

Indigenous Peoples of Canada

Teachings

Susan Blight:

I think in terms of looking at western medicine versus traditional medicine from an Anishinaabe perspective, when we think about medicine we think about healing. We're not just thinking about the physical, so we really look at it as a holistic kind of wellness. When we talk about healing we're not just talking about healing the physical self, although it may start with the physical self. But we're talking about healing spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and physically, and we really approach things that way. So when it comes to traditional medicines it might not always respond to the physical symptom, but as something a bit more holistically grounded. The Anishinaabe people are known for medicine in terms of, you know indigenous nations; on Turtle Island we're really known for that. We're known for our plant medicines and our herbal medicines; that's something that we've practiced for thousands of years. And I think what comes from that - that relationship with those medicines is a respect. So a respect for the earth from which you are taking those medicines, and respect for the person who needs the healing.

John Croutch:

Yeah, First Nations people have always held up progress, right? You know, progress like global warming, polluted rivers and streams from industry, runoff from mono-crop farms, from feed lots - like that's progress, right? From the dumping of mercury into the rivers by industry in the north, you know; not cleaning up oil spills properly; that's progress. We stand in the way of that 'progress'. We're like the canary in the coal mine, right. It's our people who live in those territories who are, you know, getting higher rates of cancer, for example. But it's virtually ignored. But the road into a law, into a law that you can only pass down your status so far, with the idea that over time there'd be fewer and fewer Indians. The bottom line of the purpose of colonization was extraction of resources, right? In the beginning Europeans needed us, right, because we were the ones going into the woods and getting the beaver, the pelts for the Europeans. They needed us. Up to the War of 1812 they also needed us as allies in their fight with - in the French case with the British, and the British with the Americans, and they valued us as allies. After the War of 1812 things started to change and they didn't

need us. What they needed more was land for the settler population. So now, all of a sudden, we're in the way.

Shandra Spears Bombay:

So I'm part of a generation where this happened a lot, and there's thousands of us that were adopted into white families with the goal of getting us to pass for white, and no longer identify as Native. And whether or not people knew that was the goal, that was - that actually was the goal. So I just grew up thinking of myself as a white kid. And that changed, so later on I was able to make that change and now I can stand here - or sit here and say that I'm an Ojibwe woman.

John Croutch:

They've changed our identity over and over again. Like you know once upon a time we were the Noble Indian, and then we were Savage, and it's all about using us to the best purpose. And once our purpose disappeared we had to disappear. At least they tried to make us disappear. And we didn't. And that exists up to the present day.

Shandra Spears Bombay:

It ends up being how you see Canada. And this would change over time because my learning changed, but almost right away I started to see Canada as not something that I was part of, but something that was on top of me; something that wanted to hurt me and wanted to make me disappear. And that was not an easy thing to shift around because there's this comfort in feeling like we're all in this together and we all experience Canada the same way. We don't all experience Canada the same way.

And I would say that getting involved in activism at a young age helped with that because definitely when you are in Native, activist spaces you're getting access to our teachings; you know there's a lot of our elders that are around who are not only traditional teachers but also activists. And so they're actually able to give someone like me my first teachings and my first kind of set of understandings. So that's the positive part, but definitely, you know, being involved in the Oka - what they called the 'Oka Crisis' - we were involved in taking action here in Toronto, and this whole notion that, you know, white supremacist groups might follow you home and hurt you - which did happen to people that I know - people knowing that the cops are not really there to protect you, and they might actually hurt you on your way home from an action, that kind of thing. So I had to just retrain how I

thought about almost everything during that time, and it was pretty challenging. I mean the stereotype is that if you're mixed race that you have a little bit of the - of both, but actually being raised by one and then turning out to be the other - there's ways that I've engaged with that as a writer and as a speaker that I try to make use of that story, and some ways give reflection back to Canada on who Canada thinks it is, or who Canadians think they are.

Because sometimes there's a - there is a - 'I don't necessarily have to think about Native people', is the way that settler society works. 'Maybe, if I'm a hero, you know, a really super awesome settler then I'll take some time and think about Native issues, but generally I can ignore it if I want to.' And that was definitely different because I'm living it; I can't really ignore it. And I would say the other thing that shifted is just looking at adoption, because I think as an adoptee we would tend to just think we're "Okay, I'm adopted"; so I got my mind around that; I understand what that is. But when I look at it in terms of my whole family, my indigenous family or my Ojibwe family, seeing how over the generations I was adopted out; my father was in residential school and my grandparents were in residential school - the generation right before that were fluent in Ojibwe, they were clearly leaders in our community, cultural leaders, and three generations of interference with children from Canada's part and you ended up with me, and I didn't even know I was Native. So it is very damaging, and very effective in terms of erasing us, and - even inside of our own minds, which is - I lived through it, and I still can't believe that that's real. But it is!

John Croutch:

I can remember hearing like teenagers, as I got older, say to other white teenage boys, you know, "If you want to get laid [have sex] go over to the reserve. You know, that's where they're easy. Just bring a bottle of whiskey." So you hear those things, right, and it's like, 'My mother's First Nations. Was my mother like that? Is that what all Indian women are like?' You know, so all these things are building up in my psyche, right, about what First Nations people are and who they are. So I'm developing this shame inside of me about being a First Nations person. Like the medicine wheel - one of the medicine wheel teachings that I always remember and live by - attempt to live by - is the one where it speaks to the idea that you're born in the east door. Like that's the east, and then you move to the south and you become older, you become teenager; and then as you go around the circle to the west door you're into adulthood. The idea is that you want to get to the north door where you're an elder, right. And you want to do that in a smooth

transition. Most people don't succeed. And we all do this: we get stuck somewhere in our lives.

Some trauma happens as a child, and you can't let go of it. Or it happens as a teenager or an adult, and you can't let go of it. And you live in that moment, and you keep revisiting it over and over and over and over again, right. And it stymies your ability to move forward, right. It holds you back. What I've learned to do is to let go of those things, those traumas, sometimes more successful than others. But as I get older it gets easier and easier, right. I am no longer rooted in my childhood, you know; the things that happened to me in my childhood, or even in my teens. There's still a few issues I probably have that I'm dealing with, but as I get older and older it gets easier and easier. I want to get to that place of elderhood, you know, where I become an elder. And that stage, you know, then you have wisdom. And then you can share that with the younger generations.

Michaela Washburn:

A couple of the ideas that I hold dear that travel with me: one, the idea that 'we must go slowly; there is not much time'. It's the opposite of - it seems like an opposite inside of itself but it's really that idea that this life is precious; we have no idea when it's going to be done. We have no idea what's going to happen, and so to really savour the moments - savour all of it because it's fleeting; it's very brief. My life experience has taught me that in a rough way. And that we're all connected - I think we're all connected and we need to embrace that and we need to be willing to learn from each other; we need to be able to be humble and say "I don't know", and have respect, and be curious. It doesn't mean that we just accept everything we hear; I think we need to have the courage to ask questions with one another, and I think we also need to have the openness to be able to receive questions from each other and not be offended - "Well you should know" - and I don't think - I think we just need to be more compassionate and open with one another. The idea that we are all connected is something that's really, really important to me, and it's what propels me forward in this world, because there's a lot of pain, and otherwise it's hard to be here.