

## The Realm of You

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Realm—kingdom; field of activity, or interest or dream.

I am using both meanings. This lecture is structured to invite questions, query and commentary.

I was raised in a large clan system of the Swampy Cree. We lived off the land and its resources, trapping, hunting, fishing, and harvesting by the Saskatchewan River delta of lakes, swamp, rivers and creeks. I knew no other life and no other people. At the age of seven, my school years started. I spoke Cree as my first language.

Our principle residence was in a large compound of log houses. We are an island people. Our island went through several name changes, but for the purposes of commerce, it became on the map 'till today as Cumberland House. Cumberland was named after the Duke of Cumberland, lovingly recalled by the Scots as the butcher of Culloden, Scotland. My genealogy reads like a map of North America before the Great Land grabs: Iowa, Yanktoni Sioux, Anishnaabeg, Comanche, Dene, northern and southern Cree and the swamp dwellers. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the names Dorion, Jourdain, Morin appear and stay to intermarry. Their offspring travelled and explored beyond their territories reaching the upper reaches of the Mackenzie, the North and South Saskatchewan, the mouth of the Columbia and up and down the Fraser. By the nineteenth century, life by the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence were of a forgotten time. The Missouri up country, and the Mississippi River system were less travelled as other populations crowded in. In 1940, the average family used a canoe and paddle in summer, and dogsled and dog teams in winter. The Bombardier came in the 1950s. A roadway to the west side appeared in the late 1960s. Trucks are still in use today. Roads in Aboriginal country are unkempt.

My grandmothers of the nineteenth century were super women for the lack of a better word. We are the survivors because of their efforts at motherhood, fending for and minding children. They were faced with wars mostly of attrition, starvation, and lack of civil care. Our leaders were either in jail, or bounded by a pass system or the evil whims of an Indian agent. Some had been hanged by the emerging settler state, Canada. It was the women who were forced into single motherhood, or else, as the equally evil residential school system captured children, becoming mothers without children. This went on for over a century so the new settlers could obtain the new Crown land wrested

out of the hands of Aboriginal people. This occurred from coast to coast and north to south.

Canada has become comfortable with her human rights violations, and is now busy building a new narrative of alleged fairness toward Aboriginal peoples. However, we have the living memory of our grandmothers and grandfathers. I know what it took to keep me alive. It did not have to be that hard and difficult. In childhood, we were shielded from the harshest truths. We were landless, often homeless because we could not buy land. How did this come to be for some of our large extended family? Some were registered Indians with land rights on reserve land. In the days of Hayter Reed and John Macdonald, some family members were declared persona non grata on the original homeland by virtue of paper theft. Another category became enemies of the state. This was collective punishment, which benefitted land speculators hand chosen by Macdonald and Laurier. Through all of this enforced poverty, grandmothers carried on.

My generation witnessed the hard work it took to keep families intact as possible. Our mothers were busy sun up to sun down. We lived in a compound. Five little cousins ruled between three houses. This included my grandfather's room where he had his own stove, grub box right off Aunt Marie Louise's kitchen. Grandfather became our custodian. We became his helpers. When he gathered clay, mud, and straw to chink the log houses, we mixed the mud. He told us stories. The women tended gardens, the animals that roamed the village, hauled water, cleaned provisions, prepared hides into leathers, made clothes, and washed them. We played in them and wore them out. Even our shoes were made. All of our outer clothing was made, kitted or prepared in some way. We gathered berries and made jars and jars of jam. As a treat, we made toffee. Our mothers baked bread, bannock, cakes and cookies, and berry pies. Our stoves were wood burning, the children hauled in the woods, mothers split the wood after sawing everything into the right length. We had two stoves in winter: the furnace that never went out hopefully and the kitchen stove. If the fire turned down, ice formed in our water pails. All of the above was labour intensive. Children had to be put to bed, told a story or sung a lullaby. Oh, our mothers owned smoke huts. We enjoyed smoked sturgeon, trout, pickerel and wild meat—rabbit, wild fowl, and venison. I am tired already. However, we still have to prepare herbs and ointments. Cough syrups had to be mixed. We could buy Sunlight soap and face soap and shampoo, but before that, it had to be hand milled. Our Sundays were a day of some rest and part of the day was spent in prayer. It was my mother's day for reading for a few hours.

During the war years in the 1940s, my mother went to Mass every morning. Late at night, I woke to see her shadow from the candlelight, her rosary beads in hand. I never make a joke about any belief system. It is the grandchildren who have the luxury of unbelief in any system of discipline. I have the long vision of generations of grandparents kneeling at prayer, chanting their supplications and pleading for forgiveness, lamentations of times of sorrowful. There was starvation after the

disappearance of the buffalo. The Great Depression reminded them of the precariousness of life. The McDonald's generation has no clue what I am talking about. I fear for these young people not because they are so hopeful but for their lack of the ability to improvise and the ability to make difficult choices. We can push any button or offer them a pill to make them feel better, fully satisfied. 'Till fifty seconds later.

It was in my childhood, living among my Indian relatives, that I benefited from their ideas of childcare and development. Among the more populous centres, you can find concepts, notions and principles of childcare.

Before the Great Disruption and before Europeans started immigrating in "horde" numbers, Indians met in Gatherings four times a year. Once a year for spiritual teachings, the Delaware left the Atlantic shores to share their thoughts to the Western basin peoples.

Women held council on childcare and development, intensive nursing care, women's ailments and cures. In my society, the twelve-year-old son was handed over to the hunter father to be taught the arduous task of hunting and basic survival skills. The women looked after the girls intensely for character and personality development. Strength in those areas was encouraged. As girl children, we thought we were just picking berries, plucking feathers of waterfowl, cleaning feathers, making eiderdown feather robes, making quilts, pillows, flipping bannock, etc. Most of all, we had to start a task, finish it and clean up. My generation benefited from being landless, homeless, and stateless. The generation that were confounded into residential school to learn how to be white and civilized came away without the language, the legends, the rituals of joy, grief and sorrow, the kind touch of a mother and father.

When you lose family, what else really matters?

What did I learn? I had to do chores. I learned to listen and remember lessons from the spoken words of grandfather. At times, he told us what we did not understand. Now we would experience these things in our later lives. We spoke in spiritual way to one another. It was a sad day when we had to inform our mom not everyone is enlightened including people of a professed faith. They were afraid of incantations and they believed in Dracula, the vampire. Since they did not understand our prayers, they cringed at our belief systems. It has taken a hundred years to decipher a sweet grass ceremony.

As students, you should try to understand government policy. Canada is a settler state. It has to import taxpayers. Treaties were made not to displace people in their own regions. We were to share the land and resources. These words are in the lexicon of Indian languages. Governments still struggle with those principles of caring and sharing. Take any sample reading of the words interpreted into English for the Treaties, they are now devoid of the meaning of those principles. Governments have to have

something of value to trade. It still cannot afford this country. In North America, the homicide degenerated quickly into genocide. This is documented in army logs and discussed in pragmatic terms.

Residential school systems have to be studied. During colonial rule from Britain, in particular, schooling for the sake of assimilation was forged out of stupidity, ignorance, and racism based mostly on greed. I can say this with confidence. Schools in Britain were places of torture. The governments for over a century saw to it that inadequate structures and underpaid and overworked staff were kept in a beggarly fashion. No matter how well meaning the staff was, the lack of money existed in exaggerated numbers. This resulted in children instructed for fewer hours. They baked bread, cut mountains of wood, slept in menacing dormitories that did not keep out human predators. The schools became magnets for child molesters and predators. Deicide occurred because a loving and protective God was absent. The last statement is impossible for Christian communities to admit that it took place. I have spent twenty years, reading, interviewing, and talking to relatives who were immersed in very horrible places and situations. When you work among Indians that is one of the minefields. Governments who lie morning, noon, and night are hard to fathom. Ask Aboriginal people how compromised the word, the promise, the pledge of government representatives is. It is preserved and not received.

In this lecture, incarceration is mentioned for the nineteenth century. In the mid-sixties, Aboriginal people started counting the relatives who were doing jail time for any number of reasons. Lack of money to pay fines was in there. The revolving door was another. Lack of parenting became a focus of social workers who went on to commit child kidnapping. That is the history. As you start your practice, think of the tiny feet whose footprints were found along railway tracks as they tried to get back home. Think of my relatives who came back from school broken in some way or dead and readied for burial. I've been there. Women disappear without a trace. That situation enrages me.

We are not a homogenous lot. Region by regions, we have different languages, showing different points of view. But, we have common history with our common enemy. We cannot really relax in our own country.

Our stress levels just keep getting new sources of anxiety. Our health is greatly compromised. Yet, I do have hope. I see social work methodology has greatly improved. There is a sly trend toward more incarceration, but society may not stand for it. We have a better view of child development based on neuroscience. We also know how vigilant we have to be. We no longer ignore the presence of a known predator of children. We also know how to query our children so they do not feel guilty or ashamed. Seemingly invincible people have been properly exposed. We have a better understanding of economics since women have joined the workforce in a meaningful way. Advertisers have to work harder for their keep. We have a better grip on the world of chemistry.

Almost every Aboriginal child has a cell phone, access to the net, understands how wide the world is. It is the limits of satisfaction that we have to drive home. With a two to ten second attention span, the work is relentless repetition. One of the places we meet many needs is in storytelling. Kids love stories, adults like telling them and everyone is an actor, singer and dancer. The revival in the pow-wow circuit is a place of pride in competition.

Historiography is gaining recognition. Sloppy work is not appreciated anywhere. Generalizations are unacceptable in scholarly work. There is a great deal of research of primary papers. Journals are cross-referenced with oral testimony. We are separating fact from impression based on prejudice.

In justice, we can sort out the issues that produced so many erroneous judgements against the well being and the dignity of Indian people. We do have lawyers schooled in English Common Law and French Civil Law. Our most knowledgeable also know Indian Common law. We can build a fairer society that way. Our democratic systems demand that much more.

One of the pleasures of my life is that I have met very dedicated Indian people all over this continent. We have stories to tell. This one is from a book through I met George Manuel on a plane. This is a dramatic moment in Indian and government relations. Mr. Manuel had asked the Canadian Senate if he could speak to them of his idea of the Indian Brotherhood. They reluctantly gave him three hours. He spoke for three days. That Shuswap had plenty to say. The Senate listened and George Manuel made sense at so many levels. Georges Sioui fasted for over sixty days for the right to an assembly. Stan Daniels showed us how to do research for government policy papers. James Brady taught us to love reading good books and how to organize community meetings. Women showed us how to look after one another. Some of our teachers taught us to read, write, and count in our rude little schoolhouses. There was always someone contributing to the greater good of a community.

I want to finish with two notions that served me well in life.

Choose sobriety and stay away from addictive behaviours.

Be accountable for your own life. Be passionate about your life's work.

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This is a talk given at McGill University to a class of Aboriginal and Ghanaian undergrads in Social Work in the Wilson Building ... The experiences of the students were varied, it included students who had lived all their lives off reserve.