

Justice as Healing

A Newsletter on Aboriginal Concepts of Justice

Red Jacket and the right to rule

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In the Introduction to *Dancing With A Ghost*, Basil Johnston wrote about Red Jacket, a noted Seneca orator chosen by the people of Six Nations to explain to the missionaries why they would not "forsake their manitous and their uncivilized ways, and to espouse the Bible and civilization". What Red Jacket told them was "Kitchi-Manitou has given us a different understanding".

And how do we begin to penetrate that different understanding? I will start by repeating the words of Associate Chief Judge Murray Sinclair of the Provincial Court of Manitoba, himself Ojibway, in an address he gave to a conference on Aboriginal justice in Saskatoon in 1993:

I am not a biblical scholar, but as I have come to understand it, in Judaeo-Christian tradition, man occupies a position just below God and the angels, but above all other early creation ... According to the Genesis account of creation ... 'God said "Let us make man in our image and likeness to rule the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all wild animals on earth, and all reptiles that crawl upon the earth ...'

Mankind was told to: '... fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, and every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

In sharp contrast, the Aboriginal world-view holds that mankind is the least powerful and least important factor in creation ... Mankind's interests are not to be placed above those of any other part of creation. In the matter of the hierarchy, or relative importance of beings within creation, Aboriginal and Western intellectual traditions are almost diametrically opposed. It goes without saying that *our world-view provides the basis for those customs, thoughts and behaviours we consider appropriate.* (emphasis added)

Within the Ojibway world-view, then, the hierarchy of creation placed the earth (and its life-blood, the waters) in first place, for without them there would be no plants, animals or human life. The plant world stood second, for without it there would be no animal or human life. The animal world was third. Last, and least important of all, was mankind, for nothing whatever depended on our survival. We were also clearly the most dependent, and therefore owed the *greatest* duty of respect and care for the other three. Our central duty was not to subdue them, but to learn how they interacted, or connected, so that we could accommodate ourselves to those existing relationships. Any other approach, in the long run, could only result in a disruption of the healthy equilibria which had existed for millennia and which, in fact, created the conditions for our own evolution.

Even the approach to *studying* those four orders of creation seems radically different. Milton M.R. Friedman, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Alberta and Senior Research Scholar with the Canadian Circumpolar Institute, explores the difference in his paper "The Nature and Utility of Traditional Ecological Knowledge", published in *Northern Perspectives*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Summer 1992:

... the methods of (western) science are essentially reductionist, that is to say, they seek to understand organisms or nature by studying the smallest or simplest manageable part or sub-system in essential isolation ...

Traditional knowledge seeks to comprehend such complexity by operating from a different epistemological basis. It eschews reductionism, placing little emphasis on studying small parts of the ecological system in isolation ...

The non-western forager lives in a world not of linear causal events but of constantly reforming, multi-dimensional, interacting cycles, where nothing is simply a cause or an effect, but all factors are influences impacting other elements of the system-as-a-whole...

Linear approaches to analysis cannot be applied to cyclical systems and, as everyone now realizes, ecosystems are in fact complex cycles of *recirculating energy, matter and relationships*. (emphasis added)

That passage struck a chord with me. I recalled, for instance, studying plants in biology classes. We learned about their cell structure, photo-synthetic processes, root systems, reproductive systems, and so forth. We did not, however, learn about how they contributed to the other plants, birds, insects, soils and animals which shared their meadow. It was, as Friedman suggests, a reductionist approach, focused not on the relationships between things, but upon how each separate thing worked in and of itself.

In short, we seemed to approach science not from within a perspective that said all things were connected to each other, but one which, by its silence on that issue, created the opposite impression. Nothing seemed to be an essential part of anything else; rather, all 'things-out-there' became separable resources to be extracted (or ignored, poisoned, paved over, etc.) at our whim. In that frame of mind, it would never have occurred to me to consider accommodating myself to the realities of their equilibria; instead, they were there to accommodate mine. It was clearly a man-centred, man-dominated universe that I was being taught to see, even though no one ever said it.

By contrast, the "connecting" or relationship-based approach to picturing the universe seems to dominate Aboriginal teaching. For instance, an Ojibway friend of mine gave me a sheet of paper entitled *Twelve Principles Of Indian Philosophy*. The first reads:

Wholeness. All things are interrelated. Everything in the universe is part of a single whole. Everything is connected *in some way* to everything else. It is only possible to understand something if we understand how it is *connected* to everything else." (emphasis added)

Traditional teaching appears to stipulate that this principle – or law – applies not only to the natural order, but to human affairs as well. When people are causing problems, for instance, that law asks for certain kinds of community responses. It asks for an enquiry into factors which might have caused the behaviour, but that enquiry goes back much further in time than is the custom in western courts. It also spreads out much wider, encompassing a greatly expanded circle of friends, family, employers and other influences. Just as importantly, any plan of action will involve not just the individual doing what he can with *his* problem, but the whole, larger group doing what *they* can about *their* problem. Disharmony within the group is seen as everyone's disharmony, even if its most visible manifestation is the act of one person only. The principle of Wholeness requires looking for, and responding to, complex interconnections, not single acts of separate individuals.

In passing, it is interesting to note that Gregory Bateson, a leading American educator, seems to be pressing for changes which echo this traditional emphasis on seeing things in terms of relationships:

... relationships should be used as the basis for all *definitions*, and this should be taught to our children in elementary school. Anything ... should be defined not by what it is in itself, but *by its relationship to other things*. (emphasis added)

As I will discuss later, this approach appears to be implicit in the structure of many Aboriginal languages, including the Algonkian group. For instance, it has been described to me that in Mi'kmaq there is no equivalent for our abstract noun "tree". Simply referring to a "tree" would say nothing whatever about the *kind* of tree referred to. Further, arbitrary names for *kinds* of trees are seen as similarly uninforming. Instead, trees are 'called' by the sounds that are made as the wind goes through their branches, in the autumn, during a special period just before dusk. In short, trees are known and talked about in terms of how they interact with their surroundings. As a result, the language itself decrees that they be thought of only in contextual, inter-relating, vibrant and connected ways. (As a footnote, I was told that this Mi'kmaq way also creates a record of environmental change: the old people know the names from their youth, names which convey sounds the young people have never heard after decades of environmental degradation.)

I earlier mentioned the Sun Dance, the fact that it is making a significant comeback, and the possibility that this was because it expressed a fundamental vision that had not been lost. As I understand it, interrelatedness was central to that vision. [See: Rupert Ross, "Seeing the world differently", *Justice as Healing* (Summer 1995).]

When westerners look at the Sun Dance, they seem to focus on the 'magic' of things which pierce the chest and then leave no scars. The primary importance seems, however, to lie elsewhere. One Ojibway teacher of mine from northern Manitoba spoke about its impact on his life. He spoke of the things extending from his chest up to the central tree, and of the sun blazing into his eyes from directly behind that tree. He spoke of coming to know many things at that time, and of knowing them in a way that is a 'felt' way, not just a 'thought' way. In describing his experience, he chose phrases which, in English, were so poetic that I am unable to repeat them properly, not having recorded them at the time. Instead, I can only write about what his poetry expressed to me.

First and foremost, he seemed to have gained the knowledge that he was tied to Mother Earth beneath him, to that tree in front of him, and to Grandfather Sun which gave spirit to all of them. Second came the knowledge that the tie was in the energy, the spirit and the forces that they all rode upon and which gave them all life. Third came the knowledge that, while they were all tied, they also moved within separate spheres, and had duties to respect the forces that organized them in that connected but separated way. Finally came the knowledge that while he could *participate* in those forces, he could neither control nor direct them, so much larger were they than he. Instead, while he could rejoice in the life that flowed through him, his primary posture had to be one of humble acknowledgment of his own inconsequential, dependent status in the larger scheme of things.

He also spoke about a low point that came later in his life, and how he went out into his yard and remembered the connecting forces from the Sun Dance. They returned to him, uniting him first with the trees and then beyond them again, taking away his loneliness. When he said that, I remembered something an Ojibway woman wrote after I asked about the loneliness of women during traditional isolation practices surrounding puberty and menses:

I'd like to share something I found out a couple of years ago. "Loneliness" is a negative and is something different than being "alone". One cannot be lonely if you truly have one's self and the helpers of the spirit world around you. To me, loneliness is equal to boredom. Even when one is isolated, it needn't be boring, especially if one meditates *good* for all the world.

This emphasis in the Sun Dance and in so many other things, upon creating good relationships between all things has consequences far larger than I first supposed. By definition, relationships are never static. Rather, they are always in the process of change. Where the focus shifts from 'things' to the relationships between them, the whole western notion of 'things' starts to unravel.