

Cross Border Thoughts

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
November 6, 2016
Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

I'm in the fifteenth year as the Parish Minister of the UCV, having moved up to British Columbia from the States in 2002. UCV is one of one 53 congregations and fellowships in Canada, and one of four UU congregations in the greater Vancouver metropolitan area. As in the States, our Canadian denomination—called the Canadian Unitarian Council—is numerically small, but we also have a reputation for being able to punch well above our weight; under the previous Conservative federal government, the CUC was singled out for harassment by the Canadian equivalent of the IRS, due to the long-standing, concerted activity by Unitarians in social justice issues and environmental advocacy.

I arrived in Canada the year after the institutional separation of Canadian Unitarians from the UUA, which made it immediately clear that taking up ministry on the other side of that border meant that Vancouver became my parish, *that* congregation *my* people, and Canada my nation. It matters up there. I even became a dual citizen in 2007, so that when I spoke and acted in public settings no one could dismiss me as just a Yankee interloper.

Crossing borders and getting oriented in a foreign country can be a daunting task in the best of circumstances. We were warmly welcomed, given insiders' advice, a copy of the book *Canada for Dummies*, and church members took pains to amicably point out the not-always clear distinctions between the US on the one hand, and ethos and history of Canada on the other.

Though Canadians do apologize *a lot*, I was soon struck by their quiet pride: they achieved nationhood without revolution and civil war; most want to achieve a truly multicultural society, and express that, in part, by welcoming a quarter of a million immigrants every year to a country with the population of California. Within months of my arrival, and despite titanic pressure from the States, I witnessed first-hand Canada refusing to join in the invasion of Iraq. In my first year up there, I also found myself testifying before a Parliamentary Commission on same sex marriage—and was proud to say that Canadian UU ministers unanimously supported it; and thus, as it turned out, Unitarians actually contributed to the legalization of same sex marriage in 2004. Canada was the first nation outside of Europe to take that step, and I celebrated one of the first same sex weddings in Canada. And personally, within that first year, I also experienced that country's single payer national health system and received very good care.

During my journey from new immigrant to citizen, I have also observed a nation and people continually in search of itself and their identity. Canada is a country with a multifarious population, complex cultural, linguistic and historical roots, and living immediately adjacent to a massive, neo-imperial nation-state. (*And Canadians are watching Tuesday's elections with great apprehension and anxious hope and best wishes that all will be well.*)

Emerging up through the complexity that is Canada, Canadians do have a solid sense of themselves, their desires as a people, and their intent for their nation. When Canadians are asked and listened to, I believe that the majority will tell you that in aspiration and practice, Canada

should be about *fairness, inclusivity, and effectiveness*. Canadians value egalitarianism, the maintenance of a balance between individuals and groups—a nation dedicated to balancing competing rights, identities, responsibilities and obligations—through on-going negotiations in all domains of private and public life. You hear the word “*process*” a lot up there.

If Canadians know and yearn to express these kinds of values and rules of behavior—then you’d think they have a reasonably good grasp on the way they want to live together, and what sort of country they want their nation to be. **But contrast what I’ve just said with the following:**

- Canada doesn’t have a national housing program, while 300,000 Canadians are homeless, 3 million suffer from core housing needs, and its mayors—sixteen years ago—announced that we have a national housing crisis
- It’s a country without a food stamp program; ¾ of million people have become dependent on food banks and five million citizens try to survive below the poverty line
- 1/3 of First Nations people are dependent on drinking water systems that threaten their health
- And cultural genocide was carried out against First Nations and Inuit people through a national residential school program, running from the 1880s to 1980s, administered by the federal government and run by major Christian denominations. Residential schools have come to be seen and experienced in Canada as its “original sin”—an equivalent to slavery in the States in its malign effects rippling through generations and across the country

When Canadians say that ours should be a nation expressing *fairness, inclusivity and effectiveness*, and then contrast that with the shameful list above (and I could add a whack more), how true were the words of Roy Romanow, the former Premier of Saskatchewan, when he called Canada a “nation half built.” How do you make sense of this mismatch between what Canadians say about themselves and what all-too-often goes on in fact?.....

The stories we tell about ourselves matter. Manifest destiny, blood and soil, civilizing mission, rags to riches, white man’s burden... mythic tropes and tales like these, those that peoples of nations tell themselves, have extraordinary power in shaping identity, and political economy, culture and social behaviour. Canada is a nation “half built” due in large measure to the fact that the long-dominant Euro-centric intellectual and political current in Canada sidelined an extraordinary story of origins; substituting *that* story for an *imaginary* “special” position inside the mythology of someone else’s empire; a story that has produced a colonized, insecure consciousness and Canadian elites aping narratives, theories and practices emanating from London, Paris and Washington, DC and *not* from Canada’s *own* distinct origins and ethos. And this is where an on-going struggle for Canadian identity lies; and gets played out all the time.

Let me explain. I was an immigrant settling into and urgently trying to make sense of my new home. I was struck by the disjunction, the ill-fit between how Canadians said they value *fairness, inclusivity, and effectiveness* as most true about themselves on the one hand, and this enthralled colonial mindset on the other, with all its messed upness. [*The twenty dollar bill: Jade Boat or Vimy Ridge?*]

And then I started to read some remarkable books by Anglo-Canadian and First Nations thinkers and to listen to and witness the powerful testimony and deeds of contemporary First Nations and Inuit peoples. Let me give you just one example: in his book, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada*, John Ralston Saul, one of Canada's leading public intellectuals and spouse of the former Governor General of Canada, makes a compelling case that Canada is not primarily a "European" [or American] nation created in the image and values inherited from France, Great Britain and the US.

Instead, he asserts that Canada has been a mixed race, Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal, multicultural nation from the beginning to this day; a nation whose most basic values, ideas, and institutions are based and influenced by the original and on-going encounter between French and English speaking immigrants and First Nations and Inuit peoples. Indeed, Saul claims Canadians are more Aboriginal than European

"We are a people of Aboriginal inspiration," Saul writes, "organized around a concept of *peace, fairness and good government*. That is what lies at the heart of our story, at the heart of Canadian mythology, whether Francophone or Anglophone. Indigenous peoples are already there, at the core of our civilization. That is our reality."

His story of Canada begins with the economic and domestic relationships established between Europeans and Natives over the first 250 years of settler life in Canada. It was First Nations peoples who taught and helped newcomers to survive, and in marrying Native women European men were marrying up—greatly improving their social, political and economic lives. These relationships were partnerships in every meaningful way, and through this constant intermingling, the multicultural ethos of the Canadian people and its institutions was rooted and shaped.

Native peoples were full-partners in military, civil and commercial affairs of French and English Canadas from Champlain's first treaty in 1603 with the Iroquois, through the Great Peace of Montreal of 1701, where thirteen hundred Aboriginal ambassadors from forty nations met with the leaders of New France to establish the ideas and practices of continuous equilibrium between them, based on the principle of "Eating from a Common Bowl." In 1764, in what's called the Royal Proclamation, two thousand chiefs met with British negotiators at Niagara to work out the details of *their* reciprocal relationships—of how each party would look after one another—in land use, commercial and military issues and alliances. While the US government struck numerous treaties with Native American tribes, there is nothing in US history that I know of that compares with the scope and foundational nature of these Canadian treaties and their subsequent impact.

It's *here*, in these historic treaties and the very process of their negotiation, and *not* in Europe or the States, where John Ralston Saul, and others, locate the origins of a multicultural, egalitarian mindset that forged a distinct Canadian culture based on the idea of an ever expanding, inclusive circle that grows and gradually adapts as new people join in. This intentional approach would later bear fruit in Canada's unique federal system of government (eg. equalization payments between Ottawa and the Provinces), its single-tier health system, its pioneering advocacy for UN peacekeepers and the International Criminal Court, its successful

approach to immigration and citizenship, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which enshrines multiculturalism at the very heart of its Constitution.

As well, the on-going historical, commercial and cultural encounter between Aboriginal and European Canadians, and the ethos it fostered, helped set the stage for Canadian Supreme Court, in one landmark decision after another since the 1980s, that have acknowledged First Nations and Inuit title to land and resource use to a degree that is almost unimaginable when I look at relationships between Native Americans, our federal and state governments, and the courts.

First Nations and Inuit peoples are Canada's fastest growing demographic population. Now at 1.8 million, they are close to the numbers estimated to have been in Canada when Jacques Cartier first set foot on the land in the 1530s. Moreover, they occupy nearly three quarters of Canada's landmass, and preside over an enormous extent of Canada's potential mineral and energy wealth. No wonder then that Shawn Alteo, then National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, said recently: "It's *our* time; we've arrived at a moment when we have a tremendous opportunity to bring our people together...to get into the room and problem-solve together as citizens and First Nations alike."

Indeed, when I think about Canada and its future, this is what excites me the most—and that is the rise of Aboriginal peoples in numbers and strength such that it will influence all of Canada to re-forge its identity—an identity far more plausible and satisfying than the one we've poorly stitched together around hockey, Tim Horton's and our miscellaneous insecurities. Instead, we will return to what Canadians say about themselves, their aspirations and their intent for their country going forward: that our nation is about *fairness, inclusivity, and effectiveness*—an identity worked out through reciprocal relations, continuously negotiated, and inspired by the chiefs gathered in Montreal in 1701 and Niagara in 1764 who proclaimed that we all "eat from a common bowl." I think Canada is in for some extraordinary times, with First Nations and Inuit peoples as senior partners in negotiation of the Canada yet-to-be.

But I don't want to end there; there's something I want to say about us—about Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists on both sides of the 49th parallel.

Some time ago, the Canadian religion writer Tom Harpur said the vast majority of Canadians, even if they had no formal religious affiliation, remain "deeply spiritual" but they're "frustrated in their search for a fellowship of the like-minded." Which brought him to make a modest proposal: there is "one denomination," he wrote, "for those looking for a spiritual home"....for people who want "a truly living experience of the transcendent" and "meaning *now and* a future hope"—and that's the Unitarian Universalists.

He praised our non-dogmatic faith and for being open to the best from the world's store of faith traditions; he singled out our autonomous self-governance; as well as our embrace of atheists, agnostics, pagans and those who value roots embedded in Judaism and Christianity. In sum, Harpur wrote: "you have to be impressed more by what Unitarians are for than what they reject from the past. They believe in the duty of each to foster the nourishment and maturing of our own soul, and to hear the divine call to work for the healing of the planet and its inhabitants." (Tom Harpur, "Unitarians could fill a vacuum," *Toronto Star*, May 21, 2005)

We are, all of us, profoundly historical, social and embodied beings. As such, we believe that being deeply spiritual, living in “the power now” and disconnected from religious community is not enough to achieve the kind of world we want to live in. Truly, as Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed has written, alone “our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

That’s why we’re here and not someplace else. UUs envision a world where our *interdependence* calls us to act for love and justice. [*Question*]: We want justice and equity, flourishing biodiversity and environmental sustainability?—then dive into that vast and intimate realm of interconnection—and we’ll get agitated, energized and equitable all right, for interdependence calls us to act for compassion and a world more decent and fair.

On both sides of the border, to be sure, an embodied spirituality means a time and place for worship, study, celebration, creation and fellowship; it also means a religious community from which we go out into the world, “standing on the side of love,” standing as allies to First Nations peoples in Canada and their struggle against the Enbridge and Kinder Morgan pipelines. And here, you’ve been standing on the side of justice and the environment with the Lummi Nation and others to block the Gateway Pacific Terminal. And I wish you continued success in this crucial endeavor. These past weeks as well, hundreds of UU ministers in the US and Canada have signalled their support for the Standing Rock Sioux and their efforts to preserve their sacred lands and the source and sanctity of their water. UUA President Peter Morales and other UU ministers are in North Dakota as I speak as allies and witnesses to our prophetic imperative to “confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love.”

For the sake of the past that brought us here and for the future toward which we journey; may we yearn and work to mend and bless our world in its myriad brokenness and strength; thankful for the gift of the future into which our bodies lean and our minds leap forward—bearing our hopes, and our children and our children’s children.