

“Canada 150?”

Danielle Webber

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

2 July 2017

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.

Yesterday, July 1st, was Canada Day; a day to celebrate the anniversary of the enactment of the Constitution Act (which in 1867 was called the British North American Act). This day is a celebration of the Country of Canada, what this country has accomplished, and all of the possibility there still is in our country. Celebrations have happened all around the city, and across the country, and were especially spectacular this year because of the nice round number of 150 years. And Canadians have great reason to celebrate: Our country has made significant strides towards equality and inclusivity of all people; from the legalization of women’s vote in 1918, to Bill C-16 which is currently in the final stages to change the Canadian Human Rights Act to include gender identity and gender expression to the list of prohibitive grounds for dismissal, and everything in between.

This country has been celebrating the diversity within our mosaic community for almost a century; we have welcomed newcomers into our country and encouraged them to continue to enjoy their culture while here. Canada was the fourth country worldwide to legalize same sex marriage. We have had near universal health care for more than 60 years. And Canadians have been able to welcome and support over 40 thousand refugees into this country over the last 18 months. Canadians and those living in this country have significant reason to celebrate Canada. And yet there are those who have very publicly stated that they stand against those celebrating.

Last Sunday, this room was transformed into a representation of the land space of Indigenous Peoples in North America. While together we learned about the many hardships, and trials that the British Crown, the Canadian Government and many different churches put the Indigenous Peoples through. Things such as land seizures, resource depletion, smallpox blankets, residential schools, and requirements of status. We participated in the Exercise that particular Sunday because the previous Wednesday, June 21st was National Aboriginal Day, which this year has been renamed National Indigenous Peoples Day, a day recognizing and celebrating the contributions of the First Nations, Inuit and Metis Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Events happened all week long, with powwows aplenty, from sun-up to sun-down on Wednesday.

Festivals, gratitude walks, history and story tellings, concerts and art shows happened all over the city to celebrate the contributions, the culture, and the vibrancy of Indigenous Peoples here in Canada.

These two events happened within 11 days of each other. A celebration of the resilience, resistance, and flourishing capacity of Indigenous Peoples in this country. And then a celebration of the anniversary of the signing of the Constitution Act, which some people might remember from last week was the law that gave control of this land to the Government of Canada, which legally allowed the government to forget all of the promises made in the treaties previously agreed upon, allowed the government to deny citizenship to Indigenous Peoples and allowed the government to take control of all of the resources in and on the land.

And so for much of the last 2 weeks I have been having this internal battle going on inside my mind, wondering how I feel about my country, and how I would celebrate the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Constitution Act.

None of this information was new to me, I have participated in several Blanket Exercises, was trained how to facilitate them last year, and I have been aware of the atrocities of Canada's history for several years. But nothing brings to light the dissonance between two ideas like proximity. And the consciousness of both issues simultaneously. And over the past several months it has been hard to avoid these two counter ideas: to celebrate Canada's Confederation, and to continue to work towards reconciliations with the Indigenous Peoples here in Canada.

Earlier this spring, in March, I was listening to CBC's *The Current* with Anna Maria Tremonti, when she started discussing with 3 people why someone wouldn't celebrate Canada 150. It was then that I started to really contemplate how I would be spending July 1st, 2017. Anna Maria interviewed her guests who shared stories about Canada 150 PLUS, an attempt to represent the moving forward in spirit of reconciliation; and the HashTag Resistance 150, which highlights the history of resistance, resilience, rebellion, resurgence and restoration among Indigenous Youth; and Colonization 150, a logo that imitates the Canada 150 logo, but represents the violence that has happened and is continuing to happen against Indigenous Peoples. Her guests discussed what it meant to be a Canadian Indigenous Person and to be witnessing such celebrations.

Erik Ritskes, author of the book *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* stated during that interview: "I think one of the questions that when a celebration like Canada 150 comes up is what exactly are we celebrating? When ... we recognize that Canada was founded on and continues to be upheld by violence against Indigenous

Peoples, as well as black people and other people of colour and that colonial and racialized violence is something that's normalized and part of what Canada is. So despite the sort of lip service to reconciliation, even within the Canada 150 platform, many Indigenous folks have asked how can we reconcile with a state that is still harming us and still violating our rights as Indigenous nations and hasn't really taken significant steps to rectify that?"

After listening to that quote for the first time I felt like I had been punched in the gut. How could Canadians go on celebrating their history, a history that hurt so many people, and caused such significant genocide to so many different nations? A history that has been brought to light, more so in recent years, and has been made impossible for those in power to ignore. How can we celebrate a country that has such downfalls?

And yet I can say, I am proud of my country. I love being able to say that I am Canadian, that Canadians have accomplished a great deal of things. Spending most of the last 4 years travelling back and forth to the United States for school, I had plenty of opportunities to talk about being from Canada and what that has meant for me as a Unitarian Universalist Minister. Being Canadian has shaped me in so many different ways when I look at the path of my formation as a Minister. It dictates the research that I have done for class work, it aids me in my call for Social Justice. Being different in this way from all of my classmates required me to articulate why and how my faith and my ministry was different. But if my ministry is calling me to seek justice for those marginalized in our world, and if I have spent much of my ministry focusing on the marginalization of Indigenous Peoples how can I celebrate Canada Day? So I started to pay attention to the stories surrounding these topics, and I started to seek advice from those that Canadian Settlers have notoriously ignored over the past several centuries.

As I start to pay attention I see articles describing the untold histories of this country, attempting to shame and blame non-indigenous people for the centuries of mistreatment. I see art exhibits like Kent Monkman's show *Shame and Prejudice: A story of Resilience*. I read about the evidence that the Heiltsuz Nation have lived in Bella Bella, British Columbia for at least 14 thousand years. And I heard stories about people yearning for a life like the ancestors', a life pre-European contact. I have read personal accounts of families losing cultural knowledge, and spending years trying to decolonize their minds in order to regain their sense of self, and community.

One person's story ended with this quote: "It's complicated, you know? It's kind of the way you'd feel towards an abusive relative. It's someone you have a lot of good memories with but they have messed you up over the years."

I find myself sitting with this understanding of Canada, and trying to reconcile with it. Canada has never abused my rights, or my privilege. I have never been mistreated by the state, or any individual there-in. But I have heard the stories, and I have witnessed the damage, and it has changed my opinions and point of view forever.

How do I grapple with this sense of disloyalty? How do I continue to feel pride over the great accomplishments of our country, the place that we have all chosen to call home, and know this history, and struggle with the truth telling that is happening from so many non-indigenous peoples?

In Friday's *Globe and Mail* Editorial Section was an article called "Cherish this Country: One of history's greatest creations." The premise of this article argues that although Canada is not without its faults, "when compared to the rest of the world our country is a marvel, ... and epic of the most brilliant exploits." The author then goes on to tell stories about other countries and nations who have had similar situation as ours in the last 150 years, such as Northern Ireland, and Hungary. Although the author does recognize our country's downfalls and offers examples such as Canada's apology towards Francophones and the denial of their protection for language and education, or "Indigenous Canadians who [it states] are owed apology, acknowledgement and redress" the article focus solely on the attributes of this young country.

Thomas Walkom – a non-indigenous journalist for *The Toronto Star* wrote an article entitled "Why I will celebrate Canada Day" on Friday. In it Walkom states "On Wednesday, a group of Indigenous protestors began what was called a reoccupation of Parliament Hill in order to make the point that Canada has not worked for them. I understand and respect their view. But I will celebrate anyways." As I read this article all I can see is his privilege; he ends the article with the sentence "I will continue to celebrate this odd and diffident country. It is my country. It is my homeland." It seems as though he refuses to accept that this is also the homeland of the Indigenous protestors that were arrested on Parliament Hill.

I have spent so much time trying to resolve my understanding of these two contradictory ideas in my head. The pride that I hold for my country and the desire to celebrate its accomplishments and to continue to work for reconciliation of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. I end up turning towards my faith, and my Unitarian Universalist theology to try to understand all of these personal stories, and ideas about how to resolve my dissonance.

My faith calls me to build stronger relationships, to recognize that it is how we treat and interact with each other that determines the truth of our world, and until every person feels fully represented in these relationships we have not finished our work.

Much like the song that we sang at the beginning of our service this morning:

Break not the circle of enabling love
where people grow, forgiven and forgiving;
break not that circle, make it wider still,
till it includes, embraces all the living.

I witness that Indigenous People have been left out of the circle, have not been given the opportunity to fully represent themselves in the relationships that make up this country.

I recognize that it will take a long time to regrow these relationships. That the connections that have been severed for so many years, will take years, decades and potentially another 150 years to be mended. But if we fight persistently, like the squash plant, and the bramble bush in our responsive reading, then we will be able to create the relationships we seek. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds will create ripples in this community of Canadians until all are in the circle. Until those who have been pushed to the margins are at the center, leading us forward.

As we move forward into the next era of this nation I will continue to wrestle with the dissonance in myself, I will continue to strive for my understanding of Heaven on Earth. I recognize that this country has made strides towards that future, has started to right its wrongs, and has much work left to do. But that that work should not discount all of the accomplishments we have made. I will continue to live with this dissonance, instead of attempting to resolve it, and continue to strive for better, for the sake of all those who call Canada home.

May it be so.