

Daily Readings for Treaties Recognition Week: 5-11 November 2017



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Treaties Recognition Week 2017
5-11 November
"Hear our voices"

This is the second year we in the Province of Ontario celebrate Treaties Recognition Week. We have much to learn about treaties in Canada. Our history is loaded with these arrangements that have left an alarming scene; more than 300 years of treaty making.

We all are treaty people. It also has been said that we all are victims; victims of treaty ignorance, miscommunication, treaty abuse, deception, racism, and manipulation. When we acknowledge this painful truth, we can begin to come together to establish new ways of being treaty people. There is much need for healing. Education and conversation do help to nurture new attitudes and relationships.

1. We recognize pain and anguish resulting from these many treaty agreements. We also find hope in knowing that the United Nations has worked for 25 years with all nations on earth and indigenous peoples to develop the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (often called UNDRIP). It is strange that such a document is needed to remind us that Indigenous peoples are people; even stranger that we have to be reminded that Indigenous peoples have the right "to the recognition, observance and enforcement of treaties" concluded with states or their successors.

Our need for such a document indicates the persistent presence of a deep seated problem. Resource extraction around the world uses underlying practices that dehumanize Indigenous peoples. The annex to UNDRIP may guide us to the problem, when it affirms that "indigenous peoples are equal to all other peoples, while recognizing the right of all peoples to be different, to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such."

If you are not familiar with UNDRIP, we hope that you will read it; it takes only a few minutes and works for a lifetime. You can access it through the internet or you may take a copy of this booklet. http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf Knowledge is power for change. Frequent use encourages wisdom.

2. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued ninety-four calls to action. When we become familiar with these and commit to respond, we nurture hope for future generations. Read one section each week. Talk about and discuss with someone else what you are reading. http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

3. This year we focus on our attitudes and the contributions of Indigenous people. We take for granted many gifts that have been shared. How do we acknowledge these?

Our Reconciling Circle [ReconcilingCircle@execulink.com] hopes that naming some of these treasures will help us all to become more conscious of the need and opportunities for renewing relationships. We know that we need a new way of relating.

Have you ever?

"O Canada! Our home and native land!"

Have you ever paused during the singing of our national anthem and choked up on the line "Our home and native land?" Imagine how it feels in the mouth and ears of Indigenous, Inuit, and Métis people. A friend has suggested changing this line to "Our home on native land." (Participate in the Blanket Exercise to pause and reflect in a new way.)

Take a moment. Consider these words and our history. This native land was the home of many peoples, who have lived here for centuries and millennia. There is extensive archaeological evidence to confirm this statement. North America was occupied long before European strangers from across the ocean "got lost" on their way to India and ignorantly named the inhabitants "Indians."

The residents of this new land had a deep regard for the practice of hospitality. So they welcomed the strangers to come ashore and opened their lives to these "lost" explorers. This invitation to step out onto the land conveyed a message that did not make sense to the newly-arrived who had their own primary interests; wealth and resources.

These alien visitors were nominally Christian. They were supported by "Christian" interests intermingled with commercial and imperial motives. The biblical foundations and the practice of hospitality had been lost or buried under the exercise of abusive power that appears to be the inevitable companion of empires seeking to expand their influence and control. Equally forgotten or ignored was the fundamental biblical concept of covenant whose goal is establishing and nurturing respectful relationships that honour the Creator.

These European strangers had been told by their highest authorities that any people unlike themselves actually were nobodies. The Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius (empty land and nobody's land) combined to remind the newly-arriving aliens that they were superior to the "nobodies" greeting them in hospitality. The rest is history and now we are trying to "get it right" so that we can discover what it means to live in peace and mutual respect. It is time to set aside suspicion and abuse so that we can again become hospitable to one another as well as to contemporary visitors.

This year let's see if we can learn to sing the national anthem with new meaning and sensitivity. Perhaps we can begin to discover that we all are treaty people. Maybe we will grow to affirm that there is much need and opportunity for healing. Openness and sensitivity toward others' perceptions and experience are gifts that we can cultivate.

Question for reflection and sharing:

What difference do you observe in your attitude and communication, when you refer to "host peoples" instead of "nobodies" or any of the other words commonly associated with Indigenous persons?

What kind of medicine is this?

Jacques Cartier disembarked at Pointe-Penouille in Gaspé Bay and erected a thirty foot wooden cross on 24 July 1534. An Iroquois leader named Donnacona had come there from Québec to fish, met him and objected to the placing of the cross on occupied territory. Cartier lied about the meaning of this cross being an insignificant landmark. Then he seized Donnacona's canoe and forcibly took him on board the ship. There he was fêted and eventually agreed to let his two sons Domagaya and Taignoagy go to France to meet King Francis I. Some trade goods were given to the fishermen.

Cartier returned in 1535 and reached Stadacona, in the area of present day Québec city. The explorer refused to listen to Donnacona's experience and headed up the St. Lawrence River to the island of Hochelaga (Montreal area), where he came to a village of up to two thousand residents tending corn fields. Because Donnacona experienced betrayal, he wiped his hands of further aiding the intruders who would not listen or respect.

Winter imprisoned the French ships in the ice and twenty-five of the one hundred French group died of scurvy; an illness resulting from vitamin C deficiency and common to know-it-all explorers. The local inhabitants did not develop scurvy. Domagaya was convinced to provide anedda (white cedar) tea, which Indigenous people used as a medicine. This saved the survivors.

The use of vitamin C in this form was already known and used by the residents of the land. But it took several centuries for explorers to learn this elementary lesson in healthy living. European arrogance got in the way of learning from their hosts. This resulted in unnumbered preventable illnesses and deaths, including more than 650 British soldiers near Lévis in the winter of 1759-60 alone.

On 3 May 1536 Cartier planted another cross; this one at the wintering site. He seized ten Indigenous people, including Donnacona, and compelled them to make the journey to France, where three of the men were baptized. This forceful removal (kidnapping) intentionally allowed another Iroquois leader Agona to assume the senior position along the St. Lawrence River. All but one little girl died in France. Ironically, Donnacona was one of the baptized and he himself died of scurvy while being "hosted" in France. A plaque was placed in Québec in 1981 to recognize him as a national historic person.

Cartier took credit for "discovering" what Indigenous hosts openly showed to him. Is it any wonder that the people who had saved the lives of the French visitors wanted nothing more to do with them because their words and actions were not trustworthy?

Question for reflection and sharing:

What thoughts do you want to share about the way Indigenous hosts offered their life-saving medicine; the way these hosting peoples were treated in their own homeland?

How was that accomplished?

True or false? Bill Mason invented the canoe. Of course, the answer is false. He loved to canoe and he made canoeing popular in our age. However the canoe was being used in Canada long before anyone arrived here from European shores.

This marvellous water craft was easily portable, completely biodegradable, and capable of travelling over long distances in various water conditions. Each Aboriginal group could be identified by its canoe designs and materials. Some craft were skillfully carved from the massive trees of the northern Pacific coast; transformed either into large vessels ideal for trade, war and hunting great whales or smaller crafts suited for small waterways.

Outside the Pacific coast, Aboriginal builders used the rind of the White Birch tree to create the birch bark canoe. This masterful invention was critical to almost every facet of life for every living soul in Canada. Save for the tribes of the Plains, it was the principal means of transportation across the country. It could manage the rigours of early travel in the Canadian wilderness while carrying a great load but still could be carried as the need arose. The residents of Canada had used the canoe for centuries. They had travelled extensively along portages that led from one body of water to another or around dangerous obstacles. Without these portages, it would have been impossible to conduct the trade that gave rich profits to the off-shore investors. The location of these paths was generously shared.

In fact, without the Indigenous gift of the canoe - consider also the incredible kayak and umiak, known for their strength and capacity - it would have been impossible for "visitors" to move into the interior of Canada. Without such gifts, the business of the Hudson's Bay Company and other fur processing companies would have been impossible. No canoe; no beaver pelts; no exploration of the interior of this newly "found" land; no "fur empire."

However business men shaped commercially their concern about land and people. Their priority was beaver pelts. They were so obsessed with these that their fixation devastated the beaver populations, forced further exploration, dislocated peoples, devoured locally needed resources, introduced diseases for which locals had no immunity, and reduced animals to simple commodities instead of land-building and life-sustaining creatures.

If you never have seen an authentic Indigenous canoe, you may be ready for a visit to the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough to discover the wonder that has been shared openly with visitors to these Canadian shores. "In the history of water craft, the canoe of the Aboriginal Peoples is perhaps the ultimate expression of elegance and function. All its parts come from nature, and when it is retired, it returns to nature."

Questions for reflection and sharing:

What happens to humans and relationships, when the gifts of creation are considered simply as commodities and resources to be exploited? When do explorers become exploiters?

How is your vision?

Designer glasses are not a recent invention. They have been around for centuries; probably one or even two thousand years. It was not the manufacturer's or a celebrity's name that made them popular or items of display. These are functional works of art and practical living made from ivory, bone, antler, seashore grass, and wood. We do well to recognize these timeless treasures and the deep wisdom they reveal.

Snow glasses were designed to protect the eyes and keep them healthy in the extremely bright glare of light on winter snow and ice. Careful carving and crafting ensured that these marvellous hand-fitted eye protectors preserved vision from the pain and inconvenience of snow blindness. They made it possible to hunt successfully and provide food for families, especially when the sunlight of spring was so overwhelmingly intense that the ultraviolet light burned the retinas beyond the ability to see. Experience and wisdom revealed that seeing less made it possible to see more, to see better, and to see safely.

Consider the wisdom behind ilgaak; an Inuit name for snow glasses or goggles. Examine them closely in a museum, where many have been collected, or online, where many intricate designs are easily visible. These were not made by primitive people but by clever practical observers and insightful students of life. Sometimes, like contemporary athletes, soot was applied to the exterior to further reduce the amount of light reaching the eyes.

Aviators, workers, and athletes now benefit regularly from special eye protection to limit and manage the light that is required for reliable vision. Polarizing lenses and other related optical ideas are simply more sophisticated contemporary means of doing the same thing that snow glasses were designed to do over the last couple millennia. Optical companies have built their designs and aspirations on the shoulders of Indigenous ingenuity without recognition or acknowledgement.

The next time you put on your sunglasses, you may choose to pause for a moment of gratitude for the Indigenous wisdom that was many centuries ahead of the lenses that you use today to protect your eyes. Consider how these wonderful devices still make it possible to survive. Think of how these gifts have been freely shared from practical daily living for your pleasure and eye safety; no patents or royalties. Perhaps this moment of recognition and appreciation can open some new perceptions of our Indigenous hosts. Imagine a pair of glasses making it possible to honour more robustly those who have gone before. Let's open our eyes to contemplate how we honour those who make possible the comforts we daily take for granted.

Questions for reflection and sharing:

How do clever innovations like "sunglasses" open and challenge our perceptions of Indigenous peoples? Is it possible that something as elementary and as sophisticated as snow glasses can become an invitation to in-sight and reconciliation?

What are you doing this winter?

Now that we have been shown how to protect our eyes in the dangerous dazzle of winter light, how are we going to deal with winter's larger bite? For this season of raw weather is a force to be reckoned with in the part of Turtle Island known as Canada. The intensity and persistence of this frosty season have dominated the accounts of numberless newly-arriving people. They have faced life-threatening challenges to health, personal warmth, and travel.

Our search for answers leads to a pattern we already have observed. When the visitors encountered problems and openly accepted their vulnerability, their Indigenous hosts responded by sharing their bank of experience and wisdom for the benefit of newcomer neighbours. Without this inclusive attitude, life would have been very much different.

Let's begin with answers from the often ignored Inuit. These clever environmentalists utilized every part of the wildlife they harvested. All garments were functionally crafted from local resources. As an example, the amauti permitted mothers to carry their children on their back, bond fully with their well-protected young, and turn the garment 180° to permit nursing in complete security from the elements. This hooded design has given to us the concept of the parka and even the popular hoody.

Footwear has been an historic problem for many peoples, as confirmed by a visit to the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto. Two noted contributions of Indigenous people in Canada stand out. The genius of Inuit women enabled them to make invisible waterproof stitches to form mukluks lined with fur for winter comfort; crafted without benefit of metal needles! Métis contributions include beautiful leggings and the knowledge that "country wives" often became "necessary" for fur traders in order to have clothing that included the essential moccasins.

On travel, Samuel de Champlain named his vulnerability, when he was the guest of Huron and Algonquin people. He recorded in his journal of 1608 that, "Winter, when there is much snow, they (his hosts) make a kind of snowshoe that are two to three times larger than those in France, that they tie to their feet, and thus go on the snow, without sinking into it, otherwise they would not be able to hunt or go from one location to the other."

He recognized that he was grounded for the winter without Indigenous guidance. Only time and experience reveal how different sizes and shapes were utilized in different terrains; no round snowshoes in dense forests. He had not even been introduced to the gift of Mi'kmaq people of the Maritimes, who have made possible our joy of tobogganing.

Questions for reflection and sharing:

How would your experience of winter be different without these Indigenous innovations and gifts? How does acknowledging these gifts affect your perspective?

Who would have guessed?

An old saying goes something like, "Unless you lift your eyes, you will think that you are the pinnacle of creation." This may be the case with today's Indigenous contribution to everyday life, which touches into much interesting history.

You may well know about the finding of oil in September 1858 in what is now called Oil Springs, Ontario. You may also have heard of the American claim of starting the petroleum industry the following year at Titusville, Pennsylvania. Both events have received much attention and have been the source of bold claims.

But have you ever heard anyone hint that North American Indigenous people were familiar with oil seeps more than four hundred years before either event? Yes, years before visitors had arrived from abroad and named the inhabitants Indians. Or have you ever heard anyone suggest that Indigenous medicine men could be considered early oil "drillers?"

Then you may be surprised to learn that medicine men had been known for many years to visit the "black waters" to prepare medicines. Some forms were used like glue to secure implements to their handles, like arrowheads to their shafts. Others were used to cover baskets and seal them with this waterproofing agent; similar to the reports of Noah preparing the ark before the flood and the protection of Moses' cradle that enabled it to float on Egypt's Nile River.

Still other uses were devised. Carefully produced preparations provided for coughs, colds, and cuts remind me of coal oil being applied to my young throat to address a winter complaint. Do you know that one form of jelled petroleum was brought into service as mosquito repellent, while another was applied as a soothing salve? Perhaps you can even visualize someone protecting her/his skin with an application akin to contemporary use of lip balm and hand lotion.

The truth is that petroleum jelly was known and utilized by various peoples long before an American chemist and entrepreneur visited Titusville, where he began experiments to produce the first commercial package of this refined substance. What once had been considered a gift from the Creator and sacred medicine was refined with a new appearance. The new name applied to this Indigenous medicament is Vaseline.

One observation shared about this history is that turning spirited gifts that are living parts of creation into detached inanimate commercial objects destroys the balance of nature and weakens the souls of those who touch the "resources."

Questions for reflection and sharing:

Does your personal spirituality distinguish between gifts that are living parts of creation and inanimate resources to be exploited for profit? How do you reconcile these two ways of life?

Have you ever chewed a band aid?

This is not a savoury image; chewing a band aid. My grandchildren would say that this is gross. However this is the truth of history; people do this.

Indigenous people in numerous countries recognize that resin from trees comes to the surface of the trees to protect them from invasion and infection. North American residents collected spruce gum from wounds and oozing areas of spruce trees. Once this substance was collected, people placed it into their mouths and chewed it; an early form of chewing gum. It was readily available and the price was right: free for the tasting.

When dental care was not as highly developed as it is today, placing some spruce gum into the mouth helped to improve a person's dental hygiene. This improved the breath and was free of sugar. Manipulating it inside the mouth helped to clean the teeth. It was even fashionable for some people and a pacifier for others. An American named Curtis made quite a fortune by converting spruce gum into various flavours that sold briskly.

It was a similar story with Mayan and Aztec people, who collected sap from sapodilla trees in the form of chicle. They made cuts on the tree's surface to encourage the band aid to come forth to protect the tree. When this was observed by Europeans, they began to collect chicle to such an extent that the trees were endangered. They recognized an economic opportunity that eventually led to the development and sale of chewing gum. In fact, this product became so popular that William Wrigley, whose product we all likely have sampled, gave up selling soap because there was more demand for his chewing gum. The market was so great for his flavoured sweetened merchandise that he died one of the richest men in the USA.

However, when demand for chicle overwhelmed the supply and threatened the existence of the very trees producing this substance, other materials were called into service, such as, synthetics and plastics made from petroleum. Then marketers became involved to generate a "need" for chewing gum. Sometimes they packaged the gum by advertising large bubbles that could be blown. Other times they included "prizes" like sports cards so that one really did not know if people were purchasing the cards or the gum. But either way money moved from one pocket and was deposited into another pocket.

The story of something as elementary as spruce resin reveals much about where we have come from, who we are, and how we operate. By exploring items used and shared by Indigenous hosts we are given many opportunities to pause and reflect on our shared history and our way of life.

Questions for reflection and sharing:

When you consider the history of chewing gum and the other items examined this week, what do you learn about our Indigenous hosts? Our own priorities and lifestyle?