

Dan Ennis' Wabanaki Perspective: What Does It Mean For The Educator?

This week's article must begin by thanking a fellow Brunswickan writer, Dan Ennis. Mr. Ennis has been sharing his Wabanaki Perspective for the past two years, honestly and openly expressing his thoughts and feelings concerning the events and consequences surrounding the European colonization of what is now known as 'North America.'

I thank him because, as I shall argue in this article, we need to have not only discussion, but an understanding and empathy for all parties concerned in order to make any truly meaningful advances in First Nations-Canadian relations. Further, this 'understanding' encompasses far more than a mere superficial understanding of history and one's ancestors. We must 'understand' how others 'feel' as people, as individuals, separate from a historical, racial continuum.

To focus exclusively on 'group rights,' as we have in the past, ignores the two most significant issues. First, the fact that the

'authorities' who decide the 'validity' of First Nations declarations are the very institutions to be debated.

This begs the question. Who is to say we should not use treaties to decide the legitimacy of the Canadian courts? It seems quite pompous to use Canadian institutions to justify Canadian institutions. The whole notion is absurd.

The second issue, which I touched on above, is the lack of effort (as a generalization) by both parties to truly understand each other as 'individuals.' We ignore the psychological effects and conditioning of 'society' as a social phenomenon and its effects on the individuals frame of mind and perspective. One's experiences and social environment simply 'cause' inherent contradiction, perspectives and biases which are then brought to the table by both sides. It is this lack of recognition of 'individuality,'

separate from 'group rights,' that is the fundamental issue missing from the discussion on social conflict.

In this article, therefore, I will first discuss the issue of 'experience empathy' in First Nations-Canadian conflict. Second, I will argue that the Canadian education system does not come close to addressing the harsh realities of colonization, let alone, offer the level of critical, meaningful study required to attain the high

Paideia: Analysing The Inconsistencies Between The Theory & Practice Of Education
by Shea Tompkins

level of understanding, tolerance and empathy needed to take positive steps towards a peaceful resolution.

I must make it clear that this talk of bias and perspective does not concern 'facts.' I am in no way suggesting that either group has a consciously skewed version of the story or

bends the truth - the issues are far deeper than this. Rather, I am saying that different individuals, when presented with identical situations, will 'feel' differently about the same issues due to their background and experience. This manifests itself in First Nations and Canadian perspectives, even among the very well informed of both parties.

From a generalized First Nations perspective, for example, emotions could be said to be centered around a feeling of loss and/or violation (the significance of which most Canadian institutions have made no real attempt at understanding) accompanied by tension between the two. First Nations wish to know how the factor of time and despondence alone elevates one from the responsibilities of inhabiting stolen land. They wish to bring to light the impossibility of a truly gratifying life, when all of the economic hardship, lack of access to clean and abundant natural resources, and cultural fragmentation, are direct results of acts of genocide and oppression.

Further, the descendants of this colonizing body are still present as the obstacle to autonomy. The descendants of the colonizing body, on the other hand, often bring attention to the fact that they are also 'native' to this land. Often descendants believe 'they' have done nothing wrong. Further, to face any repercussions for the actions of their ancestors is a violation of their personal rights and freedoms. The phrase "two wrongs don't make a right" offers an appropriate analogy for this viewpoint.

It is important to remember that both of these views are 'valid'. By valid I do not mean correct. It is not a matter of accuracy. They are 'valid' because they represent emotions, which are always fundamental for coming to terms with the manifestation and elevation of conflict.

They are 'valid' because they are factors in conflict. If we do not take these emotions into account, we remain muddled in a hopeless struggle that offers no real long-term solution. Both parties are thrown into a time and situation they did not choose. In order to proceed we must understand this about each other, so we can be sympathetic to each other. Then, progress can be made. It is for this reason I thank Mr. Ennis. His writing is a positive step towards a true 'understanding' of one another.

With such a deep level of understanding

and empathy required to approach these issues, therefore, how can we (Euro-Canadians) possibly expect to approach the situation with any form of dignity or knowledge when the true face of colonization does not make it into our history books? Most of us have not been made aware, in all of our schooling, that only 10% of the First Nations population remains after contact with Europe. Where did they go? And why are these issues not made explicit, clear and meaningful in our Social Studies classes?

I have gone through 12 years of public school in this province, and it was not until I took a course in Contemporary Issues In Aboriginal Education, during my second year of university, that I learned of the atrocities known as residential schools. They were institutionalized 'assimilation centers' firmly established in authoritarian abuse, in what I thought was my province, during my life time and I did not find out until I was 19 years old. Keeping in mind then, that I did not live under a rock for the first two decades of my life, can we not assume this represents fundamental problems in our education system? I think it does.

The problem is that we have a school system that focuses on teaching people to compete. Students are constantly told they have to sell themselves, invest in their future or equip themselves with the tools needed to compete in today's market. We reinforce self-interest rather than social justice, ethics and equality. All the while, we are foregoing the experiences, and historical perspective taking, essential in becoming a responsible individual.

The history of colonization simply cannot be justified in terms of economic advantages for our children's future, so we wear it out. As the global economy expands and becomes more competitive, we will no doubt continue down an educational path based on training instead of education - further increasing the gulf between our educational ideals and our practices. This slip will also widen the gulf between the First Nations and Canadian citizens. Our lack of ability to place one's self into another's shoes will continue because it is not economically feasible.

To me, it seems nothing short of insane that we wish to increase and fund standardized tests for students and teachers when we, as a nation, could not pass an environmental or social awareness 'report card' to save our lives - pun intended.

Celebrate a God-free Holiday Season this year

Tis the season for giving you know — and oh, are they ever giving!

Who are these givers you ask? Silly secularist Ann Arborites! While you read the Daily's "biased" editorial page and wait for some liberal academic to impress his or her dirty humanistic theories on you, millions of America's righteous religious folk are thinking about (or doing) the work of a divine entity of their choice.

This holiday season we can all look forward to hearing about the good works of all sorts of religious groups.

This type of seasonal pro-religious rhetoric seems to have gotten even to the many secularly oriented individuals. For these people, religion is a pretty benign institution at best and just sort of goofy at worst.

Having a little optimism about what happens after death has to be good. Faith gives purpose to people's lives and makes them feel warm and fuzzy; besides, the worst thing that can happen is that those who consider themselves "heaven bound" all end up disappointed when their time comes.

But attitudes like this are what make even the most non-judgmental types of spirituality so sinister.

Religion is one of the most powerful forces maintaining the social, political and economic status quo. Mass acceptance of any type of spirituality that promises a better existence after death gives people an incentive to be satisfied

with the quality of their own lives and the lives of those around them. If you're certain that eternal paradise or a better next life waits, there ceases to be any motivation to risk much here on earth. With poor people — many of whom can expect to die relatively young — the argument to "wait for heaven" might seem especially compelling.

The interesting thing about religion is that almost everyone will implicitly admit that it is an instrument of social control. Many people are terrified by the prospect of mass abandonment of spirituality — without God there can be no morality and without morality there would be chaos, doom and gloom. A cursory examination of this argument is amusing — are people who believe in God so morally fragile that they need the threat of hell to control themselves? I doubt it and I think that, if really pressed, many spiritual people would abandon this strategy.

What makes the "No God = doom and gloom" argument interesting is the level of genuine fear at the possibility of popular atheism it reflects. If the threat of atheism is not that people won't be able to control themselves without a God, what could it be? It seems to me that the hypothetical doom and gloom scenario that so many people appear to think popular atheism would unleash would be nothing more than a radical movement on the part of marginalized classes to demand

equality in social, economic and political spheres.

If religion really is just a way to keep people who wouldn't otherwise be content quiet, then there seem to be only two ways to fix it that would not involve gross violations of people's civil and human rights. The first way would be for theologians to revive the few successful religious movements that actually have been catalysts for positive social change, like the Latin American liberation theology movement of the '70s and '80s.

The second — and most practical way for students — is to do a little honest reflection on the actual social effects of spirituality and act accordingly. Among other things, the holiday season offers an easy opportunity to act on one's non-faith. Two suggestions: First, give to secular, rather than religious charities. Second, spend some of that quality holiday family time preaching atheism to impressionable young siblings and/or cousins.

Religion can not be redeemed simply by purging it of right-wing politics. By offering people visions of a glorious afterlife, spirituality weakens people's desire for a more just society on earth. Conversely, the moral "benefits" of religion appear negligible. One person's "doom and gloom" is another person's "justice."

Nick Woomer

Michigan Daily (U. Michigan)

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