

Embracing the Wild and Sacred

Earth Day Everyday!

Written to the Ottawa Citizen, April 2000

By Dominique Larocque

Written in response to the article entitled "Hospitals open door to native traditions" by Douglas Quan which appeared in the April 14, 2000 of the Ottawa Citizen. Mr Quan's article follows.

It is with great interest that I read "Hospitals open door to native traditions" by Douglas Quan (April 14). I had heard the CBC 1 interview on the Kahswentha Agreement with John Lecharité the day before and my first thought upon hearing the interview was "finally, the day has come"!

As an ecopsychologist and "white doctor's daughter", I was very much captivated by CHEO CEO Garry Cardiff comment: "What goes on in medicine is what goes on in your head as well as what goes on with the injury". I could not stop myself from transforming Mr Cardiff quote to the following: "What goes on in the world is what goes on in our collective consciousness as well as what goes on with an injured society". A society much in need of a heavy dose of "native medicine".

In the last week, the Ottawa Citizen has brought to our awareness our national list of endangered species, the dying ecological states of our National Parks, the alarming rate to which our world's amphibian population is declining. Also, our ill choice of entertainment, as illustrated by Moko's photograph, the female walrus who can blow a horn, and the half page review of American Psycho. Yes indeed, we are in much need of a heavy dose of "native medicine".

As we overwork the planet in order to satisfy our insatiable hunger for more, bigger, faster, trendier, flashier, scarier, the ecopsychologist in me stands by, observes and takes notes. My insatiable curiosity seeks to understand the "deep nature" of that insatiable hunger. I question whether that deep hunger could be for more quality time with family and loved ones; hunger for more time to grieve our departed loved ones; hunger for more inner peace and love; hunger for more affection and authentic human contacts; hunger for more green spaces, clean water, clean air, productive soil; hunger for more opportunities to develop our creativity and imagination; hunger for more creative ways to release the guilt and shame we carry in our hearts for not acting out, more often, our "inner nature".

Rain forests provide 25-40% of all pharmaceutical products. Two football fields of rain forest are destroyed every second as we drink our Tim Horton's Roll Up the Rim to Win takeout coffees on our way to the shopping malls during our leisure time. All these powerful pharmaceuticals to treat our "damaged lives", an expression coined by Tod Sloan, associate professor of psychology at University of Tulsa, wrote in his book entitled "Damaged Life – The crisis of the Modern Psyche". Charles Taylor wrote similar ideas in "The Malaise of Modernity".

I have to laugh at the mainstream non-preventative "white man's ways" of healing that often believe that native medicine is only good for natives. What a joke! I applaud the ROH and CHEO for their open mind but as I read Quan's article, I still feel allot of "white man's denial"

of the wisdom of First Nation peoples. The article does not mention the benefits that “native medicine” could also have in helping the white man’s mental health care issues. Aren’t we all after all, descendants of the same tribe?. Aren’t we all born of the same star? Don’t we all share a common disease of the soul?

I believe that the Kahswentha Agreement, symbolised by the Two Row Wampum Belt, now tells a new story: a story of two nations who share very common physical, emotional and spiritual ailments and heading in the same direction of self-annihilation. In order for these two nations to survive the next century, they might have to encroach upon each other in order to save themselves.

So Mr Cardiff and Mrs Bourgeois, I applaud you both. I also applaud, a “white psychiatrist” (whose identity I choose to keep private) and patron to my café, who, in 1995, listened without judgements to a young “white women’s” personal experience of emotional stress: hearing the trees telling her to sell her establishment and start a consulting business that would teach, counsel and inspire people to love and respect nature through the pursuit of outdoor recreation. Instead of labelling me delusional and bizarre, this psychiatrist strongly encouraged me to follow and study, without fear, the shamanic path of healing. What if I had chosen instead to share my existential angst to a “mainstream health practitioner”? Would I have been labelled and prescribed a miracle wonder drug to appease my wild visions and creative ideas? We experience what we believe. We live the reality we choose.

This winter, I taught 36 white catholic school teachers the healing benefits of nature and the wisdom in adopting, in their daily awareness, the teachings of Sun Bear’s Medicine Wheel. I could not help myself from contemplating, at the same moment, the fact that exactly 114 years earlier, Oblates priests were teaching, at the exact geographical spot, the “white man’s ways” to the natives of St-Albert, Alberta. How could they think that their ways were “more civilised” than the natives? Interesting how the wheel comes full circle.

I personally think it is truly time for a new theology, a theology that embraces the whole cosmos and recognises that the sacred is found in the wild. Robert Lawlor, writes in *Voices of the First Day*: “Dreams, deep collective memories, and imaginings are more potent than religious faith or scientific theories in lifting us above the catastrophic ending that confronts us all.” WOW!

Today’s indigenous/native cultures know that “the world is as you dream it”. We must all learn to read the wisdom found in nature’s scriptures. WE, as individuals within a society, can all be visionaries and powerful agents of change. We can deepen our awareness of the intricate web of life, which teaches that all organisational systems are interconnected: politics, education, economics, art, health, religion, and entertainment. To manage these systems requires wisdom. To continue to ignore nature’s wise teachings in all our governing policies is a grave mistake.

Human beings are but little ants on the surface of the planet. Gaia is powerful and her cleaning cycles are less than “gentle”. I don’t know of any space shuttles yet that will take us to Mars when Mother Earth decides to “shake and bake” us, “flush” us down her rivers or “blow” us into smithereens.

I wish to finish by inspiring the 301 members of the House of Commons to truly take that “walk on the wild side” by opening their heart to native wisdom. Not only should they foster their assigned endangered species but risk shapeshifting their WHOLE SELF to embody the powerful spiritual wisdom their personal animal, bird, plant and reptile symbolically represents. May they be inspired by their new totems to become pioneers in shapeshifting the present current reality into a sustainable vision. By doing so, guaranteeing life on earth for the next seven generations, as we enter the Age of Wisdom, as quoted by famous author and visionary Stephen R. Covey.

I find much freedom in admitting publicly that it is OK to talk to the birds and all creations, just like St-Frances of Assisi, patron Saint of Ecology did 800 years ago, and know that I am not crazy after all. I also want to howl to all First Nation Peoples to keep celebrating their culture by singing, dancing and drumming their hymn to the Creator. The spirits are alive and well. We have much reason to rejoice and have hope. “The world is as you dream it!”.

Hospitals open door to native traditions

Mohawks advise MD's on alternatives to 'white man's ways'

The Ottawa Citizen, Friday April 14, 2000

By Douglas Quan

In an effort to combat the number of mental health problems that go misdiagnosed, two Ottawa hospitals have set out to work with Mohawk natives to better understand their culture and traditional native approaches to mental health issues.

In a sacred ceremony held yesterday, representatives from the Royal Ottawa Hospital , the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne agreed on a framework to better address mental health care issues for the First Nation Peoples.

“Under the agreement, mental health services will be provided according to native healing processes, but in according to what their culture demands,” said Anne Marie Bourgeois, a clinician-therapist at the Royal Ottawa Hospital's children's outpatient department last night.

“Up until now ... we've been trained the white man's way. Now, services will be provided in culturally appropriate ways.”

Ms. Bourgeois said dreams and voices figure prominently in native spirituality. But a mainstream mental health practitioner who is not versed in native culture, may end up diagnosing someone with these visions as schizophrenic.

“Having someone from the reserve accompany a patient to the hospital to interpret these visions is one way to avoid misdiagnoses from happening”, Ms. Bourgeois said, “and this agreement paves the way for psychiatrists to make assessments with a higher degree of cultural sensitivity.”

“Hopefully, this agreement can play a role in stemming the number of suicides among native youth”, she added.

“What we’re trying to do is find a way to work collaboratively, not mutually exclusively,” said CHEO CEO Garry Cardiff last night. “Just because we’re using modern medication doesn’t mean they won’t use their traditional sweet grass or smoke.”

“What goes on in medicine is what goes on in your head as well as what goes on in the injury. By them doing what they have grown up believing, coupled with what we’ve found scientifically to be supportive, we hope to bring together the best of both worlds.”

There are about 10, 000 people living on the reserve at Akwesasne, located along the St. Lawrence River south of Cornwall.

The title of yesterday’s agreement was “Kahswentha,” stemming from the first agreement signed between the Iroquois and the Europeans 400 years ago.

That initial agreement was symbolized by the Two Row Wampum Belt, with patterns that told the story of two nations, each with their own values and belief systems, but moving together in the same direction without one encroaching upon the other.

This principle lies at the heart of yesterday’s agreement.

Among the key components of the plan are commitments to:

- Establish accessible, culturally relevant holistic mental health services for First Nation Peoples.
- Establish one or more Akwesasne satellite offices in Ottawa linked to CHEO and the Royal Ottawa Hospital.
- Develop a culturally appropriate Aboriginal Psychosocial Assessment Tool.

“For First Nation peoples, health is an intricate web of balance of one’s mental, emotional, spiritual and physical self,” said Mike Mitchell, grand chief of the Mohawk Council.

“This partnership, like no other in the country, addresses the need for culturally relevant services for First Nation peoples.”

The Mohawks hope the principles of the agreement can be expanded to other areas, such as education and justice.

