"Acknowledging History"

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
13 November 2022

We have just concluded Treaty Recognition Week here in Ontario.

You may not even have been aware.

If you were, I'm wondering whether
the week provided you with an opportunity
to not merely recognize the treaties that govern the relationship
between the Indigenous peoples and settlers of this place,
but, maybe, even, to have learned something about them.

I'm guessing that for many of us the answer is no.

Given this, we are taking time as a congregation—in response
to the Calls to Action from the Truth & Reconciliation Report—
to take up this topic, to engage with the history of this land,
to educate ourselves and to grapple
with what action and accountability mean.

You may have noticed that we have offered land acknowledgments
much less frequently that we did for a few years.

We have made this move, recognizing that there's a danger
in such acknowledgements becoming meaningless through repetition, becoming
rote and simply a part of the service to get through.

Even more, in recent years,
as land acknowledgements became common across the country,
Indigenous people in this land we now know as Canada
have been asking settlers what we're really up to when we offer these words.

As a congregation, we are now moving to a practice
of only offering land acknowledgements
when we have something constructive to say,
something that points to some action we've taken,
something that helps expand our understanding,
something that calls us to make some change.

To help provide some context for this, we will, in a moment,

share in watching the short film titled "Acknowledgement."

The film was commissioned by the Toronto City History Museums
and was created by Jonathan Elliott,
a Mohawk filmmaker from the Six Nations Reserve.

I have spoken with Jon and discussed our plans to show this film.

And I am grateful for his generosity of spirit
in granting us permission to share it with you.

We, as a congregation, have given Jon an honorarium
in gratitude for his work.

We are sharing this film today,
because we who are settlers still have a lot to learn,
and because we need to truly hear Indigenous voices,
even when they speak truths that may be hard to hear.

Reflection "Acknowledging History"

Last autumn, about this time, I got an email from the Dunk-Greens
telling me that they thought I very much needed to see, before it closed,
the Crow's Theatre's production of Shakespeare's "As You Like It."

Now, I hadn't at that point been inside a theatre since the pandemic started.

And though I had read all of Shakespeare's major plays
when I was in a "Brit Lit" course during high school,
I didn't recall actually liking "As You Like It."

Still, I'm a sucker for a hot tip when it comes to theatre,
so I convinced Bob and a couple of our friends to attend.

Two nights later, we got to the theatre.
We donned our masks.
Had our tickets scanned.
Showed our proof of vaccination.
Took our seats.
And waited for the play to begin.

At the appointed hour, a young man emerged
from the heavy red curtains at the front of the stage.

He introduced himself as Cliff Cardinal,
and then explained that he would like,
on behalf of the theatre, to offer a land acknowledgement.

He named his own Indigenous identity,
and then started naming the many Indigenous peoples
who have given shape to Toronto across some ten millennia,
thanking them for their contributions
and their ongoing stewardship of these lands.

He continued, recounting that history in more detail.

At the four- or five-minute mark, it started to become clear
that this was going to be a particularly fulsome land acknowledgement.

In the past, some of the most powerful land acknowledgements I have heard
have come from Indigenous people themselves.

They've often been offered almost like a great prayer of thanksgiving,
a naming of deep gratitude for not only the people who are caretakers of the land,
but also to the Creator for the gift of the world, with all of its abundance,
with all of its many blessings that sustain our lives in ways we seldom see.

Cliff Cardinal invoked many of these images as he continued speaking.

At the fifteen-minute mark, I don't think I was alone in the audience
in thinking that this was going to be a late night—
what with a lengthy land acknowledgement
followed by a five-act play, complete with an intermission.

At some point, though, in the minutes that followed,
Cliff Cardinal conceded that none of us
would actually be seeing any Shakespeare that night.

It was apparent by the time he said it.
But it was nonetheless helpful to hear, as each person
had to accept that their evening was going in a decidedly unexpected direction.

Cardinal pressed on.

And he challenged the audience over the hollowness
of so much of what passes as settler land acknowledgements these days.

References to peoples and histories we scarcely know.

Allusions to injustice without any accountability.

Promises of action absent real change to back them up.

At one point, he plainly stated the rub at the heart of all of this:
the fact that no number of land acknowledgements
is ever going to result in settlers simply giving the land back.

He played the line for laughs.
And we all dutifully chuckled,
because every one of us knew it to be undeniably true.

None of us was going anywhere—that night, or any night.

We're all too far in.

Besides, you can't just simply erase or reverse five complicated centuries.

And so here we all are, with the inconvenient truths
that what we have proudly called our home
has a history that can be hard to bear.

Hard to accept.

Hard to truly acknowledge.

My main take-away from that unforgettable night of theatre,
a point echoed again and again by Indigenous voices,
much like in the film we just watched,
is that we who are settlers here are being asked
to fully acknowledge the injustices of the past and the present,
to accept some real accountability for the legacies of harm that echo today,
and to take some meaningful action to right the wrongs of racism and genocide.

At the heart of this, what I hear is a call, an invitation, to share a common reality.

Without genuine acknowledgement, there is no hope of reconciliation.

Without squarely facing the truth, there is no prospect of justice and peace.

Without confronting the reality of lasting harm, there is no hope of healing.

Thinking about my own life, I am grateful
to be a person who finds it relatively easy to forgive and forget.

An apology, however brief, will, if heartfelt, go a very long way with me.

But the absence of an apology tends to gnaw at me.
I sometimes strive to be the bigger person and let bygones be bygones.
And sometimes I succeed.

But the reason some hurts tend to stay with me
is because I feel that the other person and I aren't living in a shared reality.

Something has happened.
Some harm was done.

And without that harm being acknowledged,
it's hard to pretend that everything is fine or normal.

Because it's not.

So, the question the film put to us is one we must face:
What are we acknowledging when we acknowledge this land?

What are we recognizing?

And what are we, in response, called to do?

In various ways, Indigenous peoples have made clear
that wallowing in guilt isn't actually very helpful.

Often, it just means it becomes more about us than about them—
and the harm that needs to be addressed.

What they are asking for from our acknowledgements
is that we take in their truths,
that we come to understand,
and that we take action to help find a path to healing—
to building up a better world for us all.

So, echoing the film, here is what I would like to acknowledge today:

We acknowledge that this city, this province, and this country,
have been built on the traditional lands of countless Indigenous nations—
the original inhabitants and caretakers of this land.

And that their contributions will not and cannot be forgotten.

We acknowledge their resilience and continued presence on this land,
and that they have weathered attempts to erase their past through colonization.

That their peoples' traditions, cultures, and languages
have and will continue to shape the history of this country.

And we acknowledge that these stories are our collective past
and that we all have a role to play
in ensuring future generations have access to our true history.

May it be so.

May we move to learn, to understand, and to act
that healing may at last take root
and open before us a future in which we may all flourish.

That's how I would like it.
That's how I hope we all would like it.
Amen

Benediction

"Oh Canada, My Country"
Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Canadian playwright

Oh Canada, My Country
Where you have failed, the fault is on my head.
Where you are ignorant…or cruel, I made you so.
In all your folly and strength I share,
And all your beauty is my heritage.
Go with this complicated country in your heart.
Go with each other in hand, in search of what still could be.