

Reclaiming Our Native Souls

By

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My Story

I am the third generation of my nation to experience the Episcopal Church. I am also the third generation to undergo the acculturation pressure of western culture. This is a story of multi-generational colonization.

My father's father was about 50 when he first saw White people in the 1890s although he had heard of them long before. He was a medicine man, a bear healer, whose ability was known in his nation. My family name comes from a descriptor resulting from his work as a horse trainer. I remember his white braids and his deliberate speech. He spoke only Lakota and was faithful to the assigned Episcopal Church even if he still carried his medicine.

My parents were the generation of profound culture change. They endured residential schools and knew the pressures of becoming "Americans" and working in the city away from home. They learned English and participated in the Episcopal Church - as much as it would let them. My father attended seminary and was ordained, eventually serving the people on our home reservation.

I grew up a priest's kid, attended every educational institution the church sponsored and eventually also went to seminary and was ordained. For all the involvement I had in the Episcopal Church, I felt a deep longing for more Lakota ways in my life. My siblings and I were dancers, and the weekend *wacipi* or "powwow" events, along with constant interaction with relatives, gave me much happiness.

Still I saw my peers suffer. I lived among the social problems of my time and, while my education and career gave me some support, I could see my peers falling. Eventually, at the age of 47, I was the last male left alive out of the ten boys in my reservation confirmation class from 36 years before. I have heard there are still four of the original 12 girls from that class alive,

but I have not seen them. Most of these untimely deaths were the result of alcoholism and violence, the learned reactions to colonization.

Throughout my life I have received much personal support from my faith, but the church itself has been more opposition than help. My deep spiritual experiences have come from Lakota ceremonies and from personal experiences, not from the institutional Episcopal Church.

At one time it seemed to me that Western culture was a necessary prerequisite to a Christian life in the Episcopal Church. To explore this further, I entered the Greek Orthodox Church to seek Christianity separate from Western Culture. I was ordained in the Greek Old Calendar jurisdiction of Archbishop Auxentios, and I served my congregations there for 15 years. There I found Christianity separate from western culture, but in the Orthodox Church, Christianity was based on the foundation of Greek culture, and it never became home. Eventually I returned to my Episcopal Church where inculturation had now become the theological theme. I became so deeply involved in this work that I eventually worked at the Vancouver School of Theology, the only accredited school of theology in North America today that works seriously with Native people in developing Native Anglican Christianity. VST works hard to overcome the legacy of colonization among Aboriginal peoples. My entire life has been one of working to heal from colonization.

The Problem

The acculturation pressures of the colonialism of the past have caused a loss of courage among Native people. From almost universal social ills, to the absence of a significant number of Native clergy, to increased mistrust and tension between Native Episcopalians and non-native leadership, there is a deep spiritual malaise that affects First Episcopalians, by which I mean First Nations Episcopalians. Most Native Episcopalians have been so discouraged by their experiences with the church that they have just walked away and

are unlikely to come back. We have tried a number of relationships with Episcopal Church entities and none of those are currently able to inspire First Nations Episcopalians to significant developments and spiritual states. First Episcopalians must recover our spiritual courage if we are to be whole. When we turn to the gospel we find Jesus speaking to our current conditions and to us:

“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather ***fear him who can destroy both soul and body*** in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ***So do not be afraid***; you are of more value than many sparrows.

“Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; ***I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.***

For I have come to set a man against his father,

and a daughter against her mother,

and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

and ***one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.***

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and

whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and

whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and ***whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward*** (10:26-42).” (Emphasis mine.)

This section of Matthew is called the Missionary Discourse. It directly addresses the malaise, lack of voice, and lack of courage Native Episcopalians are now manifesting in too many locations. To those in this state, Jesus admonishes us to rescue our souls and to fear the threat to the state of our souls. He reminds us to tell our faith stories and to remember that this may be divisive - perhaps even from our dysfunctional relatives. He admonishes us to engage in loving practical care of those around us. All of this is the work of those who have strong hearts.

The Work To Be Done

What lies before the Native Episcopal Church is work that only we can do. Erica-Irene Daes, charged by the United Nations to protect Indigenous Groups, reminds us: “You cannot be the doctor if you are the disease” (Battiste 2009, p. 4).

For two centuries, Native Episcopalians have tried working within the national Episcopal Church and that work has not been effective. The issues facing First Episcopalians is that we have to recover our own souls, and this is work that we must do by ourselves. That is to say, we cannot do this work with White people. “You cannot be the doctor if you are the disease.” We must do the soul saving work that First Episcopalians must do, completely independent of our White friends. This is not to say we should terminate

friendships nor cease relationships with White colleagues. It is to say that only if we stand on our own and do our work, will we come to be the people God has intended for us to be. We must make profound changes in how we live as Christians if we are to be whole. To recover our spiritual courage we must heal separate from White Episcopalians.

The Anglican Church of Canada has a very large Aboriginal population. The Anglican Council of Indigenous Peoples works in partnership with the Anglican Church of Canada but stands on its own and runs its own affairs. I do not know if this model is appropriate for the Episcopal Church, but I do know that if the Episcopal Council on Indigenous Ministries continues as it is, it faces complete spiritual malaise.

I do not know how our separate recovery work is to be done. I do know it must be completely independent of our White friends. Colonization has taught us to be dependent on White people and their ways. "You cannot be the doctor if you are the disease." If we are to be a separate and independent province we will simply have to declare that and do it without approval from the White Episcopalian Church. If we must withdraw from the Episcopal Church in order to heal, we must do that without asking permission from the White Episcopal Church. It may be that simply taking this step will carry a significant healing for us. The experience will teach us. Even discussing this step will create fear among those who are deeply influenced by colonization. We may find that there will be some among us who will fight very hard against our healing. Finding our own wholeness will be hard work.

Some Native Episcopalians will say this is reverse racism, it is inappropriate, and it is going to separate us from our White allies. To those, I would ask how deep their dependency on colonialism goes. It is a sign of your dysfunction if you are afraid to stand on your own and assert your dignity as a Native child of God. You must work even harder to be healed of your dependency on a colonial church because this is not what God intended for

you. When you are healed you can return to relationships with White friends from your position of wholeness. This is possible only if we first do our own recovery work from colonization.

Some will argue that we must stay in relationship with the Episcopal Church or there will be no resources to do any ministry work. I remind these relatives of the Native and Newcomer relationship of Genesis 14. When the newcomer Abram, soon to be named Abraham, comes into the Promised Land, he acknowledges the dignity of Melchizedek, the Native priest, and gives him one-tenth of all he possesses. In a similar way, let the National Episcopal Church acknowledge the dignity of First Episcopalians and give us one-tenth of its budget for each year and we will do our own work. Let each diocese give one-tenth of its annual budgets to Native ministry in their diocese and we will see a flourishing of Native Episcopalian work. This is the funding we deserve as Native people with the dignity God gave us.

Conclusion

I believe I am typical of Native Episcopalians. I grew up in the Episcopal Church and learned its ways. I prayed from *The Book of Common Prayer* and the Hymnal in our language. Most of all, I wanted a real relationship with God and the joy of living the Christian life.

I experienced a life of westernization and a constant message that Native people are not equal to White people. To a large extent, this message came from just living in North America. Most of the time my Episcopal Church was in collusion with this message of colonization. My Church, "...cannot be the doctor when [it is] the disease."

If I am to be whole, I must separate myself from the White Episcopal Church to do the work of shedding colonization. This work must precede all other work if I am to become the person I believe God means for me to be.

Beginning this work will create complications for the National Episcopal Church. It will be extremely difficult for White Episcopalians to accept that "You cannot be the doctor if you are the disease." This work will certainly unsettle my life as a dedicated Episcopalian. Still, my healed self is my only authentic self that can be in relationship with God and with others. Recovering from the disease of colonization is the main work for today's First Episcopalians.

Just beginning this work will be an act of spiritual courage. I have worked as a therapist for 40 years and understand the serious necessity for this healing work. I know the resistance the work will encounter. I trust the healing that will occur if Native Episcopalians do their work. I have faith that this work will be with God's blessing and help. I know that a whole life is the best offering I can give to God. After these centuries of relationships with the Episcopal Church, it is time for the disease of colonization to be cured. This is how we reclaim our souls.

Endnotes

Marie Battiste, ed. 2009. *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*. UBC Press: Vancouver, British Columbia.

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