

# **“There was no one here when we came”: Overcoming the Settler Problem**

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## **LECTURE TWO The Stories We Tell Ourselves: A Practical Hermeneutic of Neighborliness**

### **Uncommon Ground**

The second solemn, sacred gathering in which I participated in January 2011 was a round dance, the first ever at my small university campus on Treaty 6 land in Alberta. It was part of our centennial celebrations. The previous fall I had presented tobacco to an elder, a former student of mine, to ask whether he would oversee the ceremonies and protocols. He agreed. A stickman was selected – two, in fact – to orchestrate the dancing. Word went out to singers and drummers across the prairies. Our food services staff agreed to make bison stew, biscuits, and a blueberry dessert for an indeterminate number of people. Donations were collected for the “giveaway” dance – one of those recklessly generous, redistributive social practices, like the potlatch, that would have elicited bureaucratic and missionary disapproval at another time in history. The eagle feathers were ordered through official channels for a special part of the evening.

Late on the Saturday afternoon of the dance, the fire suppression systems were turned off in the building as negotiated, and a smudge-fire was lit in the gymnasium. The elder took charge. He said a blessing, took the pipe, and passed it around a circle that included university leaders, the mayor, the local member of the legislative assembly, some staff and students – aboriginal and not – as well as several residents from the federal corrections healing center located on the First Nation where the elder is responsible for cultural programming. By the elder’s preference, only men were allowed in the pipe circle. When the pipe had gone around, it was time for the feast. Hundreds lined up to eat.

Inside the building, the smell of sweetgrass began to permeate. Outside, volunteers watched the fire built partly to warm the skins of the

drums. And the people came: from up the street, from other campuses of the university, from communities in Alberta and Saskatchewan. The singer Susan Aglukark, who has become an important mentor to our students, was there. She was one of two Inuit present. The other was a graduate returned from Iqualuit, capital of the territory of Nunavut, in ceremonial sealskin skirt, vest, and boots. Because this was a centennial year, we had made a special invitation to aboriginal alumni to return for the round dance. We had not kept such a list before. It turned out to be surprisingly long, reaching back to the 1950s.

At one point in the evening, the dancing stopped and several elders came on stage as planned. I called forward by name those who had earned degrees in the decades before we adopted the new University of Alberta practice of having an elder present an eagle feather to each aboriginal graduate at convocation. The feather honors not just the achievement of a degree but the hard work of living in two cultures to achieve it. The powerful emotions in the faces and bodies of those who walked across the stage to receive their feathers told the truth of that hard work. I will never forget it. And then the recipients formed a semi-circle on the floor, the elders said a blessing, an honor song was sung, and the dancing resumed. By our best estimates 1,000 people came together that night – young and old, aboriginal and non-aboriginal. There were some 60 singers and drummers, an impressive measure. At midnight they stopped for the customary bologna sandwiches. At 2 a.m., the gym emptied, the singers lined up for their payment, and an efficient clean-up crew went to work.

For that long night our campus had become what literary theorist Daniel Coleman calls *uncommon ground*. Not common ground. Not middle ground. Uncomfortable, risky, unsettling, transformative ground. For Coleman, uncommon ground is the space and the metaphorical space on which the familiar is disrupted and participants must pay close attention; we cannot simply colonize or “import the signs of the Other into our existing frameworks in order to find value in them.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, uncommon

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Daniel Coleman, professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, for this phrase and the model of his own “placed” scholarship in relation to what he calls “two-row consciousness.” His idea of uncommon ground is elaborated in a manuscript, “Beyond the Book: Reading as Public Intellectual Activity,” written for a collection of essays

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ground disorients and transforms us. It calls for new words to describe what we have come to know.<sup>2</sup>

### **A Practical Hermeneutic of Neighborliness**

In these lectures I am examining the settler problem – the sense of entitlement, indifference, and ignorance rooted in the mythology that there was no one here when we came – that is still powerfully at work in the resentment and guilt attending the reality that the aboriginal peoples are still here with fresh cultural confidence and historically-grounded claims to press. This is the dangerous tendency in all the important talk of reconciliation and apology: namely, that even honest admissions are about the desire for closure, not the hope of relationship.

But I have not come here to stand on a prophetic soapbox. I will not speak in the idioms of theology or even social justice – the latter with its impatience to put the world right. Rather, I want to encourage those of you who live alongside the Grand River to be seized by the practical hermeneutic imperatives of doing so.

What do I mean by this? For a start, it is probably necessary to liberate hermeneutics from its usual application to texts in theology and philosophy. A practical hermeneutic imperative arises from the following conditions: first, the recognition of enduring differences; second, the unavoidability of face-to-face encounters between those who represent that difference; and third, the need to understand them – not defeat or dismiss them – in order to live well in a particular place. In other words, the hermeneutic imperative is intensely local. Like the work of apology and reconciliation, it cannot be delegated as a matter of proxy; there is only so much that national political leaders can do. It is on a more local scale – often where the tensions and

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in development under the title *The Public Intellectual and the Culture of Hope*, eds. Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam. See also his “Imposing subCitizenship: Canadian White Civility and the Two-Row Wampum of the Six Nations,” in *Narratives of Citizenship: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples Unsettle the Nation-State*, Aloys N.M. Fleischmann, ed. (Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> This point is not so different from the one Charles Taylor once made against an earlier generation of social scientists in “Understanding and Ethnocentricity,” reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2: *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985).

risks are much higher – that the work of imagining an uncommon space is also most real, most urgent, and most meaningfully undertaken. At the local level, too, platitudes and romanticized caricatures frozen in time cannot be sustained for long in the face of everyday life.

The hermeneutic imperative starts with honest human encounters, not with policy or justice or high drama. That is my ordering. The first step outside the settler mythology is to be a neighbor, not an advocate. It is to build relationships, not to propose a solution. You don't enter into relationships to fix a problem or find a solution; you do so because you share living space, because you might learn things and enjoy someone's company. Put another way, it is better to know aboriginal people than to know about them.<sup>3</sup> Where such relationships exist, the courage to stand alongside people will come when it is needed.

Another prairie example will illustrate what I mean. Stoney Knoll is the high point in a triangular tract of land – close to 80 square kilometers – situated along the North Saskatchewan River, west of the village of Laird and the first Mennonite settlements at Eigenheim and Tiefengrund. The land had been set aside under the terms of Treaty 6 as Young Chippewyan Reserve No. 107, though the band, in its adaptation to a post-buffalo economy and a leadership succession, did not take up continuous residence there.<sup>4</sup> In 1897 the federal government took back the land without the consent required in

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<sup>3</sup> I owe this point to a lovely essay in creative non-fiction sent to me by an undergraduate student from another campus and a community where racial tensions are often raw. He had read my essay "We Are All Treaty People." He wrote about his clandestine Grade 6 visits after school to the reserve.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to researcher Leonard Doell at MCC Saskatchewan for materials relating to the Young Chippewyan claim and the 2006 gathering at Stoney Knoll. His own involvement dates back at least to the 1980s. See "Young Chippewyan Indian Reserve No. 107 and Mennonite Farmers in Saskatchewan," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 165-67; and, earlier, "Call to support Indian land claims in Saskatchewan," *Mennonite Reporter*, January 7, 1985. The gathering is documented in a short video produced as part of MCC Canada's Indigenous Works project, "A Mennonite Reserve . . . Within an Aboriginal Reserve," accessed on May 23, 2011 at <[http://mythperceptions.ca/more%20myths/mennonite\\_reserve.html](http://mythperceptions.ca/more%20myths/mennonite_reserve.html)>. The regional weekly newspaper also provided extensive, positive coverage at the time. See Rod Andrews, "Historic gathering at Stoney Knoll leads to signing of Declaration of Harmony and Justice," *Saskatchewan Valley News* August 30, 2006, 1; and "'We are all Treaty People,'" 2. Note that the precise place reference varies. Stoney Knoll is sometimes known as Stoney Hill or Stony Hill.

the Indian Act, and made it available instead to Mennonite and then German Lutheran immigrant homesteaders. Members of the Young Chippewayan band were relegated to the status of squatters in other communities. Their dispossession, however, was a persistent source of grievance. In the 1970s, the intention to reclaim the land was communicated in threatening tones to local residents, sometimes by young Cree who drove onto farmyards. Provincial First Nations leaders began to raise the matter of “stolen” land with the federal Minister of Indian Affairs. The response was fear and disbelief. There was no one here when our ancestors came; this was empty land, and we made something of it.

I do not know the full story of the next 30 years. For our purposes, though, it came to a decisive point – not an end, not an attempt at closure – on August 22, 2006, 130 years to the day after the signing of Treaty 6 downstream at Fort Carlton, when settler and Cree descendants gathered on Stoney Knoll for a pipe ceremony, a feast, and the signing of a Declaration of Harmony and Justice. *We are all treaty people*, they said. Together, they committed to work so that the Young Chippewayans’ claim for a land base could be resolved and future generations could live in peace, justice, and sufficiency for all. That is, they made uncommon ground – all those who gathered on the hill, erected the teepee, prepared the food, smoked the pipe, eased nervousness with gentle humor, told stories, exchanged gifts, and gave thanks to the Creator. In the eloquent words of one participant:

We settlers are unsettled on our own land. We don’t know the language. We don’t know the liturgy. But we recognize the love, the respect for land. . . . The prayers, the drums, the singing, carry us into the day. Two communities . . . step over risk and embrace stories, losses, strength and dreams. . . . Hope is in the hearts and hands of those who chose to set their chairs on this hill on this day.<sup>5</sup>

Another participant, Barb Froese, a pastor who also farmed with her husband at the base of the hill, presented a Mennonite Central Committee quilt to the Young Chippewayan chief and his wife. In doing so, she said: “Many hands gathered pieces to make this blanket. In the same way, many

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<sup>5</sup> Unpublished reflections by participant Eileen Klaassen Hamm, August 29, 2006.

hands prepared and gathered the pieces for this day.” On the hill, she reflected later, “we sewed all those pieces together.”<sup>6</sup> In the gathering’s aftermath, Mennonites continue to be involved in raising funds for genealogical research to help establish the validity and scope of the Young Chippewayan claim.<sup>7</sup>

Paulette Regan describes an equally powerful feast in northern British Columbia. It was organized by the Gitksan First Nation as an occasion for United Church of Canada leaders to make a public apology for abuses at a residential school operated under its authority and for school survivors to come home and be reinstated formally as members of the community. She writes: “The Hazelton feast hall in Gitksan territory is a long way from the urban office towers where we can safely feel distanced from the victims of our benevolent peacemaking. Shifting from denial to recognition requires engaging history authentically. . . . The challenge for settlers is to listen attentively, reflectively, and with humility when we are invited into these spaces.”<sup>8</sup>

Regan’s account begins to name the attributes, the points of openness and awareness, that are demanded by a practical hermeneutic imperative of settler-aboriginal neighborliness. From the stories recollected above, I would add several others:

- acceptance of the obligations attached to proximity and place, of the gift of living where the need for reconciliation is a meaningful, everyday reality;
- willingness to respond positively to an invitation and to the experience of reciprocity without being the ones to offer it;
- openness to being unsettled, to the risks and uncertainties of a direct encounter;

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<sup>6</sup> Barb Froese, “Reflections on Stony Hill Celebration,” materials collected for the Mennonite Central Committee Saskatchewan meetings, November 4, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> First Nations and settler communities gathered again on the treaty anniversary in August 2011 to renew their commitment to a just outcome for the band. Chief Ben Weenie told the gathering that “the struggle is not with the settlers but with [the Department of] Aboriginal Affairs in Ottawa who legislated us out of existence.” See Rod Andrews, “Laird community, Young Chippewayan band mark 135th anniversary of Treaty 6,” *Saskatchewan Valley News*, September 1, 2011, 1, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 211.

- respect for cultural protocols and sacred spaces, beginning with one's own;
- refusal to accept that the past is past, that the "modern" world is fixed on a certain path, and especially that aboriginal cultures are so absolutely, essentially, and unalterably incommensurate that there is no real hope of a decolonized understanding on the part of settlers;
- willingness to face up to our history, told differently, to confound the mythology that there was no one here when we came, to wonder who the "we" is, to tell entangled stories about families and regions and the entire country.

Inside this practical hermeneutic imperative, it matters what stories we choose to tell. What if, for example, we choose to understand Canada as having been founded, as James Tully suggests, "on an act of sharing that is almost unimaginable in its generosity"?<sup>9</sup> What if along the Grand River you choose to make the two-row wampum a foundational text and Six Nations elders its primary interpreters, assuming that it can inform how you live entangled lives as neighbors in this watershed?<sup>10</sup>

One more prairie story deserves mention in relation to the hermeneutic imperative, though it is about a meeting of two people, not side-by-side communities. In the opening pages of the book *Stolen Life*, the reader is told how a Cree woman, Yvonne Johnson, an inmate at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario who was convicted of first-degree murder, will come to write her story with Rudy Wiebe, a Mennonite man, a settler, a writer, whose novel about her great-great-grandfather Big Bear she had read with reluctance. What could a stranger understand? Wiebe's novel, however, had "slapped her in the face." She wanted to know: "How is it that you came to know as much as you do? What was the force behind you? Who are

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<sup>9</sup> James Tully, "The Negotiation of Reconciliation," in *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. 1: *Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 244.

<sup>10</sup> Once published, Coleman's essay, "Beyond the Book," will be richly suggestive in regard to its call to read the two-row wampum.

you?”<sup>11</sup> She had taken the initiative to contact him. He chose to respond, not shirking the responsibility of the words he had sent into the world. She wrote feverishly. She trusted him with her audiotapes and her annotations on court transcripts. “Our past,” she wrote to him from prison, “has given each of us a gift of understanding.”<sup>12</sup>

I want to be careful not to say that Mennonites as such have any self-appointed special role when it comes to the work of understanding and reconciliation. The story of Stoney Knoll is not the norm; it took exceptional leadership and relationships built over time. Nor is the MCC Ontario presence at Caledonia or at Ipperwash, site of a long-standing land dispute and the 1995 police shooting of a Chippewa protest leader,<sup>13</sup> widely appreciated in member churches. But there is work to do in most of the places in Canada where Mennonites have settled and now live. We have been given the gift of proximity, of being in the way; and we can choose to accept it. And we do possess resources that can serve as bridges to understanding.

Those of us who are attentive to our own stories of sorrow, displacement, and loss; those of us whose ancestors were once outsiders in this country, linguistically, culturally, and politically, and indeed were once attracted to it because it promised room for difference; those of us who are still rooted in real places with complex, layered, entangled histories; those of us who know the meaning of land, the way it shapes identities, the ethos of stewardship it requires; those of us who can treat understanding as a gift when it is hardest

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<sup>11</sup> Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1998), 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> The final report of the provincial inquiry into the police shooting conducted by Judge Sidney Linden can be found at [www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/inquiries/ipperwash/mandate/index.html](http://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/inquiries/ipperwash/mandate/index.html). The report, released in 2007, found that the provincial leadership of the day viewed the occupation as a “law enforcement issue,” not as an action to be understood in the context of history and an ongoing land claim, and that in its “racist comments” and desire for a swift end it created a climate that led to the shooting. In his statement at the public release of the report, accessible at the same website, Judge Linden also noted the Caledonia conflict: “The single biggest source of frustration, distrust, and ill-feeling among aboriginal people in Ontario is our failure to deal in a just and expeditious way with breaches of treaty and other legal obligations to First Nations. If the Governments of Ontario and Canada want to avoid future confrontations they will have to deal with land and treaty claims effectively and fairly.”



to achieve; those of us who are capable of giving and receiving hospitality, beginning with food; those of us who live with humility and reverence – which is to say, a large number in total, with plenty of room for more conservative members too – we have work to do. Or better to say that the work will find us. The uncommon ground into which we are invited will surprise us. And we will be *encouraged* to let go, to imagine and participate in something new – without certainty of the outcome.<sup>14</sup>

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## THE BECHTEL LECTURES

The Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies were established at Conrad Grebel University College in 2000, through the generosity of Lester Bechtel, a devoted churchman with an active interest in Mennonite history. His dream was to make the academic world of research and study accessible to a broader constituency, and to build bridges of understanding between the academy and the church. The lecture series provides a forum through which the core meaning and values of the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith and heritage can be communicated to a diverse audience, and be kept relevant and connected to today's rapidly changing world. Held annually and open to the public, the Bechtel lectures provide an opportunity for representatives of various disciplines and professions to explore topics reflecting the breadth and depth of Mennonite history, identity, faith, and culture. Lecturers have included Terry Martin, Stanley Hauerwas, Rudy Wiebe, Nancy Heisey, Fernando Enns, James Urry, Sandra Birdsell, Alfred Neufeld, Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, and Ernst Hamm.

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<sup>14</sup> I have been helped to think about political courage and encouragement in new ways by Darin Barney. His related article, "Eat Your Vegetables: Courage and the Possibility of Politics," is found in the online journal *Theory and Event* 14, no. 2 (2011).