

The Most Important Work

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(Robert Francis) September 2018

Sunday morning at the Mid American Indian Fellowships Gathering, as we waited in line to smoke ourselves off at the cedar fire, I looked down at the bare feet of my son, nvya. During this past year, as part of his personal decolonization, nvya has gone barefoot most of the time. Looking down at his bare feet, I casually remarked, “No shoes, no shirt, no service.” It was meant as a joke, yet it was not funny. It was completely out of place, wholly improper.

Back in 1995, you might say I was not far down the path of decolonization. I remember sitting in my office alone and saying out loud, “One of these days.... I will grow my hair.”

“Why don’t you grow your hair now?” a quiet voice asked.

“Oh, there are those who wouldn’t like that,” I answered. “I could lose my job.”

“Seems to me,” the voice commented, “you’re not willing to give others a chance to oppress you; you’re too busy oppressing yourself.”

I grew my hair, and yes, there were those who didn’t like it. It may be alright for a white man to grow his hair long, but when an Indian does it, it’s scary. With every step I have made along the path of decolonization, there have been those who have seemed frightened and threatened, doing what they could to pull me back, saying in one way or another, “You’re going too far.”

This year at the Gathering, we had a food team rather than food coordinators, with indigenous foods, mostly cooked on site over fires. These wholesome foods, the very foods enjoyed by our ancestors of generations ago, were greatly appreciated. Even so, the old style tuya gadu or bean bread along with some of the other foods may have stretched a few comfort zones. Likewise, at the Daksi Gatiyo, where my family lives, where the Sacred Fire is kept and traditional aniyvwiya or Chickamauga Cherokee ceremonies held, wood heat and lack of air conditioning, composting toilets, water carried in buckets and minimal mowing have, no doubt, stretched some comfort zones as well. Some of these stretched *my* comfort zones, until I got used to them. If comfort zones are not stretched, we are not going far enough.

When nvya first started going barefoot, I commented that I might try that myself, if not for my peripheral neuropathy. Looking back on the improper comment I made at the Gathering, first I apologized to nvya, then I considered why I would say such a thing. That was fear talking. What am I afraid of? Bare feet? The best thing to do with fear is confront it. Peripheral neuropathy or no, I determined to start going barefoot for part of each day, at least until cold weather sets in. Since then and until the time of this writing (late September 2018) I’ve walked barefoot each morning up the hill to the Sacred Fire and out to the garden before breakfast. Usually I am still barefoot when going back up the hill to check the Sacred Fire at noon. No one is forcing me to do this. Decolonization is not forced. Yet, I have found as millions before me have found, there is nothing more grounding, more connecting with the Earth, than going barefoot. Is it painful? Sure it’s painful. Decolonization is always painful, at least in the beginning. No pain, no gain. And yet, in this time in which we live, there is nothing more important than decolonization and indigenous cultural restoration.

Decolonization is resistance to, escape from or engagement in a process of freeing oneself from colonizing imperialism. Decolonization happens on both individual and group levels. For those intent on decolonization rather than surrender to empire, decolonization is an ongoing process, lasting as long as colonizing empire may last in the Earth.

Even so, the opposite or inverse of “colonized” is not “decolonized” but rather “indigenous”. Being indigenous is less a factor of where ones ancestors lived 500 years ago and more a factor of how one lives today. To be indigenous is to be connected in respectful, reciprocal, cooperative relationship with the land and the peoples of the land where one is. By “peoples of the land,” I mean animals, birds, plants and waterways as well as indigenous human beings. To be indigenous is to live as a true and integral part of the land as opposed to living as proud flesh or a cancer in the land which is what we become when we treat the land as inert matter for extraction, exploitation and destruction. Being indigenous means leaving light footprints in the Earth, living with regard to all creation and to the needs of our children’s children’s children of the seventh generation, rather than grabbing all we can now as if there is no tomorrow. That is how I see it.

As my son, nvya points out, indigenous cultural restoration happens primarily at the group level. Restoration of indigenous culture requires restoration of indigenous community, and restoration of indigenous community requires restoration of indigenous culture. This is very difficult. After decades of armed resistance, our aniyvwiya or Chickamauga Cherokee people scattered like coveys of hunted quail eluding the hunters in a field. When quail scatter, they wait for the hunters to leave the field then promptly regroup. Well, the hunters are still in our field, still picking us off, maybe not physically, although that still happens, but most often culturally, even as we try to regroup. Too many of our people are left as disconnected individuals trying to make a way within the empire. Too many fall for the trappings or traps of the colonizers, accepting whatever the colonizing empire has to sell as normative and superior to the priceless culture gifted to our own people by land and Creator. Too many take the indigenous culture of our own people as a quaint diversion or something to be tacked onto the edge of a colonized life rather than as the fullness of a real and unpretentious life lived free and decolonized. In the face of all this, restoration of indigenous community grounded in connection with the land and common cultural practices is next to impossible, and yet the spirits of our ancestors say, “Don’t give up!” Of course, as indigenous thinking would understand, nothing is ever really done alone or accomplished individually. The indigenous are always surrounded by community, not just the members of our human families, bands and tribes, wounded and scattered as we may be, but also the plants, the birds, the animals of all sorts, the Earth in all her aspects, spirits of our ancestors and spirits of the place, of the land in which we live, all working together as one, gadugi.

Rejection of colonized death-ways in favor of indigenous life-ways requires both decolonization and indigenous cultural restoration in the four indigenous cultural aspects of oral tradition, ceremonies, agriculture and language. To illustrate, decolonization is hacking away the Johnson Grass, multi-floral roses and bull-thistles from a field. Indigenous cultural restoration or revitalization is planting that field in selu (corn), tuya (beans) and squasi (squash), tending the field, harvesting the crop to feed the people and saving seed for the following year. Vigilantly keeping the noxious weeds from retaking the field is the ongoing process of decolonization. Now, think of your whole life and the life of your people as that field, and you should get the picture. Lead, follow or get out of the way.

The primary weapon of colonizing empire is fear. We must not allow fear to hold us back or cause us to pull another back from the most important work of decolonization and cultural restoration.

There were seven crabs in a bucket. Four of the seven didn't know they were in a bucket. Two of those four didn't even know they were crabs. Of the remaining three crabs who knew they were in a bucket, two believed that particular bucket to be the best place for a crab to be. "It's better to be in *this* bucket than in some bucket we don't know about," they reasoned. Only one crab out of seven was completely aware of his captivity and unconvinced of the benevolence of his captors. Only one crab tried to climb out of the bucket. Every time he almost got out, another crab pulled him back down again*.

Making negative comments, sabotaging the decolonization efforts of others, trying to pull people back or re-colonize them in any way – these are not friendly actions. This is aiding and abetting the adversaries of our people.

We must be very careful to live by the harmony ethic, to live lives characterized by gratitude, reciprocity, patience and especially respect, not to let fear prompt us to shoot at the backs of those who are leading out in decolonization and indigenous cultural restoration efforts, not throwing lassos around their necks, not pulling them off the edge of the bucket.

Saturday night at the Gathering, Lilly and the children: Duncan and Serenity, in the Circle, with no light but the Fire, telling the Grandmother Turtle Story with the children as the voice of Grandmother Turtle; this was the most heart-touching rendition of that story I have ever experienced. The Chickamauga Cherokee story of Grandmother Turtle giving her life to bring up mud with which to create the land is a story of the power of weakness, the power of that which seems powerless. The very old may seem weak, but they are not powerless. Little children, as in this case speaking with the voice of Grandmother Turtle, may seem weak, but they are not powerless. A person who may be seen as "different" or "out of the ordinary," may be thought by some to be weak, yet that person may be very powerful.

I heard a man say of his little grandson recently, "Sometimes I think he may be one of my ancestors."

Looking into the child's fathomless, dark brown eyes, I replied, "Maybe he is."

The spirits are sending them back, those who are needed in this time, and maybe the spirits are saying, "Do what you can. Be courageous. Know that in many ways, you will fail. But, it is your task to create the world anew."

Early Christian colonizers were offended by trans and two-spirit people accepted as normal in indigenous communities. And, one of the first things they set out to do was to teach us to be offended as well.

Acceptance is easier at a distance. It is said that a prophet is not without honor except among his or her own people. Lilly is a test for us. I like Lilly. And, when Lilly, a trans person, was asked to go out with the women to dance at the Flint Corn Ceremony this summer at the Daksi Gatiyo, tears came to my eyes, for I felt, deep inside, this is as it should be. I felt that again as Lilly, Duncan and Serenity told the Grandmother Turtle story in the Circle at the Gathering.

Remember the Harmony Ethic. It applies in this case as well. The Harmony Ethic is about respect. Patience yes, gratitude yes, reciprocity yes, but especially respect. There are

two aspects of respect: Holding the other in high esteem *and* practicing an attitude of non-interference, not taking from another or attempting to take from another the right to choose.

Some, in fearful opposition to decolonization and cultural restoration will say things like, “But without colonization, there would be no progress,” or “We can’t go back; we may only go forward.” Here is my question to those who say such things: What do you do when you’ve lost your car keys? What do you do? Do you sit in your car hoping for the best, making varoom varoom noises with your mouth? No! You *go back* and find your car keys. Then you may go forward, proceeding on your way. There are those of our people fulfilling the sacred responsibility of going back and finding that which has been left and lost along the way: our agriculture (our seeds—the corn, beans and squash, our relationships with deer and other animals, our relationships with medicinal herbs), our language (revelation of the way our people have thought from ancient time – deep understandings developed through the ages), our oral tradition (sacred stories, prophecies and the expressed cosmology of our people expressed across millennia), our ceremonies (our relationship with the Sacred Fire, water and land, our understanding of our people’s sacred place in the Earth). These are infinitely more important than a set of car keys. Without these, we cannot hope to live and move forward as an indigenous people. Those who do not understand these things need to go back and do some searching of their own or just look around them and open their eyes. Decolonization and indigenous cultural restoration are *real* progress, normal progress, unpretentious progress, progress that may actually give our descendants a future, assuming it is not too late. But, real progress comes a little at a time. Bare feet take time and effort to toughen up, and it is hard to say how much time we have left. Lead, follow or get out of the way. We must never allow fear to prompt us to pull others down or throw lassos around their necks.

In this new epoch, a sorting is in progress, not just in our community but in every community in which people are endeavoring to decolonize and restore or revitalize their indigenous cultures. All humans, as individuals and as communities and peoples, all stand at a crossroads with a most important choice to make. Which path will we take? One path appears to be a path of ease, well paved, busily traveled. In reality, it is a hard path, and just around the next bend, it becomes the path of death. The other path appears difficult, overgrown with grass, “weeds,” and brush, seldom used, yet this is the path of life. Some tell themselves they may walk both paths at once, but these paths are divergent; they do not run parallel. Those who fancy themselves walking both paths are, in reality, stalled at the crossroads, perhaps blocking the way for others. Which path to take? Will it be the path of death or the path of life? All creation awaits our choice with bated breath. Lead, follow or get out of the way.

Decolonization and indigenous cultural restoration are not easy. Any change is difficult. When giving birth, a woman in transition may curse and swear that she will never have another child, but with the child in her arms, the effort is forgotten in face of the priceless reward.

Here is my current short list of books that may assist the reader with the process of decolonization: ***An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*** by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Beacon Press 2014; ***Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*** by Robin Wall Kimmerer, Milkweed Editions 2013; ***Celia’s Song*** by Lee Maracle, Cormorant Books 2015; and ***Mean Spirit*** by Linda Hogan, Random House 1990. For a longer reading list, see

<http://midamericanindianfellowships.org/Colonized%20vs%20Indigenous/Bibliography.pdf>

The interested reader may also want to read the extended essay "Colonized Thinking vs. Indigenous Thinking," a work in progress found at

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

*"Seven Crabs in a Bucket" by Robert Francis 2006 may also be found at

<http://midamericanindianfellowships.org/PDF/Seven%20Crabs%20in%20a%20Bucket.pdf> .