

# Recognition

By Robert Francis

June 2015

## **Turtle and the Beavers**

(A Cherokee Story)

Turtle had a wonderful world in which to live. The cool water of the creek was a fine place to swim and catch minnows. When Turtle grew tired of swimming, he could climb up on his log. One end of this log



was buried in the mud at the bottom of the creek, while the other end stuck out of the water. It was here that Turtle spent long, lazy afternoons just basking in the sun. The log was Turtle's special place to pray and meditate. On hot summer days, when Turtle got too warm on his log, he could always swim over to

the lush shade of the trees growing along the banks of the creek. Everything Turtle needed was here.

When winter came, each year, Turtle swam down to bury himself deep in the mud at the bottom of the creek. There, Turtle slept, trusting that the little creek, his special log and all the beautiful, shady trees would still be there when he awoke in the spring. But then one spring Turtle awoke to find his world had changed.

Arising from his muddy bed, Turtle groped, sleepy-eyed, across the creek bottom to find his special log. Turtle climbed up the log, all the way to the top and began to take a deep breath of fresh spring air. That's when Turtle first noticed the change. Although he was at the very top of the log, Turtle was still under water. He could see the sunshine playing on the surface several feet above him. More than a little confused, Turtle swam up to the top, stuck his head out of the water and took a look around. What Turtle saw, nearly made his heart skip a beat, and turtles have really strong hearts. The creek was gone! In its place was a wide pond, almost like a small lake. The beautiful shade trees were gone too. Turtle could see pointed stumps barely sticking out of the water where the trees had been. The trunks of these trees were piled downstream, damming up the flow of water, creating this big pond. As Turtle struggled to comprehend all these changes, he saw three fearsome creatures moving across the pond, swimming toward him. The creatures were big and covered with dark, wet fur. They had

massive square heads, little beady eyes and long, orange teeth. With webbed feet and wide, scaly, flat tails, they shot across the water to surround poor Turtle. The largest of these beavers, for that is what the creatures were, opened his mouth and began to speak. In a stern voice that conveyed his feeling of self-importance, the beaver said, "This is *our* pond. You are trespassing. You will have to leave."

Turtle could not believe what he was hearing. "There must be some mistake," Turtle said. "This is my home. I have always lived here. My mother and father lived here before me, and their mothers and fathers before them."

"You will have to leave," the beaver repeated. "If you refuse to leave, we will use our sharp teeth to chew off your shell. Then we will throw you over the dam."

Well now, these beavers had certainly taken Turtle by surprise. For a few moments he was at a loss for what to do. It's hard to suffer such a shock, especially when you've just awoken from a long winter's nap. But now Turtle was coming to himself, able to think more clearly. "I've always been a fair-minded and sporting person," Turtle said. "What do you say to us having a contest? We'll have a race, a swimming race, from one side of this pond to the other, and back again. Winner takes all. The loser will have to leave."

The beavers looked at each other incredulously. If beavers had any sense of humor, these would have certainly laughed out loud. Just imagine a turtle challenging beavers to a race! They decided to play along, seeing it as an easier way to get rid of Turtle, less effort than say, chewing off his shell and throwing him over the dam.

Preparing for the race, Turtle lined up evenly with the fastest of the beavers at the starting line. They were just ready for the race to begin when Turtle said, "Wait! As I said before, I'm a fair-minded person. I am a very fast swimmer, and in the spirit of fairness, I am willing to give my opponent a head-start." The beavers looked at each other in disbelief. Then, with a shrug of his shoulders, the beaver who was going to race with Turtle moved ahead. Another of the beavers fired a starting pistol, and here's what happened. Quick as lightning, Turtle stretched out his long neck and bit the beaver he was racing with on the tail. That beaver took off, swimming fast across the pond, but you know how turtles are. When they bite, they hold on. That beaver was hurting, and he pulled Turtle all the way across the pond. He couldn't get him off his tail. As the beaver turned around to swim back, Turtle was still hanging on, going across the pond like a water skier. As they approached the finish line, all of a sudden Turtle bit down really hard on the beaver's tail. "Ow!" the beaver cried, as he swung his poor tail up over his back. Just at the right time, Turtle let go of the beaver's tail and went sailing through the air, to splash down across the finish line, ahead

of the beaver. Sticking his head out of the water to look at the astonished beavers, Turtle smiled and said, "I told you I was a fast swimmer."

Although the story of Turtle and the Beavers has taken its place in Cherokee oral tradition, my feeling is that it is a story with fairly recent origins. This is not a bad thing; we need stories with recent origin. We especially need stories that help us deal with colonization and empire building. On the surface, the story is not at all fair to beavers, since beavers aren't really like that. Far from displacing turtles, beavers, when left alone to do what beavers do, create more and better habitat in which turtles and many other kinds of animals may coexist. Several species of animals, including muskrats, mice and frogs even routinely share the homes beavers carefully construct of sticks and mud, living warm and snug, along with the beavers, through the winter months.



Time was when beavers were among the major movers and shapers of this land, and not only of this land, but Eurasia as well. Much of the rich and fertile farm land we have is due to the work of beavers. However, since beavers have, for the most part, been displaced, farmland grows less and less fertile even as agribusiness seeks to replace the natural fertility with chemicals made from petroleum. Beavers are marvelous creatures, wizards really. They can create oases in the deserts, conserving and maximizing the value of the rain that falls, even changing climates. If left alone to do what beavers do, within 20 years, they could probably bring a halt to or even reverse global warming. But, beavers are not empire builders. They do not seek to displace nor to conquer and control. I have heard that in some places, beavers are receiving some protection. In Kansas, for instance, it is now illegal to destroy a beaver dam; we will see how far this goes. If past behavior is any indication of future behavior, for the most part, the true empire builders, following the path of certain self-destruction, are too control oriented to allow beavers or anyone else who might effect some healing in the Earth, free reign in which to do so.

### **The Indigenous Struggle**

In March, of 2012, through the Mid American Indian Fellowships e-mail Linkup, I began publishing a paper entitled "120 Questions". Here is Question 108: "What is the difference between the struggle of American Indian people and the struggle of other minority groups?" And here is the response:

The one thing that is often most difficult for those of non-indigenous cultures to understand is that the indigenous struggle, whether of Indian tribes in America or Sámi (Laplanders) in Finland or Ainu in Japan or of hundreds of others throughout the earth, is not a struggle simply for

equality as individuals within the nation-state which has appropriated their lands as part of its territory. African Americans, Asian Americans and many other minority groups struggle for equality as Americans, in other words, to be treated just as everyone else on an individual basis. Similarly, Koreans and other immigrant minority groups struggle for equality within Japan, while Swedish and Russian immigrants struggle for equality within Finland. Indigenous peoples: Sámi in Finland, Ainu in Japan, Aboriginals in Australia, Indians in America and many others around the world, ***struggle for existence and the right of self-determination as peoples or nations in our own lands, the lands of our ancestors.*** One must understand this fundamental difference between the struggles of indigenous peoples and the struggle of minority groups before one may even begin to understand American Indian issues or points of view.

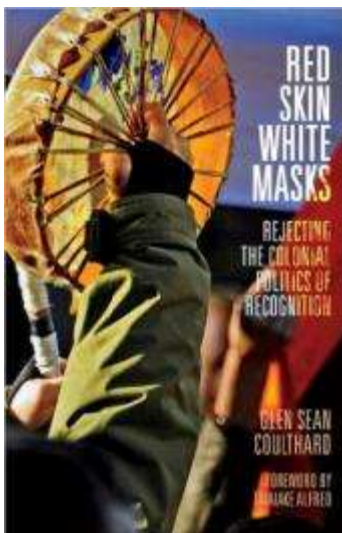
You will find the entire paper at

<http://midamericanindianfellowships.org/MAIF120Q.htm>

### Good Book / Unfortunate Title

This spring and summer, I have been helping a young man named Matt Cumings with an independent study, and in so doing have been introduced to the book *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* by Glen Sean Coulthard, published by Regents of the University of Minnesota in 2014. Matt Cumings wrote an excellent review of the book which is to be found in the Summer 2015 edition of the *Signals* newsletter, or you can find it at

<http://midamericanindianfellowships.org/PDF/Red%20Skin%20White%20Masks%20book%20review.pdf>



The book has an unfortunate title. Perhaps in Canada, where Glen Sean Coulthard of the Dene Nation resides, the “R” word is not so charged as it is in the United States where the fight to get a football team based in Washington D.C. to drop a disrespectful name has us doing our best to convince the colonizing imperialists that we do *not* use that word to describe ourselves. It would have been better had the author chosen a different title. It would have been better yet had the author written in a more understandable manner rather than in academic jargon which is itself another “white mask”. Even so, I must say that, insofar as this book serves to identify a real problem and look to real solutions, it is a good book, a needful book.

The gist of the book is basically this: In our struggle for survival, indigenous peoples have continually sought recognition from the very imperialistic and colonizing states that continually seek to exploit and/or destroy us. Such recognition, once achieved, does the opposite of what those seeking such recognition expect, proving itself, again and again, detrimental to tribal sovereignty and to the survival of indigenous cultures. In other words, instead of engendering peaceful coexistence based in reciprocity and mutual recognition, official recognition of indigenous peoples by nation-states serves as a tool of colonial and imperialistic power used to increase control and further infringe upon indigenous rights even if affirming certain rights in a limited way. The author argues that instead of pandering to and seeking recognition from conquering and colonizing governments, indigenous peoples should engage in a critical process of self-recognition, both individually and collectively or tribally through direct action and resurgence of cultural practices, knowing that, culturally, we have much to offer, especially to those in desperate need of lessons in how to live in coexistent reciprocal and respectful relationship.

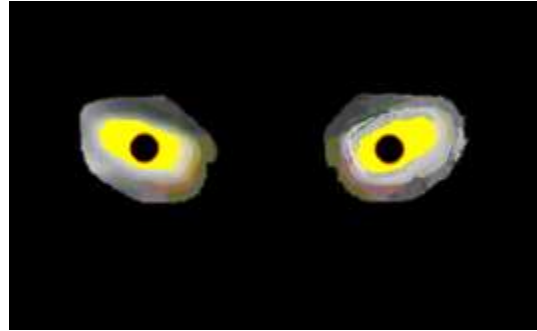
State or federal recognition is not and has never included recognition of the sovereignty or innate right of self-determination of an indigenous people. What did then President George W. Bush say when asked to define tribal sovereignty? Stumbling about for an answer, he basically said, "It's just that: sovereignty. We give 'em sovereignty, and they're sovereign." Reality is, there is no recognition on the part of any nation-state in North America of sovereignty or the right of self-determination as an innate and inalienable right of indigenous peoples, a right that is perennially or constantly violated by colonizing and imperialistic powers. Rather, the attitude is that indigenous sovereignty is merely a favor to be granted or denied at the whim of the nation-state which has set itself up as God. When an indigenous people seeks or accepts recognition from an imperialistic/colonizing state, the state assumes that the indigenous people or tribe accepts the state's attitude toward sovereignty. In other words, such recognition presupposes that an indigenous people recognizes the state's legitimacy along with the legitimacy of their imposed rule or sovereignty over the indigenous people who are seeking recognition.

### **Excerpt from "Colonization: Weapons, Gifts, Diseases and Medicine"**

At the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies (NAIITS) Symposium, Sioux Falls, South Dakota in November 2007, I presented a paper entitled, "Colonization: Weapons, Gifts, Diseases and Medicine".

This paper came from a growing understanding that while the need for decolonization is imperative, people will only begin to seriously decolonize as individuals and groups as they come to understand the truly malignant nature of colonization or empire-building. In my writings, I have used two different paradigms or models to communicate how I understand colonization and empire-building: 1. Empire-building as demonic behavior and 2. Empire-building

as the spread of cancer in the body of the Earth. Within these respective models, my assertion is that all empire-building is demonic, and/or all empire-building is cancer. Although patriotic citizens of empires believe in exceptions, **there are no exceptions**. There is no such thing as a good empire, and unless enough people come to understand this to the point of serious and active resistance through the process of decolonization and indigenous cultural restoration, the life of the human species along with other species and, in fact, the life of the Earth herself remains in immanent peril.



I assert that “Decolonization cannot begin without awareness of colonization, what it is and what it does to human beings and to all of creation. The natural and appropriate response to such awareness is anger. This anger may first be turned toward the colonizers, until it is understood that the colonizers are themselves human beings who are colonized. While anger is appropriate, the anger must ultimately be turned away from fellow human beings and toward colonization itself which exists as an evil spirit (or cancer) in the earth.” Anger at colonization will lead to careful examination of our own lives and the groups to which we belong for colonizing or colonized aspects which may then be extricated or excised, effectively lessening and eventual breaking the dependency on or co-dependency with the colonizing power and allowing a re-indigenizing atonement to begin. Such atonement, or more properly at-one-ment, is found in a realization of relatedness and restoration of relationship between Creator and all of creation – the oneness of all that is. By no means am I talking about some sort of vicarious punishment or torture here! Atonement includes and is effected by the restoration of all aspects of a balanced indigenous culture.”

You may read the entire paper at

<http://midamericanindianfellowships.org/PDF/DCRS%201%20Colonization%20Weapons%20Gifts%20Diseases%20Medicine.pdf>

There are those who may be surprised by my identifying anger as an essential step in the decolonization process. There are many who seem to think anger is actually *the* Indian problem, that if Indian people would only let go of our anger at wrongs done to us “in the past” we could get with the program of our benevolent conquerors. And so, governments and Christian denominations have initiated reconciliation events and resolutions, in which there is never any admission of *present* wrongs, *continued* colonization or empire building or genocidal activities, and therefore no indication of any change in behaviors.

### Child’s Play

The following story is from a dream that came to me in the wee hours of the



morning, October 3, 2005. This story is also included in Chapter 10 of *Being a Real Person*, Volume 4 in the *Talks from the Heart* Series by Robert Francis, a decolonized publication 2010. To find the entire book, go to <http://midamericanindianfellowships.org/MAIFTFTHIV.htm>

To read Chapter 10 of Volume 4, go to <http://midamericanindianfellowships.org/PDF/TFTH%20IV%20Being%20a%20Real%20Person%20Chapter%2010%20Reconciliation%20Oct%202005.pdf>

A group of children were playing in the yard of a house. “Come and hold my brother!” one boy shouted to the other children. “Hold him tight; don’t let him squirm.” And so the boy tested the sharpness of his pocket knife by severing his brother’s arm at the elbow.

The father of the two boys was horrified upon discovery of what had transpired in his yard. His first concern was saving the life of his mutilated child. After the hospitalization and homecoming of the terribly injured son, the father’s next greatest concern was the reconciliation of the brothers. The father loved all his children and was afraid these two would be severed from one another as surely as the one’s arm was severed from his body.

In the assembly of all the people, the father arose and spoke aloud to the two brothers concerning their need for reconciliation. He was greatly troubled by the attitudes of both boys. The one who had done the deed was saying, “It’s no big deal; what’s done is done. He’s still alive.” The other, unable to comprehend the enormity of his loss, was still expecting his arm to grow back. Also, seeing himself as the lesser of the siblings, he was not so sure whether what was done was a crime or just the normal outcome of child’s play. He lacked the capability even to hold his brother to account. He was, therefore, likely to be victimized by his brother again and again until there were no parts of him left for his brother to cut away.

### **Not Our Way**

Among other things, indigenous peoples in North America and elsewhere suffer from Stockholm Syndrome, a psychological phenomenon in which captives begin to feel empathy and sympathy for their captors, often to the point of identifying with and defending them. Pandering to the nation-state, seeking recognition on their terms or accepting terms of reconciliation even as oppression continues are symptoms of this disorder. Stockholm Syndrome is a major aspect of colonization. We all suffer from this insanity (Yes, it is insanity.) to one extent or another. I can look at a person’s Facebook page and get a pretty good gauge on their level of Stockholm Syndrome, especially around the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

Glen Sean Coulthard, in his good book with the unfortunate title, suggests that, “indigenous peoples’ individual and collective resentment - expressed as an angry

and vigilant unwillingness to forgive - ought to be seen as an affective indication that we care deeply about ourselves, about our land and cultural communities and about the rights and obligations we hold as First Peoples.” And he offers this quote from Philip Blake, a Dene from Fort McPherson:

“If our Indian nation is being destroyed so that poor people of the world might get a chance to share this world’s riches, then as Indian people, I am sure that we would seriously consider giving up our resources. But do you really expect us to give up our life and our lands so that those few people who are the richest and most powerful in the world today can maintain their own position of privilege?

*“That is not our way.*

“I strongly believe that we do have something to offer your nation, however, something other than our minerals. I believe it is in the self-interest of your own nation to allow the Indian nation to survive and develop in our own way, on our own land. For thousands of years we have lived with the land, we have taken care of the land, and the land has taken care of us. We did not believe that our society has to grow and expand and conquer new areas in order to fulfill our destiny as Indian people.

“We have lived with the land, not tried to conquer or control it or rob it of its riches. We have not tried to get more and more riches and power, we have not tried to conquer new frontiers, or outdo our parents or make sure that every year we are richer than the year before.

“We have been satisfied to see our wealth as ourselves and our land we live with. It is our greatest wish to be able to pass on this land to succeeding generations in the same condition that our fathers have given it to us. We did not try to improve the land and we did not try to destroy it.

*“That is not our way.*

“I believe your nation might wish to see us, not as a relic from the past, but as a way of life, a system of values by which you may survive in the future. This we are willing to share.”

Of a truth, there can be no reconciliation between indigenous people and colonizing, controlling empire, nor with a dominant or dominating culture. Let the dominant culture stop dominating. Does any government or Christian denomination think of themselves or identify themselves as “post-colonial”? Let them engage in action that will make this more than vain imagination or empty assertion.



## Self-Recognition



The New Sun has risen. By the ancient Cherokee calendar, a New World or New Epoch, the Epoch of the Sunflower has begun. There is no room for colonization, empires and empire building in this New Epoch. Granted, there are those who do not yet know that. The empires are dead already yet continue to thrash about like snakes with their heads smashed. We must remember that there was a time before nation-states and empires. We will live without them again. Their time has come and gone. We need to recognize this even as we recognize our own legitimacy as peoples, as indigenous people groups rising from the ashes, connecting properly with Land and Creator.

Glen Sean Coulthard identifies the “Idle No More” movement with its blockades of Indian land and flash-dance protests in urban centers as one way self-recognition is exemplified. The Greater Lakota Nation’s resistance to a proposed tar-sands pipeline crossing their lands is a related example.

There are other examples. There is the example of Lipan Apache Robert Soto’s lawsuit to regain possession of eagle feathers stolen by federal wildlife agents. That fight continues since, although the feathers were returned, they were returned with insanely unreasonable restrictions. There is the example of a Chickamauga Cherokee tribal group’s lawsuit against the Oklahoma State Parks Department to gain access to a sacred site for the purposes of conducting ceremonies. I would hold up as examples many indigenous books and indigenous movies; here I am speaking of those books that are authored by indigenous people and those movies that are screen-written, directed and produced by indigenous people.

More prime examples of indigenous self-recognition may be seen in traditional indigenous groups arising all over this land and others. Such groups, including the group that gathers at our own Daksi Grounds in western Missouri, are working to revitalize indigenous agricultural practices: hunting, fishing, gathering and subsistence farming with heirloom crop varieties of our own peoples and with a growing understanding of the value of giving away what we have in abundance in order to escape, to some extent, the trap of economic colonization. Such groups are working to revitalize indigenous languages, opening ourselves up to ways of thinking that the languages of colonizing empires disallow or make difficult. Singing in our languages, learning and making songs is a good way to progress. Such groups are revitalizing and continuing the oral traditions of our indigenous peoples, passing along stories of the people, internalizing the ancient stories that

they may meet each new generation, speaking to each new crisis. Also family stories and personal stories are added to the oral tradition, keeping it dynamic or alive. Finally, such groups are revitalizing the ceremonies of our various peoples. We are gathering together and singing ourselves together again as peoples in spite of and in resistance to the powers that would prevent that.