

**Looking At The Other**  
by Douglas Buck  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
Sunday, December 4, 2016

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.

Reading

Helen Betty Osborne

By Marilyn Dumont, (Alberta poet and descendant of Gabriel Dumont, the Métis leader in the Northwest Resistance of 1885.)

Betty, if I set out to write this poem about you

it might turn out instead

to be about me

or any one of

my female relatives

it might turn out to be

about this young native girl

growing up in rural Alberta

in a town with fewer Indians

than ideas about Indians

in a town just south of the “Aryan Nations”

it might turn out to be

about Anna Mae Aquash, Donald Marshall or Richard Cardinal,

it might even turn out to be  
about our grandmothers,  
beasts of burden in the fur trade  
skinning, scraping, pounding, packing,  
left behind for 'British Standards of Womanhood,'  
left for white-melting-skinned women,  
left here in this wilderness, this colony.

Betty, if I start to write a poem about you  
it might turn out to be  
about hunting season instead,  
about 'open season' on native women  
it might turn out to be  
about your face young and hopeful  
staring back at me hollow now  
from a black and white page  
it might be about the 'townsfolk' (gentle word)  
townsfolk who 'believed native girls are easy'  
and 'less likely to complain if a sexual proposition led to violence.'

Betty, if I write this poem.

## **Looking At The Other**

Good morning. My name is Doug; I'm a member of this congregation. As David has mentioned, the three ministers of this congregation, Shawn Newton, Lynn Harrison, and Danielle Webber, along with many clergy and thousands of others, are at this moment standing with the people of Standing Rock Sioux Nation in North Dakota to protect lands and water.

Here are two media stories: a wild bird, an Osprey, that neglects its chicks to the point of threatening their lives, and the murder of a homeless Indigenous man. How do we respond to these stories? (1)

Many people love watching web-cams focussed on wild bird nests. Their cycles of nest building, mating, egg laying, hatching, and feeding chicks are closely watched. And, followers develop feelings for them.

But in nature, chicks do starve, or get pushed out of the nest too soon, but when these occur on screen, some viewers get upset.

There are many stories like this: a man loading a shivering Bison calf into his car; later the calf had to be euthanized when it was rejected.

Some people do relate to animals more easily than to other humans.

## ***Canada's Indigenous People***

We meet on the traditional lands of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. This area has also been home to the Haudenosaunee Seneca/Onondowaga, and the Huron, or Wendat. We acknowledge these historic territories at meetings, but reconciliation with Indigenous people is now required, asking more of us.

On page 2 of the same newspaper as the Osprey article, by coincidence, was an article on the murder of a homeless Indigenous man. What struck me was the contrast — so much attention to birds but so little to a person.

That person was Ramsey John Whitefish. (2) He was born on the Lac La Croix First Nation, or in Ojibwa, Zhingwaako Zaaga'igan, meaning "Lake of the Pines," in the Rainy Lake area. He had moved to Toronto at 18 and lived here for two decades, mostly on the streets.

Whitefish tried to make a life; he went on street patrols for Anishnawbe Health Toronto, and the manager of Anishnawbe Health said he was a funny man and a great guy to know. Although gripped by addictions, he was well read, wrote poetry and songs, and had written two unpublished books about native urban life. When he died at 42, he left behind his parents, four brothers, two sisters, a daughter, and two grandsons. (3)

Looking at racial discrimination in the U.S. South for a moment, many know the name of James Reeb, the Unitarian minister who was beaten to death in Alabama in March, 1965, while marching for voting rights. But earlier, in February, Jimmy Lee Jackson, a civil rights worker and deacon in his Baptist church, had already been killed.

Writing about this, Martin Luther King said: "Jimmy Lee Jackson, a brave young Negro man, was beaten and shot by an Alabama State Trooper and (later) James Reeb, a committed Unitarian white minister, was fatally clubbed to the ground..... President Johnson sent flowers to the gallant Mrs. Reeb, and in his eloquent "We Shall Overcome" speech paused to mention that one person, James Reeb, had already died in the struggle. Somehow the President forgot to mention Jimmy, who died first. The parents and sister of Jimmy received no flowers from the President. The (marching) students felt this keenly. Not that they felt that the death of James Reeb was less than tragic, but because they felt that the failure to mention Jimmy Jackson only reinforced the impression that to white America the life of a Negro is insignificant and meaningless." End quote. (4)

Now, in Canada, we ask, in what ways are a black person's life, the lives of Ramsey Whitefish, 1200 missing indigenous women, and despondent children on reserves, less significant than white lives?

Perhaps people "see" threats to Osprey chicks, in a way that they are unable to see a homeless person's death.

A Six Nations man argued on a call-in show that media should not refuse to publish racist postings from listeners. Difficult as they are to listen to, they at least expose the racism which would otherwise remain hidden and anonymous. He added that Six Nations plans to keep its residential school, now called Woodland Cultural Centre, as a reminder to Canadians of the past. (5)

Indigenous settlements in Canada were sometimes arbitrarily moved. In 1953, Inuit from Nunavik and Pond Inlet were forcibly relocated much farther north to Resolute on Cornwallis Island. In 1956, the Sayisi Dene in Manitoba were relocated from their forest home to barren shores near Churchill. In both cases, promised housing was not delivered, and many died. There were no Government apologies until the 21st century.

Residential schools for children of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit were funded by the Federal Government and operated from 1876 to 1996; over that time 150,000 children were apprehended from families, many of them physically or emotionally abused, and 6,000 died. (6)

During the so-called “Sixties Scoop,” Indigenous children were taken from their families, often because they were poor. The Toronto Star wrote: “...First Nations Children were taken from their families, often without consent, and placed in non-indigenous care. To ensure the children would never return to their First Nations communities, death certificates were issued expunging any record of their aboriginal existence.” (7) This affected 16,000 children in Ontario alone, between 1967 and 1984. (8) I didn’t know; likely you didn’t either.

However, “scoops” are for ice cream. When a child is removed by government officials from its parents forever, without consent, and given up for adoption, what could we call that? It’s kidnapping; that’s a crime. Roméo Dallaire asks: “Are all humans human? Or are some more human than others?”

Recently, the federal government has increased funding of on-reserve child-welfare services, but not until the Canadian Rights Tribunal had issued a legally binding order in January, 2016 to address Ottawa’s financial discrimination against children on reserves, then followed with a compliance order in April, then a third order in October. Even then, the motion to increase funding came from opposition member Charlie Angus,

whose northern riding encompasses the Attawapiskat First Nation, a community that has had an epidemic of youth suicides. After a short time, the motion was supported by the Government. (9)

In 2011, the incarceration rate for Indigenous people was ten times that of non-Indigenous and for women Indigenous the rate is higher, 41% of all women prisoners. (10) We can't arrest our way out of these problems.

Inuit and First Nations, despite sometimes saving lives of early settlers, have lost their land, languages, children, and their spiritual life. It was settlers who decimated the buffalo. Settlers and their descendants, to whom many of us are related, fished out or poisoned lakes and rivers. Our ancestors put First Nations on small reserves, many in remote areas, then blamed them for living in poverty and abusing substances that Europeans introduced them to. Recently, child poverty has actually increased from 18% to 20% in Canada. For First Nations children living on reserves, however, the poverty rate is 60%. 11) Recently, a hundred Indigenous communities have been on boil-water warnings, and 50% of children in care were Indigenous. Primary schools on reserves receive a quarter less funding from the Federal government than non-reserve schools do from the provinces. (12)

### ***Facing Racism***

Indigenous people have been stewards of the land for thousands of years, but when Europeans brought our culture, it was with a belief in its superiority and subjugated the land and the people, even their own.

Every colonial culture is riddled with racism towards its Indigenous people. Think Australia. Think South Africa. Think the U.S. and think Canada. And we can be racist without knowing. We have implicit biases, unconscious injustices. We are all, after all, the water we swim in. We swim, breathe, and drink it, so, for example, white male privilege felt normal to me.

Speaking to the UUA General Assembly in 2015, Union Theological Seminary Professor Cornel West spoke about racism. His words:

“Who is willing to tell the truth—good and bad, up and down, insights as well as blindnesses of ourselves first, then our communities, then our nation, then our world? I've got a lot of vanilla brothers and sisters that walk with me and say, Brother West, Brother West, you know, I'm not a racist any longer. Grandma's got work to do, but I've transcended that.”

“And I say to them, I'm a Jesus-loving, free, black man, and I've tried to be so for 55 years, and I'm 62 now, and when I look in the depths of my soul I see white supremacy because I grew up in America. And if there's white supremacy in me, my hunch is you've got some work to do too..... Too much male supremacy inside of me. I grew up in America. Too much anti-Jewish sensibility—there is no Christian civilization in the history of the globe that has not been shot through with anti-Jewish hatred. We've got to come to terms with that.”

Can we, as a people, confront misogyny and racism when we encounter it, and not let it slide past? It's hard to do, and sometimes we'll fail. Martin Luther King said: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever effects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

### ***Hope for the future***

What if we could listen to Original Peoples without defensiveness, to see them as the beautiful and amazingly kind, forbearing people that most are, to create with them genuine equity? Are we willing? Cornel West has said: “Justice is what love looks like in public.” West also said: “Truth comes from the margins,” and Canada's margins are in the inner city, in aging suburbs, and remote northern villages.

While acknowledging our history, it's important that we not fall into shame. Shame immobilizes. Shame can become defensive. Reconciliation will take time — time to build trust with us if we are willing to listen. If we are to survive, all must thrive; there can be no “others.”

Since the publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's ninety-four recommendations, schools, school districts, and ministries of education across Canada have been revising curricula. Lakehead and

Winnipeg Universities have made Indigenous studies a required course.  
(13)

The story of Channie Wenjac, a 12-year old Ojibway boy who died in 1966 while trying to run home from residential school, was recently retold in music and video by the Tragically Hip's Gord Downie. The arts do build bridges.

### ***Unitarians***

Where does that leave those of us who are mostly the descendants of settlers? Unitarians comfort one another when afflicted but we must also afflict ourselves when we're too comfortable, as we did by sponsoring Syrian newcomer families, as did some Unitarians who chained themselves to heavy equipment during the Standing Rock Sioux Camp anti-pipeline demonstration in North Dakota, and as our ministers Shawn, Lynn, and Danielle are doing by offering witness there right now.

Kate and I are considering volunteering to stand in front of the bulldozers if construction begins on an oil pipeline to Tidewater in Canada. When our hearts grow big enough to meet the world's sacred humanity, it makes possible a sacred humility. And sacred action. For each of us, it's our call. Can it also be our calling?

At the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report, Justice, and now Senator, Murray Sinclair said words many will know: "We have described for you a mountain. We have shown you the path to the top. We call upon you to do the climbing." If Canada is to meet this clear challenge, this expectation, the hearts and minds of caring people must change first, to ensure that governments do, in fact, change. We must be the change. We are the ones we've been waiting for.

Words of Canadian former Chief Dan George of the Tsleil-Waututh (tslay-wa-tuth) Coast Salish Nation, who was sent to residential school at age 5:

"May the stars carry your sadness away,

May the flowers fill your heart with beauty,

May hope forever wipe away your tears,  
 And, above all, may silence make you strong.”

—Chief Dan George

May it be so. Thank you. Meegwetch.

Notes:

- (1) (Saturday, May 21 2016  
 <<http://torontostar.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx>>)
- (2) <<https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2016/05/20/brutal-end-in-the-tragic-life-of-a-man-who-called-the-toronto-streets-home-dimanno.html>>)
- (3) (<[obits.dignitymemorial.com](http://obits.dignitymemorial.com)>)
- (4) (“Black Power,” in “Where Do We Go From Here,” 1967, M. L. King)
- (5) (Cross Country Checkup, CBC, 21/08/16)
- (6) (Wikipedia)
- (7) (“Apologize and pay up,” 23/08/16, p. A10, Toronto Star)
- (8) (“Sixties Scoop survivors get day in court,” 22/08/16, p. A1, Toronto Star)
- (9) (Toronto Star, editorial, Nov. 6, 2016, p. A10)
- (10) (The Office of Correctional Investigator, <[oci.bec.gc.ca](http://oci.bec.gc.ca)>)
- (11) (Toronto Star, “Sobering child poverty stats inspire call for renewed action,” 24/11/16, p. A4)
- (12) (Macleans, “Aboriginal Students, An Underclass,” 8/08/12)
- (13) (“Sen. Murrury Sinclair on Truth and Reconciliation’s progress,” Macleans, Nancy Macdonald, 1/06/2016)

Words at service end, echoing Gandhi’s words that David said earlier:

It is possible to live in peace.

If we are to reach real peace in this

World, and if we are to carry on a

Real war against war, we shall have  
to begin with the children.

It is possible to live in peace.

The future depends  
on what we do in the present.

It is possible to live in peace.

—Mohandas Gandhi