

“Aboriginal Spirituality”

Danielle Webber

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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.

I was first introduced to Aboriginal Spirituality 3 and a half years ago, when working with the Siksika Family Services office, or previously know as the Blackfoot child welfare center. I was running a group for teenage girls, the office’s highest risk clients; we were teaching them life skills, things that they hadn’t picked up while they were growing up, and bouncing between houses and sometimes schools, as well as interpersonal skills. After a few months we also started inviting an elder to join us and to offer cultural history and information for the group.

When I started Seminary 4 years ago, one of the requirements for the first year of classes was to do a field placement of 8 hours a week, for the 8 months of classes. Our placements were not to be in a church setting, as we would be doing internships during the 2nd and 3rd years of our degree, but we were to be in the community close to our church. In the summer of 2013, southern Alberta had received massive amounts of rain, and flash floods became a significant problem, not only for Calgary and other cities, but also for the reservations and small communities all over the province. Very few of the church members were affected by the flooding, although there were a couple. But there was a strong desire to support our community and help those who had been hit the hardest. And because the CUC’s commitment to Truth and Reconciliation had come out that March, the Calgary church decided to offer their support to the Siksika Nation, a community and reservation south and east of Calgary. This community exists on the banks of the Bow River, which flows the entire 60km of the reservation. So many of the community’s buildings and belongings were washed away.

So that summer the Calgary Church began helping the Siksika Nation. A financial collection was taken up, raising over \$5000, household items, clothing and children’s toys were delivered to the offices to be distributed as needed, and a few hundred hours of physical labour on the reservation were donated.

When I offered my services to the Family office I imagined I would continue this work, helping to organize volunteers and donations, but after submitting my resume

and list of volunteering I had already done, I was asked instead to start the female youth program. And after several weeks of self education, discussions with the site elder, and time spent in the Glenbow Museum Archives, I began creating a program for these young girls. However, it wasn't soon after I started working with them that we realized that there was something missing from our time together.

Although we were able to offer lots of educational material, and creating a space where these girls could learn things about themselves, and about each other that they had never before been asked to talk about, I was not able to offer any sort of cultural education, or knowledge from their own people. So the social workers and I decided we should start to invite an elder into our group, and offer ritual and cultural teachings to the girls during our sessions together. And being witness to these teachings and ritual has been one of the most spiritually significant times in my faith formation.

Our gatherings began to take on the air of small group ministry, as the time with our elder, Kate, began. The first time she was with us, she brought a buffalo hide, full with hair and tanned leather, and laid it out on the floor, much like a hunter's rug. She asked everyone to gather round the hide, with shoes removed, and feet stretched in front of us, ankles crossed, or tucked in beside our hips, because ladies never sat crossed legged. The young women, and the two uncommon leaders, one Indigenous, and one a Caucasian, descended from settlers 4 or 5 generations ago, first smudged, and then began by checking in about our week.

What was one good thing, and one bad thing that had happened this past week? It was a question that always started our afternoons together. Kate would go on to offer some teaching, or a story from the Siksika culture, and then I would offer a teaching or activity that looked at different concepts of becoming young women, resume writing, or making a budget, talking about emotions, and being able to describe how we were feeling. Each session would again end with everyone on the buffalo hide, with Kate offering a prayer, and me giving assignments for their journals, until we would meet again the following week.

It was not long before I realized how much I valued Kate's lessons, and the opportunity to smudge, or enjoy learning one of her traditional skills.

Cleansing oneself is a traditional way of preparing to connect with the divine. Either through baptism, or crossing oneself with holy water, ritual washing in a silver bowl, or maintaining strict dietary restrictions; many faith communities have different cleansing practices.

I was taught that the practice of smudging was done in order to cleanse oneself and to prepare to be with the most sacred parts of oneself and with the creator. We would pull the smoke close to us, ritually washing our mouth, so that we would not speak ill, our ears, so that we would not hear negative things, our eyes so that we would not invite negativity in through our eyes, and we would wash over our heads and onto our hearts to ensure that our mind and heart were ready for the learning to be taught to us. This simple act of washing in smoke came to have significant meaning for me, a place where I could connect to my most authentic self, where I could live into the values that I held, without concern of judgment from others, or accusations of peculiarity or cautious glances of apprehension and concern.

In the times during our youth group in the moments after smudging and feeling connected to this reflective and yearning side of my brain I felt little embarrassment expressing my desire to be more connected to the earth, and to the people around me. Others did not seem to think it weird that I wanted to be more dependent than independent. That I wanted to know who my neighbours were, and wished I could develop a sense of security in my apartment building.

I became aware that my desire to go camping, and to spending endless afternoons walking through Nose Hill, a provincial park located in the city limits, probably was more connected to my sense of longing for the earth, than from avoiding society. As the weeks of our youth group gatherings continued to pass, each one bringing with it new lessons and world views I had never before considered, I began to feel a transcendent, deep and unexplainable shift in the very center of my being. I began feeling a sense of homecoming, or finding a deep sense of personal and spiritual richness among these practices, and within this language of reverence.

But what does it mean for me to recognize or claim parts of a culture that is not one that I grew up with or that I have experienced, in any ways other than through weekly gatherings. Even though I had spent hundreds of hours doing historical and cultural research, and even though I spent weeks planning and collaborating on activities and outings for a group of teenage girls, did this give me any right to claim parts of their traditional sacred practices as my own?

What does it mean if I pick medicines in the ditches of Saskatchewan highways, dry them and then burn them for smudging practices? Am I allowed to use the word Creator to capture my understanding of the divine, if what I mean by Creator is not necessarily the same as what Kate taught the young girls? What if my understanding of the divine has shifted and transformed into that which was described to me? At what point am I learning from a tradition that was taught to me, and adapting my own understandings of the world and myself to match up with the truth that I recognize in

those learnings; and where do I cross the line into misappropriating from a culture and a community that my ancestors have historically marginalized and culturally annihilated?

There has been a rather public, and pretty heated, conversation happening around cultural misappropriation for much of the last year, highlighting conversations around wearing headdresses at Halloween, getting tribal or dream catcher tattoos, and the very explosive conversation around specific people's claims to Indigenous Heritage.

“The expressions of cultural heritage [as defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] can be intangible, including scientific, agricultural, technical and ecological knowledge (also called "traditional knowledge") and verbal, musical and active expressions (such as performances); or they may be tangible expressions such as plastic arts, architectural forms, human remains and land. Expressions of cultural heritage are more than just property: they express the way of life and thought of a particular society, which are evidence of its intellectual and spiritual achievements.”

UNESCO also points out that “Cultural heritage transcends the individual. The word ‘heritage’ itself suggests that a practice must be maintained and passed on by more than one generation.” And when we put this information together with all of the knowledge that we have about assimilation, displacement, removal of children and banning cultural activities, it makes sense that Aboriginal Culture is at risk of being lost. And many people now argue that cultural appropriation and negative stereotypes are just the next step in a long line of the perpetuation of injustice and inequality for Indigenous Peoples of Canada.

Not only have people from the dominant culture “borrowed” expressions, symbols, artistic style and know-how from Indigenous Peoples without any sort of authority or recognition of where they came from. But these designs, and cultural knowledge are often taken in ways that completely misrepresented, and even disparaged, Indigenous Peoples. If one were to go onto Twitter, Instagram or Facebook and enter the HASHTAG Native American or HASHTAG Indian, the images would mostly consist of Caucasian individuals wearing headdresses or war bonnets at music festivals. Only recently have First Nations People been able to repopulate these hashtags with appropriate images and content that actually represents Indigenous People.

The extremes of Cultural Appropriation within the North American world have gotten to the point where publishing and production companies would rather have stereotyped pieces of work than authentic ones. Cultural Appropriation has become

just one more way for the majority culture to dispossess and denigrate Indigenous Peoples.

What does this mean for me, when I have begun including Indigenous practices into my faith and religious practices? What does it mean when our denomination encourages us to affirm and promote spiritual teachings of Earth-Centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature? Or when our church's Aboriginal Awareness Group's Mission is to deepen our knowledge of Indigenous Spirituality?

Much like Diane said when telling the story this morning, it is important to recognize our own knowledge with the information that we share, it is important to understand where it comes from and how we came to possess the information, and bits of culture. Similarly, as we would never quote someone else's writings or ideas as our own, we should not claim these bits of spiritual culture as our own, without identifying where they come from, and how we came to possess the knowledge. And we must never attempt to gain credibility or wealth, or status, or recognition because of the cultural information that we have learned from.

For myself, I continue to recognize that the spiritual exercises and activities that I have included in my own practices are used to nurture me, and not used in a way that misrepresents or devalues those who taught me the information. I continue to learn about the people and the practices and traditions of those around me, and I am careful how and with whom I share that information. And I have never felt like I have any authority in the knowledge that has been passed on to me, but use it in the way that I was told it could be used.

I believe that when we learn new things, from Indigenous Peoples, or from other cultures, faiths, and peoples that we need to be aware of all of the possibilities and conscious about all of the intricacies that it means to be using and informing our world view with the knowledge. Our faith can be a place for healing and saving those who have been harmed by previous traditions, but we too need to take steps to avoid perpetuating harm and continuing negative or damaging stereotypes.

I know that this is a thin line and that we can struggle to find the balance that helps inform our lives while allowing Indigenous Peoples to claim and live fully into theirs, but I believe that it is a line that is worthy and necessary for us to traverse.

May we do so with intention and with grace.