

“After the Words”

Curtis Murphy, Intern Minister
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

All of us likely have a few articles of clothing we don't wear very often: the impulse buys, old favourites which don't quite fit anymore, or the well-intentioned gift which missed the mark, but we are hesitant to give away out of fear that the person who gave it to us will see it hanging at the thrift shop.

In my case, I'm thinking about a red hooded sweatshirt that sits, perpetually clean, draped over the back of a chair in my apartment. On the front it says “Got land?” and on the back, “...thank an Indian!” I actually bought them from a Unitarian friend in Peterborough, who was selling them in partnership with a local Native community centre. There's a story behind it, of course: last year a young indigenous woman in Saskatchewan wore a shirt with the same words on it to school and was sent home, her shirt being deemed inappropriate. Activists affiliated with Idle No More picked up her cause and the phrase went viral, with people around the country being encouraged to wear the same slogan in solidarity. Hence my sweatshirt.

I actually really appreciate the message, but can rarely bring myself to wear it out of the house. Why? For one thing, there's that word, “Indian,” which feels problematic to me, even though I know it's used self-referentially by many indigenous people, and I think is meant to be part of the witty bluntness of the phrase. There's also this weird mental image I get every time I think of wearing it: I imagine some curious soul walking behind me on the sidewalk and seeing “...thank an Indian,” and then following me around awkwardly for the next half hour, trying to figure out what it says on the front. Or maybe my resistance is simply part of our collective resistance to thinking too hard about the fact that we got land which was once someone else's.

Now I know it's easy for a conversation about this topic to feel like a pointless guilt-trip. And maybe that's another reason why I don't want to wear that shirt; I worry that people will see it, feel like they've been accused of something, and then be left alone with no outlet for the larger questions. And I hope that's what we can do here: ask questions which lead us toward important truths, and do so in the context of a covenanted religious community.

My grandfather grew up on a farm in rural New Brunswick. No electricity, no running water, but they did have land. Over the years, the land got parcelled up, with pieces sold and given to different family members. About 10 years ago, after my grandfather's death, my mother and her two siblings bought one of the remaining pieces from a cousin who lives far away, on the west coast. They all agreed they wanted a piece of the land to stay in the family.

While my knowledge of family history is spotty, I do know that my ancestors arrived in what is now New Brunswick in the late 1700's, as refugees from the American War of Independence. They were among what are called United Empire Loyalists, though their actual loyalty to the British Crown is unknown; it seems many of them were mostly in it for the free land. I'll try to spare you too much of

my amateur history, but the point is that, before my ancestors arrived, that land was part of what is still known to the indigenous people of the region as “Mi'kmaq” -- the territory of the Mi'kmaq nation.

Though the area had been officially controlled by the British for several decades, and by the French for about a century before that, there had been no large-scale European settlement until my ancestors and thousands of other families were given land grants by King George III, land which he did not necessarily have the authority to grant. In fact, Mi'kmaq leaders complained to British authorities about the sudden influx of settlers to their territory, saying that they had not surrendered their land to the French, and therefore the surrender of the land to the British was not legitimate. They were told that, according to European law, land could not be owned by any non-Christian, and as such, Mi'kmaq land was free for the taking. However, Mi'kmaq historian Daniel Paul points out that, “If this warped law were ever to be accorded recognition by modern legalists, they would have to take into consideration that after (the Mi'kmaq Grand Chief) and his family converted to Christianity in 1610, the land of the Mi'kmaq had become exempt from being seized because the people were Christians. However, it is hard to imagine that a modern government would fall back and try to use such uncivilized garbage as justification for not recognizing aboriginal title.

So there it is. That beautiful piece of lakefront land is owned by my family on account of 17th and 18th century European religious and legal ideas which few people would try to defend today. The question is, what do we do now? Frankly, I'm not sure. Knowing what I know now, it would be hard to imagine simply building a cottage there for occasional use, and acting as if the history of the land began in 1783. But what are the alternatives? Do I call up the nearest Mi'kmaq reserve and ask if they want three acres of land back, mosquitoes and all? Could we partner with a Mi'kmaq organization to build some kind of community centre dedicated to the work of reconciliation? What would that even look like?

What does reconciliation look like? Words are a good start, but it will take a lot more than just words. Reconciliation means returning to relationships of respect and reciprocity, or in some cases creating them for the first time. This is not easy, and may take us further out of our comfort zones than we are ready to go at the moment. As Adrienne Rich says, “It's exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting, and painful.”

Of course, reconciliation is not only, or even primarily about land. One survivor of residential school wrote that, in spite of the persistent abuse he and his classmates suffered there, by far the worst part was the loneliness. This kind of harm is hard to measure, but it runs deep. Reconciliation may also mean a national inquiry into missing and murdered Native women, and significant investment in teaching Native languages, to Native and non-Native students alike. These and other things have been repeatedly identified as acts of reconciliation which would show Native people we are serious.

But of course, we don't write the laws here at First Unitarian Toronto. And we don't set government policy, however much some of us might like to. While we can try to influence these things, we are first and foremost a spiritual community. Our work is to grow together in mind, soul and spirit, “to the end,” as our covenant says, “that all souls shall grow into harmony with the divine.” So I'm not going to tell you to write a letter to the government or a letter to the editor, though feel free to do so if you like. Instead, my suggestion for your totally optional homework assignment is to do a little amateur history. Find out the history of the land where you live, or the land where your cottage is, or your hometown. Find out its pre-colonial history and how it came to be colonized. Not as an exercise in guilt, but an exercise in growth. As for me, my homework will be to finally wear that sweater. And if I wear it here, I hope that I won't be sent home from church.