



Physical Quadrant

Glimpses of Racism from an Aboriginal Perspective

By Stan McKay¹

RACISM TODAY IS often difficult to describe and almost impossible to explain. This is probably due to the subtle nature of racism in this country, and the refusal of people in privileged positions to acknowledge its existence. In Canada, racism has been “institutionalized,” embedded in the way things are rather than consciously willed. Hence, it is necessary to resort repeatedly to stories and personal experience in an attempt to describe the separation by race and the power imbalance inherent in racist behaviour. The following are my experiences from my own life.

My residential school experience

Historically, Canadian society and its leaders have been involved in racial activity in the Indian residential schools. Seen as centres for integration/assimilation, the schools were established on the premise that progress for Native peoples meant making Indians “white.” It is not surprising, then, that most Indian residential schools were built in or near

1. “Glimpses of Racism from an Aboriginal Perspective” by Stan McKay from *That All May Be One*, pps 8-10 © The United Church of Canada. 2004. Reprinted with permission.

towns. Equally interesting, however, is the total segregation that came about between white and Indian students for most of the early history of residential schools.

My own experience of a residential school included both segregation and, later, attempts at integration. The results were basically the same. Even when we went in to town for our classes and studied with non-Native students rather than have teachers hold classes for us in the residential school, segregation persisted. Outside the classroom we had our own hockey and baseball teams. The greatest rivalry was with the non-Indian teams in the same town. After classes each day, it was customary for us to stop for a bottle of pop on our way home. The town had two restaurants on the main street within 50 meters of each other. The Indians went to one, and the other students went to the other.

There was another strange dynamic that came out of my residential school experience. Although there were many churches in town, we never entered them. Instead, we had our own Sunday school and worship services in the school auditorium, with a minister who came to us. And since we came from many different Christian denominations, I realize that what we practiced in those days was in fact a kind of “practical ecumenism.”

Two Incidents from my young adulthood

The magnitude of racism came home to me when opposition arose to establishing a temporary lodging place in North Winnipeg for Native people with emergency housing needs. The United Church had purchased an old, three-storey house and asked my mother and father to manage it. Even before it opened, people in the area expressed strong opposition. They had newspapers report on their concern about Indian people living on their street; ostensibly their concern was for the safety of the women and children of the area. Some of us realized it was mostly about the fear of property values depreciating once they had Indian people living on their street.

I once borrowed a friend's motorcycle for the summer. I was in university and had a job at the opposite end of the city. I had a driver's

license, but had never driven a motorcycle before — I had thought that the only way to learn was to do it myself, a bit of “learning by doing.” The first evening I went out to practice I drove for a whole kilometer before attempting a left turn on to a side street. The motorcycle was going faster than I realized. Just as I was completing the turn, I pressed down on the front brake, which locked the front wheel and propelled me over the handlebars in a beautiful arc. Fortunately, I had borrowed my friend's helmet as well and I landed, more or less face first, on a grassy lawn. The helmet took a divot out of the lawn and I was bit winded, with grass between my teeth, but basically uninjured except for my pride.

Then came the most memorable racial comment I have ever heard. It came from a young boy who had been playing in the front yard a couple of houses over. He saw my landing and, running over to me in great excitement, said, “My dad had a motorcycle once. An Indian stole it and it broke his leg.”

My understanding expands

Other experiences important for my understanding of racism emerged when I attended the University in Winnipeg. A classmate and I volunteered in an inner city mission one night a week. The minister was a Japanese Canadian. His perceptions and spiritual depth helped me to understand things in very new ways. Most significantly, he helped me realize that the reality of racism was not confined to Native people. His experience of racism in Canada went back to the period of the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War. The memory he held was heavy, but he bore it well, except when the wounds of racial injustice were reopened. This happened one evening when this gentle man returned to the church in obvious pain.

Part of his ministry was with a group of alcoholics who were struggling for change. One of the men in this group had died and arrangements for his funeral were in process. The minister's name had been suggested to the family and he had gone to meet with them. Upon

his arrival, the family showed obvious discomfort. Some of them left the room for a short time. When they returned they told him they had found another minister to conduct the funeral. “I guess it is understandable that [white] people do not want a little oriental minister in a wrinkled suit,” the minister observed wryly, opening my eyes still wider.

Inner city youth visit an Indian: racial stereotypes, internalized racism and anti-racism work

The volunteer work my classmate and I had taken on was with a boys’ group, many of whom came from welfare homes and single-parent families. These ‘tough’ kids — at least that was what they pretended to be — came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Aboriginal. With very little racial awareness, they would punch out anyone who looked at them sideways, regardless of race, colour or creed. In time we began to develop an understanding of, and respect for, one another. After three years of meeting once a week, we did become a group — well maybe, at least a gang.

The end of my time at university meant that our group would be ending too, and we discussed plans for a meaningful way of doing that. The decision was to go on a weekend camping trip. I suggested we go to my reserve, a four-hour drive north of Winnipeg. There was much excitement and some hysterical behaviour at the thought of getting away from the city, even if for a short time.

We drove north on a Friday evening. As it got dark, concerns emerged as to how we would survive in the wilderness. We pitched the tents by the lake, and as we sat by the campfire, the ‘tough’ guys became very communicative. They were calmer than I had ever seen them in the past three years: not a single punch had been thrown in 45 minutes! Before going to bed, we discussed how we would spend the next day, agreeing on lots of swimming and eating, and some hiking. I offered to take them to visit “an Indian.”

Everything went fine in the discussion until we came to the “Indian

visit.” “Are there many Indians nearby?” the boys wanted to know. “Is it safe to sleep here?” All of them, including the Aboriginal boys, had only TV images of Indians.

The next afternoon we visited “the Indian” — who happened to be my grandfather. He answered all of their questions patiently and he had some pretty interesting stories for them as well. It turned out to be an effective way of dealing with racism and stereotypical images, rooted in childhood, about people they did not know. Looking back on the weekend, I realize it was an experiment, however serendipitously, in anti-racism work. ■



For reflection and discussion

- 1) Examine your own attitude toward the abuse (including cultural genocide) suffered by students of Indian residential schools in Canada. How has Stan McKay's sharing of his experience helped you to get in touch with the students' pain? How has it helped you to understand the issue more clearly?
- 2) Say "Indian," "Native people," or "Aboriginal." Examine the images that come into your mind. Where did the images originate? Where do they get reinforced? What can you do to make sure younger people are subject to positive images only?
- 3) The boys in Stan's group had their stereotype of "Indian" broken by an encounter with a Native person, in addition to their three-year association with Stan. What clues does this give you about how to break some of the stereotypes you or your church/group are saddled with? What are some other strategies?
- 4) What are some concrete actions you/your group can take to address racism and to build bridges between people?

Stan McKay was born at Fisher River First Nation Reserve, a Cree community in Northern Manitoba. He attended Fisher River Indian Day School and the Birtle Indian Residential School. Stan was Moderator of the United Church of Canada from 1992-94. Currently he is advising First Nations on education, health and development. Stan and his wife Dorothy have three grown children.

Combating Racism Through Education

By Dr. Daniel N. Paul

IN NOVEMBER 2007, Dr. Daniel N. Paul proposed reforming Nova Scotia's teacher training program so that graduates would leave with a positive opinion of the Mi'kmaq Nation. He called for a required course on "true Mi'kmaq history" to counter the systemic, stereotypical racist image of Indigenous People. He argued that this course was necessary because most graduates of teaching schools in Nova Scotia know little or nothing about First Nations People, and much of what they do know could be categorized as "White washed history."

As Dr. Paul explains, this profound ignorance of Indigenous peoples and their history perpetuates the "colonial demonizing propaganda" which leads to systemic racism. "Systemic racism has marginalized and excluded us for centuries and it is the root of the discrimination we suffer." His conclusion is that education is the only way to negate systemic racism.

According to Dr. Paul, systemic racism has caused him to suffer the indignity of being discriminated against because of who he is. The opportunity to propose positive action to correct an historical wrong through education is something he has wanted to do for years. His vision is of a Canadian society where Indigenous peoples are accepted as equals. This, Dr. Paul asserts, is essential for the future prosperity and well-being of Indigenous peoples.

A condensed version of Dr. Paul's presentation to the Nova Scotia Teacher's Training Review Panel is re-printed below.

The why and how

I recently received an e-mail from an American Indian leader asking if I could offer an explanation about why racial discrimination in the United States against First Nation Peoples is so widespread and pervasive. The following is an edited version of my reply:

“It’s the same on both sides of the border. Somehow, somehow, pride in origins needs to be re-instilled in our People, and the non-First Nation population must be educated about the true histories of our Peoples. Then, somehow, somehow, a desire to return to the self-sufficiency that was part and parcel of the pre-European invasion First Nation existence must be reinstated into the expectations of our Peoples. Depending on another race of people’s charity for survival is degrading and fosters feelings of inferiority and insecurity. The end result is that the idleness created for able-bodied people by living on handouts leads to drug, alcohol, family abuse, etc.”

Two major problems

The first problem is rooted in the white man’s condescending paternalism. In order for First Nations Peoples to restore their self-esteem it is essential that we come to know and promote the truth: our intellectual abilities are equal to those of any race of people on the face of Mother Earth! We have the intellectual capability to do things for ourselves. We don’t need others to do things for us. Because we’ve been treated as mental incompetents, incapable of managing our own affairs by another race of people for centuries doesn’t mean that we have to accept the fabrication as fact. We have much to be proud of. Our People survived the hell on Mother Earth that the European invasion begot them and are still here. That alone is something to be immensely proud of.

Secondly, the lack of knowledge about the true histories of First Nations among ourselves and the general population is almost universal,

with very negative results for First Nations. This is a vacuum that Canadian provinces can easily correct by proactive reform, if the will can be found, of education systems to require mandatory teaching of real First Nations history in schools. This won’t be easy to accomplish. Elected officials will have to muster the fortitude to override the obstruction efforts of influential closet white supremacist individuals who will fight diligently to preserve the status quo, which presently excludes real First Nations history from being included in the province’s school curriculums.

One of the most serious problems arising for our Peoples out of our historical exclusion is that most First Nations Peoples have very little knowledge about their histories. For instance, most Mi’kmaq have no knowledge whatsoever that their ancestors, trying to save their country from theft by invaders, fought the British bravely for over 130 years. The only things most know about our culture is dancing and artwork. This can be attributed in large part to the hunter writing the history.

Read most history books written by white men about the invasion and colonizing of the eastern seaboard of North America by Europeans and you will find nary a positive comment about the heroic efforts made by the area’s original inhabitants to preserve their cultures and homelands. Most do not even acknowledge the existence of the great First Nations that once prospered in the area. When they do, generally it is in the most unflattering terms — barbarous people, savages, heathens, etc. One notable exception was made by Joseph Howe in an anti-Confederation speech he delivered in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, in 1867:

“The Indians who fought your forefathers were open enemies, and had good reason for what they did. They were fighting for their country, which they loved, as we have loved it in these latter years. It was a wilderness. There was perhaps not a square mile of cultivation, or a road or a bridge anywhere. But it was their home, and what God in His bounty had given them they defended like brave and true men. They fought the old pioneers of our civilization for a hundred and thirty years, and during all that time they were true to each other and to their country, wilderness though it was”

European colonial history

The European subjugation of the indigenous Peoples of the Americas was a crime against humanity that knows no equal in human history. By the time the invaders had managed to appropriate all the lands in the Americas that our ancestors had owned and occupied for millennia, of the hundreds of diverse civilizations that had existed prior to Columbus, not one was left intact, and tens of millions were dead. During the process, Indigenous people suffered every barbarity imaginable — mass murder, germ warfare, enslavement, rape, enforced starvation, relocation, etc.

Some of the abhorrent acts that were visited upon First Nations Peoples were the result of the systemic racism that was created by demonizing colonial propaganda. One can be certain that if enlightened action is not taken to stop it, similar abhorrent acts will continue to occur for the foreseeable future.

Why racism and other forms of intolerant attitudes persist

In his discourse, “Lessons at the Halfway Point,” Michael Levine accurately explains why intolerance exists: “If you don’t personally get to know people from other racial, religious or cultural groups, it’s very easy to believe ugly things about them and make them frightening in your mind.”

If Europeans had gotten to know and had accepted Indigenous Americans and Africans as equals during colonial times instead of adopting White supremacist racist beliefs that negatively, and erroneously, depicted both Peoples as wild inhuman savages for the better part of five centuries, these peoples of colour would not have suffered the indescribable hells they did across the Americas and, in far too many cases, still do.

First Nation invisibility and systemic racism

According to Dalhousie University professor Susan Sherwin, the reason it is so hard to get society to recognize and accept the systemic racism that victimizes First Nations Peoples is because, “the greatest danger of oppression lies where bias is so pervasive as to be invisible.”

Systemic racism is an evil that demeans civilized societies. In modern times the negativity that First Nations Peoples suffer from is pervasive. Although both claim to be compassionate countries, with justice for all as a core value, Canada and the United States are not making any viable effort to substitute demonizing colonial propaganda with the truth.

An example of First Nation invisibility in Canada

The following quote is from the May 30, 2007, edition of the *Globe and Mail*. “Tim Horton’s serves up some controversy, No Drunken Indians Allowed.” The sign was put up by a young employee at an Alberta outlet.

The incident provides a great example of how deeply ingrained in Canadian society are systemic racist beliefs about First Nations Peoples. When a young Caucasian teenager hangs a sign stating “No Drunken Indians Allowed,” it shows that she has been taught by others that expressing such racist garbage about First Nation Peoples is not wrong. Her action exposes the reality that there is a long-festering sickness loose in Canadian society that needs to be dealt with effectively by federal and provincial governments. After all, it was their predecessors, and British colonial administrations, that instilled in the subconscious of this society, by using demonizing propaganda about First Nations Peoples, the systemic racism that plagues our Peoples today.

Justice comparison

The following quote is from a column by Jonathan Kay published in the *National Post*, on October 23, 2007. It vividly illustrates that you can write and have published by a respected publishing entity in this country just about anything about First Nations Peoples, no matter how vile.

“A proper native policy would be guided by the three principles listed above.... The most decrepit and remote reserves ... would simply be torn down — their inhabitants installed at government expense in population centers of the residents’ choice. The hundreds of millions of dollars that go into running these hell-holes would be used to teach job skills, detox the drunks, educate the children and otherwise integrate the families into mainstream Canadian life. ...

“Self-government would be possible, but only in the same limited way that any Canadian city or town is self-governing. The conceit that native reserves can be re-conceived as culturally distinct “nations” would be given up in favour of a model that promotes integration. ...

“Off the reservation: The reserve system is Canada’s worst moral failing. Let’s do the right thing and get rid of it.”

I had published in the May 26, 2000, issue of the *Halifax Herald* a column entitled, “Where is society’s outrage over proposed genocide?” It was in response to a review of Tom Flanagan’s book, *First Nations, Second Thoughts*, that appeared on the front page of the April 17 issue of the *Herald* under the headline “Book blames reserves for natives’ plight.”

The story revealed that in his book University of Calgary professor Flanagan advocated the extinction by assimilation of Canada’s First Nations Peoples as a means to solving the country’s so-called “Indian Problem.”

Flanagan, who at the time was an influential Alliance party policy advisor, was not expelled from the party for advocating in his book the

extinction of our Peoples by assimilation. Alliance party brass did not react in horror to his outrageous suggestions. Nor did he suffer any penalty from society for asserting that First Nation Peoples, because their cultures were not identical to European models, were not civilized. In fact, he has been the recipient of many awards and in 2005 he led the Conservative party’s federal election campaign.

Proposal

With the goal of eliminating the systemic racism that colonial propaganda created, and which continues to impede the return to self-government by our Peoples, we propose a creative, pro-active reform of the province’s teacher training education system that will include the adoption of a mandatory course on the history of the Mi’kmaq Nation, with emphasis on post-European invasion events, and all the warts that go with it. This course will provide teachers-in-training with an accurate, complementary picture of the Mi’kmaq Nation. Most importantly, course materials will stress that our ancestors fought the British to try to preserve their culture and country, not for the perverse pleasure of slaughtering innocent people. It will be a course that all students will have to pass in order to acquire a Bachelor of Education degree.

If implemented, graduating students will know that our ancestors abided in a prosperous, socially caring, free, democratic, “YOU” society, prior to European invasion.

I promote such a reform wholeheartedly because I consider inclusion of true Mi’kmaq history in teacher training curriculum a vital element for successfully removing, in the foreseeable future, from the non-First Nation sub-conscience, the negative picture they hold of First Nations. It will have other positive benefits for the province, among them its pioneering role model of progressive racial education policy for the rest of the country to follow and a prosperous Mi’kmaq People who will increase the prosperity of all Nova Scotians. ■



For reflection and discussion

- 1) How did the comments made in 1867 by one of the fathers of Confederation, the Right Honourable Joseph Howe, differ from the generally held savage stereotype view of the Mi'kmaq in the Nova Scotia English community?
- 2) Governor Edward Cornwallis, on October 1, 1749, issued a proclamation for the scalps of Mi'kmaq men, women and children in an attempt to exterminate them. Today his memory is honoured with statues, parks, schools, etc., named after him. Why would Caucasian society honour such a man?
- 3) How can systemic racism be so pervasive that it is invisible?
- 4) What can we do to eliminate the systemic racism that negatively affects the progress of First Nation Peoples? Be specific.

Dr. Daniel N. Paul, C.M., O.N.S. is Chair of the Council on Mi'kmaq Education. Among many awards, Dr. Paul is the recipient of both the Order of Canada and the Order of Nova Scotia. He is the author of *We Were Not the Savages: Collision Between European and Native American Civilizations* (Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2006.)