

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Remembering the Children Day in Red Deer

Seeing Creation Through Indigenous Eyes

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' – Genesis 1:26-31

My job is to teach Christian faith, but faith is not primarily information or intellectual propositions to be taught, accepted, or denied, as the case may be. Christian faith is, rather, a way of seeing the world, a worldview so different from the way that we usually see the world that it requires constant refreshment, regular acts of worship, so that we are constantly reminded that our usual way of seeing the world is deeply flawed. Christian faith is about seeking to see the world the way that Jesus saw it. To see this world as Jesus saw it is to enter God's kingdom.

This morning, I want to share with you, briefly, some of the ways in which I have learned about this alternative way of seeing the world from indigenous people, because indigenous people have a very different way of seeing the world from those of us from European heritage.

Many years ago, I took a summer school course in Vancouver from a Cherokee anthropologist named Bob Thomas. Professor Thomas' specialty was in the worldview and spirituality of indigenous people, and the fact that he was Cherokee gave him special insight into that world.

The Cherokee, as you may know, lived until the 1830s in the Smokey Mountains of North Carolina, but their lands were expropriated so that European farmers could take them over. 16,000 Cherokee were forced to leave their ancestral homes and migrate at gun point over a 1000 miles West to Oklahoma. So many of them died along the way, that the migration came to be known as the Trail of Tears.

So the Cherokee had been living in Oklahoma, by Professor Thomas' time, for 150 years. That was enough time for Oklahoma to have become their homeland. But

one of the things that makes indigenous people Indigenous is that they have a deep connection to a place. Over thousands of years, the land they inhabit has become something more than a homeland; it becomes a Holy Land. They have stories about every part of the land. Their holy land is where generation upon generation of their ancestors have lived and died and been buried. So for them to walk on their holy land is as if they are walking on the flesh of their ancestors. The land and its creatures are relations, kin.

It takes thousands of years for a homeland to become a holy land. So for Professor Thomas and his Cherokee compatriots, their homeland was in Oklahoma, but their holy land was still in the Smokey Mountains. Bob Thomas grew up in Oklahoma, but all his life, he heard stories about their holy land, and when he was able to visit the Smokey Mountains, he felt like he was really coming home. He knew stories about every mountain, and every valley, every river, every spring and every creek. Indeed, every mountain and valley, every feature of that land was a living witness to the Creator's goodness over the eons his ancestors had lived in that place. Walking on that land, that holy land, was a powerfully sacred moment for him, not just a homecoming, but a spiritual epiphany, a revelation. He felt connected to every part of the land. In fact, he felt that the land and its inhabitants were his relatives.

Recently, I read a book by another Indigenous author, a biologist from New York State named Robin Wall Kimmerer. The book is entitled *Braiding Sweetgrass*, because in it Professor Kimmerer braids together scientific knowledge, indigenous wisdom, and her own life story. It is a brilliant book, but one of the most profound insights I discovered was when Professor Kimmerer talked about trying to learn her own indigenous language of Potawatomi, which is now spoken fluently by less than a dozen people, mostly very elderly people. And so she decided that she needed to learn as much as she could before those elders all died and the language died with them.

What struck Professor Kimmerer about this indigenous language (and apparently most indigenous languages) was how words that in English are nouns, are verbs in Potawatomi. While English is 70% nouns, Indigenous languages are 70% verbs. So the word for "river" which is a noun in English, is a verb in Potawatomi. To

translate it accurately, you would have to say something like “to be a river,” or “to river.”

At first this made absolutely no sense to her, because she had been raised speaking English, and she could not get her head around how a thing like a river could be a verb. But eventually, she realized that her ancestral language reflected a worldview very different than the worldview that English makes possible, and slowly, she started to get her head into that very different space. She realized that for the native speakers of indigenous languages, the world is not made up of objects, dead things that can be labelled with nouns, but of subjects, living beings that are animated with their own life force. She calls the worldview embodied in this language, one of “animacy.”

In this alternative worldview, a river is not a thing, just sitting there; a river *rivers*, tumbling and flowing, nurturing microbes, crustaceans, fish and amphibians, and spilling its blessings out to the bears and the birds and the bushes, all those other creatures that in their own way are not just objects and things, but subjects and beings with their own life force and animate being. Even stones are subjects, they are grandparents, which is why the stone circle in Coronation Park at which the outdoor service is being held this morning is referred to as the Grandfather Stones. In the same way, the ground we walk on can be the flesh of our ancestors, a tree can be a mother to all the creatures which live in and around and through it, and so on, and so on, for every aspect of this creation.

To get a sense of just how different this way of thinking of the world is from the mainstream, modern way of seeing the world, it might be helpful to know that the scientific method, regularly “objectifies” whatever it studies. Even when it is studying people, it treats them as objects to be manipulated rather than subjects to be respected. And so a scientific way of seeing the world leads us to approach the rest of creation as something to manipulate and dominate. And it leads us to understand the creation story as empowering human beings to dominate the rest of creation, even each other, an approach that is rapidly leading us to environmental disaster. But the Scripture does not say that we are to dominate, but to exercise “dominion,” a word which is easily confused with domination, but can have a very different meaning. Today I am suggesting that we interpret dominion, through indigenous eyes.

I am not trying to disparage science, which has brought many blessings to us, but to suggest that when it comes to relating to the natural world, this indigenous way of seeing the world may be a helpful supplement and corrective to the objectifying method of science. Just as we cannot treat people just as objects, however much we may learn from studying them as objects, we also need to learn to see the rest of creation as both objects and subjects. We need to learn a worldview, a way of seeing that is *bifocal*, that is able to see other creatures as subjects as well as objects, a way of seeing and knowing that I have elsewhere called a “pluralism of mind,” open to many different forms of knowledge.¹

I thought of this one time when I was on a whale watching trip, watching juvenile humpback whales breach, throwing themselves out of the water and splashing back in spectacular fashion. The biologist on the boat was explaining that young humpbacks are doing this as exercise, to prepare for the long journeys that humpbacks make around the oceans, but to me it looked very much like these great animals were playing. The biologist’s explanation objectified these great whales, reducing their inner lives to instinct and biological necessity, but I could not avoid the impression that these amazing animals were subjects with a complex inner life, frolicking and clearly enjoying their activity. Perhaps both explanations are true, in the same way that the play of human children is preparing them for adulthood, but is also just plain fun. If we can learn to see and understand other creatures in this *bifocal* way, as both objects and subjects, I suggest, our ability “to live with respect in creation” (as we say in our United Church creed) will be enhanced.

Learning from these two scholars, Bob Thomas’ understand of his Holy Land, and Kimmerer’s understanding of the animate creation revealed to her by studying her indigenous language, each describing the very different worldview of their ancestral people, has also helped me to understand something very important to my Christian faith. You see, I also have come to realize that the Jewish people who produced the sacred scriptures that we read each week are also indigenous people, with a relationship to the land and its inhabitants that is very different than the modern way of seeing the world, my default way of seeing the world. If we are to really understand those Scriptures, in which the mountains and the hills can give praise and bear witness, in which the human relationship with the rest of creation is

¹ See Ross L. Smillie, *Practicing Reverence: An Ethic for Sustainable Earth Communities* (CopperHouse, 2011), p. 133.

one of kinship rather than domination, in which all things are part of a creation that is immeasurably bigger than we are, indigenous people have something to teach us. And what they have to teach us is not information or something easy. It is nothing less than a different way of seeing the world, a way of seeing the world in which the Creation around us is holy, sacred and alive. The health of the natural world, our very survival, not to mention our faithfulness to seeing the world as Jesus sees it, may well depend on us learning those lessons. Amen.