

BEGINNING STEPS ALONG THE WAY

In Sudbury, in August of 1986, a white man, Bob Smith, Moderator of the United Church of Canada, spoke a formal apology to First Nations members of the church on behalf of the largest protestant denomination in Canada: “Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured....”

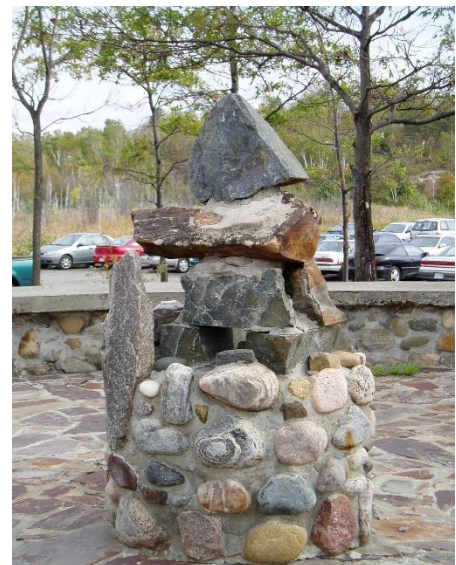


An old, seamed, aboriginal woman, sitting around the sacred fire, reverently tosses a pinch of tobacco on the flame. In a voice raspy with experience, punctuated with long pauses to ponder, gently holding an eagle feather, she remembers.

“My grandmother, an Elder and a Clan Mother, who lived with respect in Creation, taught me the old ways. She warned me never to let the pastors, the ministers, the priests know. She told me the stories of Grandfather sun and Grandmother moon, of the trickster, of the four-leggeds and the two-leggeds. She taught me to respect the land, to give thanks to the Creator for the blessings of life and food and family. She taught me how to listen to the wind, how to hear the whisper of Mother earth in the soil, how to pay attention to the Great Spirit speaking in the rustling leaves. She showed me how to live lightly with the land, only taking what we needed, always giving thanks for the sacrifices little brother and sister animals made to feed us. She always lived in the heart of the Creator. I’ve tried to do the same, but it’s hard.”

The white man continued to speak words of apology: “...We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality. We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ. We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel. We tried to make you like us and in doing so we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were....”

As the sacred fire’s smoke slowly wafts toward the heavens, the old woman seems lost in thought. Her breathing slows and tears start to leak from the corners of her eyes. She bows her head, in prayer? in sorrow? in despair? Her raspy whisper pierces the air with memory as her feet rest on the grandfather rock in front of her.



Cairn in Sudbury marking Bob Smith’s apology of 1986.



“My daughter was only 5. She was a sweet bundle of energy, long, dark braids whipping across her slender back, a ready smile and an eager hug were always there for the asking. She was my heart. They took her away in late summer. They said it was government regulation. They said she would get an education. They said she would be happy. I’ll never forget the forlorn look of betrayal on her face, her arms reaching out to me in entreaty, her sobs punching a hole into my broken heart.

“They took her away for 13 years to the residential school. I lost my daughter that day. Every summer she came home changed more and more. Her braids were gone. She soon couldn’t speak the language of the People, insisting scornfully that we should speak English like she did. She lost her love for Creation, her ability to give thanks to the Creator for so many gifts of bounty. She became hard, her laughter replaced with sullen resentment, her hugs replaced with argument. Each year my beautiful daughter died a little more. Each year her spirit drained away. She became hollow. She lost herself.



“One day I got a call from the hospital. My 32 year-old daughter was in the intensive care unit. She was dying of a drug overdose, something she used to blunt the pain. It was then she told me what happened in that school. She told me that they took away her heart, her soul, her identity, for they tried to make her into ‘a good white Canadian.’ She told me of the abuse and the beatings and the rotten food and the denial of her native ways.”

The old woman pauses, breathes, sighs. The tears are gone, but the wistfulness in her voice abrades the soul.

“I looked around me after she died. I saw what they had done to us. I saw the old councils and the hereditary chiefs and the Clan Mothers had been forcefully replaced by elected councils and elected chiefs, the Creator’s land replaced with tiny parcels of barren reservations. I saw that we had been forced into the same white straitjacket as my daughter had been, but more subtlety. The results were the same. We had lost our soul.”

The white man finished his confessional apology, "...As a result, you, and we, are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be. We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God's creation healed."



Standing up, the old woman slowly crosses to the cedar bows piled to one side of the sacred fire. She tosses a branch on the flame and pungent, thick smoke curls over the grandfather rocks circling the blaze. Her jaw clenches and she straightens, determination in every line of her face.

"Don't they see? Don't they understand? They think they have bought us off with their 'landmark settlement,' but they never admit to stealing who we are. Do you know why they always sent the missionaries in first? Because they knew what they had. They knew if they could rob a people of their belief system they could control them."

The old woman stops, fury gone, replaced by a sense of wonder. She cups the fire's smoke in her boney hands, smudging herself by washing her head, her eyes, her ears, her mouth, her heart.



"The People tell a story of how light came into the world. After the Creator gives the gift of light, the Animal People ran off in many directions, and it was a long time before they learned how to trust each other again and to live with each other's differences. The coming of the Light meant that they had more to learn of each other and their world. But they learned it and they continue to pass on these teachings to each other, and especially to people, the newest and strangest of the Animal People.

The question rises, mixed with the sacred, heavy smoke, "How do we know each other to trust each other?" Healing is not in the question. Reconciliation is in the seeking for an answer to the question – perhaps at the Blanket Exercise this Monday at 7:00 p.m. – that we may live into all our relations.

Together.