

**Can We UnSettle Our Minds?**  
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Good morning, and Happy Summer Solstice! Today in Canada we also celebrate the 30th anniversary of National Indigenous Peoples day. According to the government of Canada website, this is a day to “recognize and celebrate the traditions, cultures and contributions of First Nations, Inuit and Métis” and that it falls on the same day as summer solstice is not a coincidence. This day was chosen as “summer solstice holds deep spiritual and cultural significance for many Indigenous Peoples, marking a time of renewal, connection, and celebration.”

Renewal. Connection. Celebration.

In this era of Truth and Reconciliation, these are NOT always the words that first come to mind when we think of indigenous peoples.

In her book of songs and stories *Islands of Decolonial Love* Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explores the concept of decolonial love as the type of love that might be capable of liberating us from the legacy of colonial violence we inhabit.

Decolonizing ourselves is a daily act of love.

But how do we actually do it? I’m sure many of us know all too well how overwhelming it can quickly feel, when we start to wake up to the many ways our daily actions cause harm to others.

Colonialism is ongoing. We participate in it each time we buy a banana or a roll of aluminum foil or a pair of socks.

I could quite easily argue that colonialism threatens every single one of our cherished UU principles. Colonialism is a fundamental threat to democratic processes, to human rights, and certainly to the interconnected web of life. The logic of extraction of resources for the benefit of those who hold power underlies every major system in which we operate. In other words, living in late capitalism can be a bit of a downer.

But that’s not where I want us to focus today.

It is too easy to get stuck in this overwhelm, but we must return to that most important question: What are we going to do about it? How do we find a better way?

Solstices and equinoxes have long held a special meaning for me personally. After leaving my Christian faith in my early 20s, a young very passionate environmental activist, I yearned for an earth-based spirituality I could call my own.

I struggled to find the right fit within paganism, and for so long, I was so afraid of doing something wrong, misappropriating something that was not mine culturally, that I didn't really engage much with indigenous teachings.

Not contributing to further harm seemed much more important than my own spiritual development.

Yet at one time, we were all indigenous, and my ancestors in Scotland and Northern Germany would have once had earth-based spiritualities, possibly very similar to the First Nations peoples of Turtle Island on whose land we now live. But that was a long time ago, and a lot has happened since. Much has been lost, and there wasn't much left for me to connect with.

As a biology student, one thing I did feel I could legitimately celebrate and explore, was the turning of the wheel of the seasons. Solstice and equinox were scientific realities, and no one could tell me I wasn't allowed to base my personal spirituality on celestial movements, so I did.

Sometimes great spiritual insights come to us while we are hiking a mountain or meditating beside a lake, but sometimes they can also come in the form of a library recall notice. Early in my first year of Seminary at Emmanuel College, surrounded by deeply spiritual Christians, Muslims and Buddhists, I felt the pull to deepen my earth-based spirituality.

So I had this academic historical book about Celtic spirituality sitting on my desk, but life and assignments quickly piled up and a few weeks later I received a recall notice email. I carried the book around in my backpack for a few more days thinking I might find time to look through it, until I suddenly had this profound moment of realization. I Didn't Have To Read This Book!

I returned it with a clear conscience feeling free and light, and I visited the U of T First Nations House for the first time that afternoon.

Because while it is almost certainly true that Europe was once home to rich and nuanced nature-based wisdom systems, they are dead and gone. Rather than mining German folklore for hints, or trying to read between the lines of Celtic Christianity for relics of the traditional wisdom that came before, could we white settlers not learn from the living traditions that are still here, on THIS land.

Still here, despite all the harm that has been done in attempts to suppress or replace them. Could we learn to apply these teachings in forming our OWN lived relationships of learning with this land.

This land, that indigenous knowledge keepers tell us is the greatest teacher of all?

The Seven Sacred Teachings of White Buffalo Calf Woman, is a telling of the Seven Grandfather teachings that are shared, valued and practiced by many indigenous peoples of Turtle Island today.

You may already be familiar with the seven grandfather teachings. In fact, since 2021 they are even represented above the entrance to the chambers of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario by a wood carving by Ojibwe artist Garrett Nahdee.

Mishomis is the Ojibway word for Grandfather. In the Mishomis Book, the seven gifts from the Grandfathers are told as follows:

To cherish knowledge is to know **Wisdom**.

To know **Love** is to know peace.

To honor all of the Creation is to have **Respect**.

**Bravery** is to face the foe with integrity.

**Honesty** in facing a situation is to be brave.

**Humility** is to know yourself as a sacred part of the Creation. **Truth** is to know all of these things.

Today I want to invite us into a deeper relationship with these teachings, beyond a token carving or a beautiful book, a land acknowledgement or indeed, colonial guilt.

What if we could each try, in our own ways, to enter into relationship with these teachings, and consider them daily as we live our lives, AND, as we continue the work of being the best allies we can be to our local First Nations communities, thus affirming and promoting our eighth principle.

Rather than viewing indigenous teachings and beliefs as a cultural relic that we might learn about in a museum, or even as a worldview to be honored in contrast with our own, could we genuinely engage with these teachings that are available to us, and apply them as a pathways towards UNsettling our minds and our daily actions, allowing them to show us a better way to be?

The more I engage with First Nations scholars, elders, and communities, the more I realize that many indigenous people would very much like for us settler folk to learn from them, and would LOVE for us to learn a better way of being in relationship with this land.

But it's not easy and it must be done with abundant care. We must be ever vigilant to avoid propagating further colonializations of mind, knowledge or practice. And what is required is not just learning, but UNlearning, often at a very fundamental level.

I frequently am reminded how my own scientifically trained mind's linear reductionist habits deeply shape how I process new ideas. Indigenous worldviews are generally nonlinear, following cycles and seasons, revisiting the same ground again and again and always finding something fresh.

You can pick up 3 well respected books on these teachings and find 3 different versions of correspondence to colour, animal, direction or even the wording of the teachings themselves. For example, sometimes Strength and Courage are separated and love isn't explicitly named as one of the Seven.

There is never just one answer, and most of the time, a book is really not the place to look at all.

Indigenous wisdom traditions have almost always been oral traditions, and the dangers that come with capturing spiritual wisdom in written form is a topic for another day.

One of the gifts of oral traditions is that the teaching can be adapted to the situation, and can more easily evolve along with people and circumstances. And all of this matters deeply for those of us who wish to decolonize our minds.

It is so hard to train ourselves away from looking to a book as our source. But even if it is now written in a book, all this knowledge came originally from spirit and from Creation, and that is where we must each also seek to develop our own relationships of learning.

We must listen earnestly to what the birds, and the trees, and the rocks, and the water, might be telling us. We can learn to show our gratitude to this land each day and listen to its lessons. **“Open your heart as well as your eyes.”**

I encounter a book like this and my brain immediately wants to memorize the details, to get them right. But the most important line in today’s reading is this:

“Look to the Seven Directions and **seek out** which of your wild cousins best represents each Teaching. **By studying nature**, you can best understand yourself and these Teachings.

And **study shapes, colours and songs too. Open your heart** as well as your eyes. My Teachings are waiting to be discovered.”

This is the true wisdom of indigenous worldviews that I think our settler minds often miss. The glorious exuberance of spiritual wealth that is to be found in every aspect of creation.

In her book *Sacred Instructions: Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change*, Penobscot lawyer, author, teacher and activist Sherri Mitchell discusses the recent interest in the law of attraction as the reemergence of an ancient wisdom she names as the “law of creation”.

Where we focus our energy and thoughts impacts our vibrational frequency and brings into existence our shared reality. She writes: “This movement shows us how our creative powers can be used to change the direction of our world. We have to divest from the things that we want to dissolve, and invest in what we most want to create.”

She is very clear that this doesn't mean we stop paying attention to what is going on around us. It doesn't mean we deny what is, or ignore what needs to change. She urges us to “look poverty, pain, injustice, environmental destruction, and all forms of bigotry and hate squarely in the eye”, but “as we do so, we must learn to limit the mental, emotional, and energetic investment that we make” in what we see.

She invites us to practice what she calls “the 80-10-10 rule: “invest 10 percent of our energy looking at what needs to be changed... 10 percent holding back the tide of harm” that has already been put in motion and, crucially, “the final 80 percent creating a reality that offers compassion, safety, equality, justice, and sustainability for all life.”

Eighty percent is a lot. It is a lot of time focussing on the good, especially when we are so deeply enmeshed in a system that churns out so much bad.

Think for a moment, what percentage of your waking hours do you think you spend envisioning the kind of just, loving, decolonized world that we would most wish for future generations. Eighty percent is a lot of time. How can we hope to keep up with this math?

**Humility, honesty, respect, courage, wisdom, truth, love.**

What if we tried using these teachings as a lens through which to do the daily work of decolonization? What if, when we are feeling overwhelmed, we could breathe the sky and connect with wisdom? When we are feeling hopeless, we could remember humility and look to the sun as an example of abundant love? When we are feeling alone, we could touch the earth and remember truth? When we are feeling attacked, we could look to raven and remember to act with honesty with ourselves and others?

**“By studying nature, you can best understand yourself and these Teachings.  
Open your heart as well as your eyes.”**

So, on this longest day of the year, and each day from now until the shortest day of the year, and then back around again. My invitation to each of you is to spend time studying a budding leaf or flower. Take out your earbuds and listen to the birdsong. Watch the path of an ant or the flight of a bee. Take an extra moment with the squirrel or bunny that you encounter. Pause during a walk in nature to sit for a while and see what creation might have to tell you.

**Open your minds and your hearts.  
These teachings are waiting to be discovered.**

*What is something you have learned from spending time with nature? Can you relate it to one of the seven sacred teachings?*

## References and Additional Resources

Today's Reading: Foreword: Words of White Buffalo Calf Woman, as told by Chief Arvol Looking Horse, 19th Generation Keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe of the Lakota Nation. From Bouchard, David, and Joseph Martin. *The Seven Sacred Teachings: Niizhwaaswi Gagiikwewin*. Illustrated by Kristy Cameron. Vancouver: MTW Publishers, 2009.

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