

Re-membering Dis-membered Stories: Discipleship, Restorative Justice and the Canadian TRC

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Thanks to Sto:lo elders Ray and Millie Silver for their welcome onto this land, and to Cheryl Bear and her band for singing us into this place.

Craig Greenfield invited me many months ago to participate in this gathering, and at that time my intention was to focus both of my talks on a topic that preoccupies much of my time these days: the pressing issue of faith and the environmental crisis we are facing. Specifically, I intended to reflect tonight on what it means for us Christians to reshape our identity in terms of watershed consciousness and practice, in order to help pave the way for tomorrow morning's workshop on that topic by the Arocha folks. I commend their workshop to you, and I will address that theme tomorrow. Tonight, however, I have to change course.

The reason is that in the last couple of months Elaine and I have been doing some research on the place where we are gathering. When we discovered that we were going to be meeting on the site of a former Indian Residential School, we immediately began shifting some gears. Elaine, a restorative justice practitioner, and I have been involved for the past 10 years in Truth and Reconciliation work in the U.S., and we are following with keen interest the recently inaugurated national Canadian TRC process regarding the residential schools legacy. In fact, on June 11th, 2008, I had the honor of being on an aboriginal reserve—also the former site of a residential school—in Nova Scotia to hear P.M. Harper's historic apology for that legacy to native elders on the floor of Parliament.

As a Christian who cut my teeth working in solidarity with indigenous people in the Pacific Basin, these issues concern me deeply. So I want to talk with you tonight about why these issues matter to our discipleship, not to mention our citizenship. And I want to make it very clear that everything I say to you as Canadians also applies to me as an American who is accountable to the same kind of difficult legacy, and the same gospel demands for restorative justice.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was a famous 19th century American writer, most well known for his novel "The Scarlet Letter." Hawthorne was from New England, and was haunted by the psychological and religious legacy of his Puritan ancestors, and by the contradictions of a young American nation that claimed religious piety on one hand, but routinely slaughtered anyone standing in the way of its project of Manifest Destiny on the other. One of Hawthorne's earliest short stories, published in 1835, is a sort of allegorical tale concerning the young "Goodman Brown."

The story begins at sunset in Salem, Massachusetts, as Brown leaves Faith, his wife of three months, for an unknown errand in the forest. There he meets a mysterious old man bearing a resemblance to himself but carrying a black serpent shaped staff, who leads him deeper into the forest in order to be initiated into a dark rite at midnight.

Too far, too far!" exclaimed the goodman, unconsciously resuming his walk. "My father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians, since the days of the martyrs. And shall I be the first of the name of Brown, that ever took this path and kept--"

"Such company, thou wouldst say," observed the elder person, interrupting his pause. "Well said, Goodman Brown! I have been as well acquainted with your family as with ever a one among the Puritans; and that's no trifle to say. I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem. And it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip's War. They were my good friends, both; and many a pleasant walk have we had along this path, and returned merrily after midnight. I would fain be friends with you, for their sake."

"If it be as thou sayest," replied Goodman Brown, "*I marvel they never spoke of these matters...* We are a people of prayer, and good works to boot, and abide no such wickedness."

When he arrives back at his home the next morning, Goodman Brown is uncertain whether the previous night's events were real or a dream, but he is deeply shaken. He loses his wife Faith, and thereafter lives his life an embittered and cynical man.

Friends, like Goodman Brown, we European North Americans will do anything to avoid walking into the dark forest of our history to confront the truth of our bloody past. But we must do a bit of that tonight, gathered as we are here this weekend in Mission, B.C. You see, as Cheryl Bear said earlier, "everybody has a story." And to come to a place is to walk into (and onto) a story. As people of faith, we should aspire to be responsible and sensitive visitors, not ignorant or blustery tourists. This means taking the time and attention required to learn the stories of the place we have come to. So tonight I want to talk about acknowledging the stories of the *people* of this place. And tomorrow I want to talk about learning the stories of the *land* itself.

What does this have to do with "creative world justice"? *Everything*. Because most of the injustice in our world, past and present, is the direct or indirect result of human beings *not* respecting the stories of places and peoples they encountered. Structural poverty, human trafficking, environmental destruction, labor exploitation, human rights violations—you name it, it all ultimately stems from ways in which we have put people and places at the service of profit, power and privilege.

The issues of violence and injustice we face today, without exception, have deep roots in history, in choices that some people made to ignore the integrity of other people and their places. This is especially true on this continent, where European conquest and colonization displaced and dismembered indigenous human cultures and exploited and destroyed their lands. This centuries long process was justified by the religious conviction that only *European* stories and material well being mattered. And we continue to deny that past because we are deeply committed to the myth of our own essential nobility and innocence, and we are desperate to hang on to our privilege and power. Yet we are haunted by what is unspoken. “*I marvel they never spoke of these matters...*” declares Young Goodman Brown incredulously.

The burden of history is especially heavy right here in Mission, B.C., so come on a walk in the dark forest with me. Before European contact, this place was richly populated by First Nations people who pursued a flourishing and sustainable way of life for thousands of years—as was the case with my home place some 1200 miles down this west coast. Like California, B.C. was invaded by Europeans fairly late in the centuries-old colonial game, not until the late 18th century. By that time, the European invaders—including many of our ancestors—were well practiced in the cruel art of dispossession. I want to thank my colleague brother Steve Heinrichs, a Mennonite activist, for the following summary narrative of the native history of this place.

Here, around that river we call the Fraser, from present day Vancouver all the way up to Yale, live a resilient, kind and hospitable people called the Sto:lo¹, a word which means “people of the river.” They call this land S’olh Temexw.

At the time of contact there were around 60,000 Sto:lo living here. They were a deeply spiritual people, who believed in a good creator who had blessed them with a good land – land that would care for them and define who they were. This wasn’t a piece of real estate, it was their mother and their sister.

The various Sto:lo tribes lived together in relative peace, aside from the odd skirmishes and fights. Some lived in spacious subterranean pit houses; others in solid cedar-plank homes. The Sto:lo were hardy, well-resourced folks, because the land that God gave them was abundant. They fished salmon and sturgeon from the Fraser, hunted deer and elk in the forests and the valley; harvested clams and mussels from the sea; and reaped crops of *wapato* (the original potato) and all kinds of berries. Life was so good that Sto:lo tribes could afford to take an annual vacation that lasted sometimes a month or two. During that *potlatch* holiday, tribes would gather together and do all the things we Christians also love doing – share sacred stories, sing songs, give gifts, pray, eat and dance.

But this good life was suddenly and radically altered when Europeans arrived on the scene. In 1782, a smallpox epidemic brought by newcomers killed more than two-thirds of the Sto:lo in just six weeks. Whole villages vanished, and most of the elders (and their wisdom)

¹ This term is being used in its traditional and inclusive sense. Contemporary, distinct nations such as the Musqueam, Tsawwassen, Katzie, Sto:lo Nation, Sto:lo Tribal Council, were all included under this signifier (though by how many is debated).

were wiped out. Imagine if you lost 2/3 of your entire family or church body in just 2 months! But the Sto:lo didn't have generations to recover from this trauma. Because in 1858, gold was discovered by Europeans in the Fraser Valley.

The Sto:lo knew about gold, had been digging it up for centuries; but it was no big deal to them. It was, however, a big deal to the colonial powers and their capitalist economies. So between April and July of that year, more than 33,000 miners arrived, and it was because of their overwhelming presence that the Native reserves were created. The British government decided to physically remove and enclose the Sto:lo so that they weren't in the way of white settlers; then Governor James Douglas gave whites the green light to move throughout the entire Fraser Valley and take up to 160 acres of land per family. Meanwhile, the government allotted pieces of land for the Native people that were nowhere near the same size per capita. Then, in 1867 things got even worse: with more settlers arriving, the occupying powers decided that the Sto:lo reserves should be reduced in size by 92 per cent. To top it off, they made it illegal for any Native man to appropriate new land. The Fraser Valley was a promised space only for white, European Christians.

There were no treaties or mutually agreed upon settlement. First nations people were simply corralled and cordoned off by their "guests." The repercussions of that grave historic injustice are still very much with us today. The theft of Native land by settlers has *not* been resolved, even though the oppressed cry out and God cries with them for a just redistribution. Chief Dan George summed up the tragic situation well, when he said back in the 1960s, "When the white man came, we had the land and they had the Bibles. Now they have the land, and we have the Bibles"—not to mention poverty, despair, and addiction.

The comprehensive assault on Native life culminated in 1885, when the Government outlawed the potlatch, which was *the* social, political and religious system for the Coastal First Nations, a time of sharing, community celebration, and the passing on of key traditions. This would be analogous to banning Christians from going to church—but of course, it was Christians passing the law. In 1889, a disheartened group of Sto:lo chiefs sent an urgent petition to then Prime Minister John A. MacDonald, asking him to repeal the law banning the potlatch because "we will *die* unless we are allowed to dance." This proved to be tragically prophetic: by 1921 there were only 1200 Sto:lo left.

Yet things got *worse*. Starting in 1913, the city of Vancouver began removing Indigenous communities to create recreational space for its white citizenry. Gone was Khitsilano reserve, gone were the villages in "Stanley Park." Then, between 1922 and 1926, the BC Government drained Sumas Lake—home to hundreds of Sto:lo, where they had fished for centuries—in order to create 35 000 acres of farm land – land that many some of *your* ancestors would purchase. No one listened to the Sto:lo protests.

A particularly painful chapter in this history of the dismemberment of a culture was the church-run Residential School system. The place where we now sit was the site of one of the first Residential School: St. Mary's, opened in 1863. These schools, which the government eventually funded and made mandatory for Native youth, were intended to assimilate First Peoples into European society; to "*kill the Indian,*" as some officials put it, "*but to save the child.*" So in the name of Jesus, children were separated from their

families, had their names changed, were forbidden to speak their language, and were forced to give up their sacred indigenous ways. Most were emotionally and culturally abused; many were physically and sexually harmed; and more than a few died in this system. In fact, death rates in many schools exceeded 40 and 50 per cent. But as Duncan Campbell Scott, the head of the Department of Indian Affairs once said,

We readily acknowledge that Indian children lose their natural resistance to illness by habituating so closely in the residential schools, *and that they die at a much higher rate than in their villages*. But this alone does not justify a change in the policy of this Department, *which is geared towards a final solution of our Indian Problem.*"

Or worse, how about Alex Sutherland, a superintendent of the Methodist Church in 1889, who stated to his church colleagues that their task was to "Make the savage a Christian so he will settle peacefully on reserves. Teach him the scriptures and he will give up his claim to the land that we require." Ouch!

Now, more than a century later, we are beginning to understand that the "Indian problem" about which Scott spoke ominously was in fact a "settler problem," as Alberta political scientist Roger Epp puts it in his recent book *We are All Treaty People*. The truth is, we all bear the scars of this legacy of cultural genocide. But in order to heal from it, we have to face it squarely—especially those of us who would continue to identify as Christians.

Dear friends and fellow disciples, Creative World Justice begins *right here*. In this province, where most of you were born and raised. In this Fraser valley, where white society built its prosperity on the "false gospel" of settler entitlement and stolen land. And on these very grounds, where a residential school once confused European superiority with the "good news to the poor" and as a result, the "least among us," whom Jesus specifically instructed Christians to *serve*, were instead systemically disenfranchised.

Yeah, every place has a story, but the story of this place is so painful that we've conveniently forgotten it. Best not to bring up the past. "Too far, too far" objected Young Goodman Brown as he approached the forest of memory. You know, white Canadians don't really have to pay attention to this national Truth and Reconciliation process regarding the residential school legacy. It's all so, ah, *complicated*, you know? Better to just let sleeping dogs lie; the past is *past*. Let's get on with our lives and ministries.

Well, this might work for a lot of Canadians, but Christians have to deal with *another* really inconvenient truth. For people of *biblical* faith, the luxury of historical amnesia is consistently *proscribed*, indeed unequivocally *prohibited*. Take, for example, the simple exhortation that lies at the heart of the church's one universal ritual, the Eucharist/Lord's Supper: *Remember*. When we take both the bread and the cup, we repeat for emphasis the words Jesus left us with: "Do this in order to *remember*."

Whenever you eat or drink this, said Jesus on the eve of his execution, *you are re-remembering that which will soon be dis-membered: my Body, given for you*. But let's not take these words out of their context in a story about a specific historical place and time. Jesus was giving a Passover homily, which is all about re-remembering the long and continuing journey of his people from slavery and oppression. The Jews were deeply familiar with distress, displacement, and near-disappearance by one empire after another: Egypt, Babylon, Rome. Make no mistake: *their* consistent experience was much more akin to that of the Sto:lo people than to ours—removed from their beloved land, their rituals suppressed, treated as a despised minority.

We, on the other hand, are for the most part children of *Pharaoh's* household, citizens of *Caesar's* empire. We don't want to remember the blood that was spilled to build our privilege; we don't want to go into that forbidden forest. Oppressed people want to remember; oppressors want to forget.

But Cheryl Bear said today that "the gospel predates the white man." So let me go even further, and suggest that Jesus *was* Sto:lo—a political refugee from birth, living on traditional lands that were militarily occupied by a colonial power, forced to speak another language, and impoverished by an economic system geared to benefit distant elites. Yet for all that, Jesus struggled hard to save his people from the twin fates of total assimilation or annihilation, and spoke truth to the Powers who were busily trying to dismember his people. And because of that, those Powers arrested him, convicted him of being a dissident native terrorist, and they broke his body on their executioner's cross, just as he had anticipated. But they couldn't keep him dead, or kill the memory of his liberation movement.

So what will we be remembering when we take communion on Sunday? Jesus' exhortation at the last Supper sums up the deep wisdom of the entire biblical tradition: *liberation begins with memory*. To participate in this ritual meal is to ingest that memory, and thus to join ourselves to the historic struggle for wholeness that began in an Exodus march to freedom, culminated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and continues whenever we re-member all that has been dis-membered by empire and hubris and sin, not least right here in Mission, B.C.

Friends, that is why this Festival began by recognizing Sto:lo elders, and following protocol of being welcomed onto this land. And it is why tomorrow Elaine Enns will be offering a workshop on restorative justice and the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I pray each and every one of you and your church communities will learn about this national re-remembering process, participate in and promote it, in order to bring healing to the broken body of Canada. It would be easy for you as people of relative privilege to ignore the process, or simply lament what happened in the past to poor aboriginal people, but finally to dismiss it as "not your issue." But Jesus asks us to "take and eat" the work of re-remembering, to internalize the stories of dismemberment, and to take responsibility for healing. This legacy is "hard to swallow," it's "a lot to stomach." But this is what *communion* requires.

And there is a cost to *not* doing this work. Young Goodman Brown returned from his midnight journey into the “forest” of his people’s suppressed political unconscious with a choice: to maintain his ancestors’ silence, or to face the truth about his history. Unable, or unwilling, to deal this conundrum, he ends up losing “Faith,” and becoming cynical and depressed. Welcome to post-Christian capitalist culture in North America! No faith, no diagnosis of our true condition, no vision for healing.

Discipleship is the hard work of *re-remembering what has been dis-membered*. Tomorrow I want to continue in a similar vein, by reflecting on how we also need to listen to the story of the land itself, beginning with our own relationship to the watershed in which dwell. We might call this a discipleship of *re-placing that which has been dis-placed*, and I commend the Arocha workshop tomorrow morning, which will provide a unique introduction to both this watershed and native practices of sustainability in it.

Sisters and brothers, let us journey into the haunted forest of our history, so that our churches can become spaces where those difficult stories can be aired so that healing can begin. There is an old Sto:lo saying: "The ancestor of everything is an action." That’s their way of reminding us that practice takes precedence over mere thinking or rhetoric. So when you go home, will you make a commitment to put yourself in the company of those seeking justice and healing for First Nations, and of those experimenting with how to truly address the “settler problem”? Because our healing is tied to theirs. And Creative World Justice begins *right here*. Amen.

Note: *For an extended analysis of these issues see Myers’ Who Will Roll Away the Stone? Discipleship Queries for First World Christians (Orbis, 1994, chapter 5).*



in 2006, the “Man Turned to Stone” artifact discovered in a collection of the Burke Museum of Natural and Cultural History in Seattle was returned, after much effort, to the Chilliwack *Ts’elxweyeqw*, one of the Sto:lo tribes. The relic was lost to its rightful owner for more than 100 years. Tradition says that the First Nations man was born thousands of years ago and was transformed into a four-foot-high granite statue as punishment for mistreating his wife. For the Sto:lo, the artifact (called *T’xwelatse*) is a beloved ancestor, a stone man with a living soul. After a long campaign, spearheaded by former Lt. Gov. Iona Campagnolo and supported by Abbotsford South MLA John van Dongen, *T’xwelatse* was finally returned to the Sto:lo. “*T’xwelatse* was a very precious thing to us. It meant a lot to our people. As children we were taught to work hard so that we wouldn’t turn into a rock for doing bad things like *T’xwelatse* did,” said Sumas Nation elders **Ray and Millie Silver** (pictured at left). Van Dongen said the return of *T’xwelatse* to the Sto:lo was one of the highlights of his time as B.C. Minister of State for Intergovernmental Relations.”

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