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She is the author or editor of five volumes, including: *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* (2004); *Remember This!: Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives* (2005); *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook* (2005); *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors: The Dakota Commemorative Marches of the 21st Century* (2006); and, her most recent volume, *What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland* (2008).

You Can't Un-Ring a Bell: Demonstrating Contrition through Action

My grandfather, Eli Taylor, from the Sioux Valley Reserve in Manitoba, used to say, “There is no word for ‘sorry’ in the Dakota language. Just like you can’t un-ring a bell, bad actions or words cannot be taken back.” Thus, within this cultural world view, we must all act mindfully in order to maintain good relations with all of creation. In the event that we do not act respectfully and actually cause harm to others, our words cannot rectify the harm. Instead, we need to demonstrate contrition through our actions. In the context of a peoples-to-peoples relationship, it is also appropriate to think about the significance of action, rather than apology, as a means of addressing the harms perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples both in Canada and in the United States. Given the magnitude of these historical and ongoing harms, repairing the damage requires action on a colossal scale.

While the current initiatives in Canada are focusing on residential schools, settler society eludes responsibility for the broader harms perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples by narrowing the focus of the harms to be repaired. Because of the extensive violence of the residential school experience, we have been trained to forget that the schools were used as a tool to disconnect us from one another, from our spirituality and cultures, and from our lands. They were designed to compel our complete subjugation to the colonial state. Thus, the schools had served a larger colonial project. In stripping them from that context, settler society is attempting to maintain the colonial structure while throwing mere scraps to residential school Survivors for the terror and devastation wrought within colonial institutions. We need bigger solutions.

Similar experiences with colonial powers have meant similar legacies for Indigenous Peoples on both sides of the 49th parallel. In the Dakota homeland of *Minisota Makoce* (land Where the Waters Reflect the Skies), we are currently calling attention to the need for Minnesotans and the United States government to address these long-standing historical and contemporary harms. I have recently published a book entitled *What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland*³ to initiate what I hope will be a public discussion. In this book, I highlight a four-step process for addressing the crimes of land theft, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and colonization. This process includes a need for a broad-scale truth-telling forum, a campaign to *TAKE DOWN THE FORT*, a program of land restoration and reparations, and,

finally, the end of American colonization of Indigenous Peoples and homeland. While all Indigenous histories are not identical, they are similar enough to offer some relevancy to Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

Though the crimes of land theft, genocide, and colonization are well-documented on both sides of the Canadian-US border, most settlers still remain resistant to acknowledging the violent and morally reprehensible crimes perpetrated so that they could not only obtain Indigenous lands, but also so they could continue to inhabit them without fear of violent retribution. Thus, colonial governments were intent on eradicating the existence of Indigenous Peoples, either physically, culturally, or both. The genocidal practices range from outright attempts at physical extermination to residential school imprisonment, involuntary sterilization, destruction of our food sources and land bases, gendered segregation through incarceration, and the perpetration of ethnocide. Further, settler society has prevented us from living as Indigenous Peoples on our own lands. As Indigenous Peoples, we simply cannot reproduce or continue to survive if our populations are incarcerated, sterilized, and systematically attacked and our food sources—as well as air, waters, and lands—are destroyed. The antidote to these violent and repressive actions requires a commitment to support Indigenous life, lands, and ways of being. This requires a reworking of the existing social order.

As Dakota people have begun to think about justice in the context of our *Minisota* homeland, we have realized that before we can move to a discussion of justice we need to bring the injustices to the forefront of public attention. This, I believe, applies to the Canadian context as well. No one will be committed to righting the wrongs if they cannot recognize and name those wrongs. Thus, the first step in working toward justice involves establishing a truth-telling forum in which Indigenous Peoples can voice our suffering from the violent effects of European, Canadian, and American invasion, genocide, land theft, and colonization.

At the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Desmond Tutu stated that “No one in South Africa could ever again be able to say, ‘I did not know,’ and hope to be believed.”² The hope is that we would reach a point in Canada and the United States in which settler society could no longer deny the crimes (both historical and ongoing) perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples with any semblance of credibility. Thus, truth-telling efforts—whether in the form of a commission, a major educational effort, or some other forum—must be conducted on a massive, public scale. At that point we can ask the questions in earnest: What does recognition of genocide demand? What does recognition of land theft demand? What does recognition of colonization demand? Awareness of truth compels some kind of action.

Once settler society acknowledges injustices and demonstrates contrition, they will create a moral imperative for restorative justice. The process of restorative justice is perhaps more easily conceived in stages. Once we initiate a phase of truth-telling, it will necessarily cause us to rethink the foundations upon which the nation-state and provinces were created.

One of those foundations is that the *settlement* of Indigenous land is benign or even benevolent. When the violence and nastiness of the imperial business is unmasked, we must question the morality of continuing to celebrate the nations' imperial and colonial icons. With that unmasking, not only do we realize that we cannot celebrate those icons, but we also realize we must pursue a campaign to *TAKE DOWN THE FORT*, both literally and metaphorically. While I employed this phrase to refer most tangibly to historic Fort Snelling in the state of Minnesota (the site of the Dakota concentration camp during the winter of 1862–63), it also applies to all monuments, institutions, place names, and texts in Canada and in the United States that continue to celebrate the perpetrators of genocide or the institutions and systems that facilitated the implementation of genocidal and unjust policies. The process of taking down the fort becomes an educational venture in itself and can assist in the truth-telling process. Any time Indigenous people challenge a beloved colonial icon, it becomes apparent just how invested settler society is in maintaining the status quo. Eradicating the symbols, then, becomes an important step in the struggle for justice.

To create a moral society, Canadians and Americans must then engage the next step in the movement toward justice: land restoration and reparations. While this usually invokes tremendous fear within settler society, there are ways to conceive the return of land that do not involve current settlers relinquishing their individual property rights, unless they wish to do so in the name of justice. In the state of Minnesota, for example, we can identify more than eleven million acres currently designated as federal, state, county, or metro-commissioned lands.³ Settler society could immediately return those millions of acres to Dakota people without touching a single acre of privately held lands. The same is true of public or Crown lands in Canada. For justice to occur, the return of all Crown lands must be a given. The reality is that restitution for land theft—no matter how long ago the crime was perpetrated—eventually requires the return of land.

The return of land alone, however, is not enough to create justice. Instead, settler society also has to restore those lands to a pristine condition. This would require extensive cleanup efforts, particularly on the part of corporations, farmers, and resource extractors that have left horrendous environmental destruction in the wake of their activities.

Together, settler and Indigenous Peoples alike will need to address all of these issues systematically. In addition, non-land-based reparations will also be a necessary element in restoring justice within Indigenous homelands. For example, other reparations might include environmental cleanup, infrastructure development for sustainable living, educational opportunities, healing centres, resources for language and culture revitalization, relocation expenses for displaced Indigenous Peoples, and debt relief.

In the end, however, none of this makes sense if institutions and systems of colonization remain in place. Ultimately, if Canadians, Americans, and Indigenous Peoples are going to create a peaceful and just society, all oppression must cease. Colonization, by its very nature, is antithetical to justice. Therefore, complete decolonization is a necessary end goal for a peaceful and just society. This would entail overturning the institutions, systems, and ideologies of colonialism that continue to affect every aspect of Indigenous life. In a nutshell, we must all rethink our ways of being and interacting in this world to create a sustainable, healthy, and peaceful co-existence with one another and with the natural world. While this may seem an impossibility given the sense of permanency we associate with the existing nation-states, the reality is that human beings are on the cusp of a great world change. The flourishing of empire has advanced societal models based on principles of domination, exploitation, and violence. This has served to harm human beings, plants, and animals, as well as the air, lands, and waters, thereby pushing us into a planetary crisis. Today we are witnessing the beginning of catastrophic collapses of the existing systems, both natural and man-made, as empire is ultimately self-destructive.

But we have a choice. Author David Korten relates that this transformation “can play out in the mode of Empire, as a violent, self-destructive, last-man-standing competition for individual advantage. Or it can play out in the mode of Earth Community, as a cooperative effort to rebuild community; to learn the arts of sufficiency, sharing, and peaceful conflict resolution; and to marshal our human creativity to grow the generative potential of the whole.”⁴ I, for one, would prefer the latter option. If Canadians and Americans choose Earth Community, it will require all of us to rework the existing social order and to adopt a new set of values based on mutual respect and sustainability.

Contemplating this future requires expansive thinking from all of us. For non-Indigenous people, it asks that you challenge, re-examine, and reject the racist and colonialist programming to which you have grown accustomed. It also asks that you rethink the values of domination, consumption, and exploitation that have become a part of Canadian and American societies. For Indigenous

Peoples, it requires that we awaken our consciousness to the potential for liberation. Most importantly, however, it requires all of us to move beyond a simple re-education and acknowledgement of past harms. It requires action that will fundamentally alter the current power imbalance. It requires action that will serve to ensure justice to the Original Peoples of this continent.

These questions are being raised at a time when the international community is beginning to address both the historical harms perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples globally and the contemporary harms we suffer because of ongoing subjugation and oppression. On 13 September 2007, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* with an overwhelming majority. This declaration affirms both the individual and collective rights of Indigenous Peoples as a way to promote justice and peace for all human beings throughout the world without discrimination. Article 8 of the *Declaration* is particularly relevant to the discussion of how a state addresses tremendous crimes against humanity:

1. Indigenous Peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.
2. States shall provide effective mechanisms for prevention of, and redress for:
 - (a) Any action which has the aim or effect of depriving them of their integrity as distinct peoples, or of their cultural values or ethnic identities;
 - (b) Any action which has the aim or effect of dispossessing them of their lands, territories or resources;
 - (c) Any form of forced population transfer which has the aim or effect of violating or undermining any of their rights;
 - (d) Any form of forced assimilation or integration;
 - (e) Any form of propaganda designed to promote or incite racial or ethnic discrimination directed against them.⁵

Certainly, the Canadian government and its citizens are guilty of perpetrating every one of these internationally recognized crimes, as is the United States government. By eliminating or severely debilitating the original owners of the land and its resources, colonial powers have ensured that Indigenous Peoples could no longer threaten the genocidal and exploitative policies that would continue to enrich them and other citizens.

Article 8 of the *Declaration* directly dictates that both Canada and the United States have an obligation to acknowledge and offer redress for these harms. Reparations are not simply a potential option, they are a settler obligation and an Indigenous right.

Notes

- ¹ This essay is adapted from the introductory chapter, “Envisioning Justice in Minnesota,” in Waziyatawin (2008). *What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press. For further information, see www.livingjusticepress.org
- ² Tutu, Desmond M. (1999:120). *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- ³ Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (2000). *Public Land and Mineral Ownership in Minnesota: A Guide for Teachers*. Revised May 2000. Retrieved 27 November 2008 from: http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/lands_minerals/PLteachersguide.pdf
- ⁴ Korten, David (2006:63). *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- ⁵ United Nations (2008:5). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Retrieved 24 November 2008 from: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf



Sisters outside the Pukatawagan day school with a group of boys wearing Plains Indian-style headdresses made from paper, circa 1960

Attributed to sister Liliane

National Archives of Canada, PA-195120

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