

Idle No More: A Moment of Possibility

by Sue Wilson, CSJ

“Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions of change – personal change, community and organizational change”.

(Margaret Wheatley)

The relationship between government, Indigenous peoples and settler peoples in Canada has become a burning topic of conversation. Rightly so, the issues are critical: treaty relationship, treaty rights, poverty, equity in education, health care, housing, resource development, protection of land and water, and different understandings of Canada's history.

All are issues that require meaningful dialogue and effective action.

A Catalyst

In late October, four aboriginal women in Saskatchewan began exchanging emails about Bill C-45, the most recent omnibus bill introduced by the federal government in Canada. They were concerned that the bill, like the omnibus bill before it, would erode Indigenous rights. So, they organized a peaceful protest event, using the title Idle No More as a slogan. It turned out to be the beginning of a movement.

But Idle No More is also serving as an invitation to meaningful dialogue – dialogue that is open to new possibilities and directed toward real change.

Some of the Voices

Indigenous voices are diverse but they are gathering around convergent concerns:

- ◆ Aaron James Mills (White Wolf is his Anishinaabe name) writes to "all my relations" saying "I don't know what will happen if we are confronted with our national origin story because most of my fellow citizens haven't been taught to understand their history of institutionalized violence. [...] Canada really is the most amazing country on Earth [...But] as the Right Honourable Paul Martin recently acknowledged, 'We have never admitted to ourselves that we were, and still are, a colonial power.' Colonial power is violence against Indigenous

minds, bodies, cultures and lands. I know that many of you don't see it. [..But] all my relations, you hear it now; you have only to listen."

- ◆ Pamela Palmater writes in the Ottawa Citizen that in order to understand the Idle No More movement, "it is necessary to understand how our history is connected to the present-day situation of First Nations. While a great many injustices were inflicted upon the indigenous peoples in the name of colonization, indigenous peoples were never 'conquered.' The creation of Canada was only possible through the negotiation of treaties between the Crown and indigenous nations. While the wording of the treaties varies [...] most are based on the core treaty promise that we would all live together peacefully and share the wealth of this land. The problem is that only one treaty partner has seen any prosperity."
- ◆ Devon Meekis writes on the Idle No More website that "Idle No More calls on all people to join in a revolution which honors and fulfills Indigenous sovereignty which protects the land and water. Colonization continues through attacks to Indigenous rights and damage to the land and water. We must repair these violations, live the spirit and intent of the treaty relationship, work towards justice in action, and protect Mother Earth. On December 10th, Indigenous people and allies stood in solidarity across Canada to assert Indigenous sovereignty and begin the work towards sustainable, renewable development. All people will be affected by the continued damage to the land and water, and we welcome Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies to join in creating healthy sustainable communities."

Truth and Reconciliation

It is no accident that the Idle No More movement has emerged in the midst of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation process, which has focused attention on the personal, familial and cultural impacts of taking 150,000 Indigenous children from their families and forcing them into residential schools as part of a national assimilation policy. In 2008, the Prime Minister apologized to Indigenous peoples, but reconciliation demands more than apologies. It requires transformation of the relationship. It calls for restorative justice.

We must learn to recognize the individual and social costs of exclusion, and together we must find a path forward into right relationship.

One of the challenges of the Truth and Reconciliation process has been to engage the wider Canadian public, to help people recognize that this is an issue that affects all people in Canada and one that calls all of us toward transformation. Unjust relationships between Indigenous and settler peoples in Canada have been ongoing for many generations. All Canadians are part of this story.

Indeed, if the Truth and Reconciliation process in Canada is truly to be about truth and reconciliation, it must be a vehicle through which people in Canada are able to confront the racism and injustice that have characterized the history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Its potential for transformation depends to a great extent on whether it is able to bring us to a shared sense of meaning and belonging.

Meaningful Dialogue

There is no question that Idle No More has generated much conversation throughout Canada. But meaningful dialogue requires more than a sharing of long-held opinions. It urges us to listen intently, moves us to curiosity, and opens us to see the issues from another perspective.

Meaningful dialogue causes us to explore our assumptions, looking for oppressive aspects. It reveals the barriers to which we've become blind, and stimulates new insights.

Above all, meaningful dialogue is conversation for the long-haul. It is interspersed with authentic action as we are motivated to respond concretely to our changing consciousness. In turn, this action renews the cycle of dialogue and insight, drawing us more deeply toward truth, compassion and justice.

Evolving Consciousness

The notion of our evolving consciousness might provide a helpful lens through which to engage the issues that have been raised by the Idle No More movement.

Each of us, in our lifetime, 're-walks' the path for the evolution of consciousness that has taken place thus far in the human race, and each of us has a role to play in carrying this evolution forward.

The work of Carl Jung has helped us to think about the process of evolving consciousness as the movement of psychic material from the unconscious toward the conscious mind, a process that continues until the conscious mind reflects the wholeness of the total self. It's a process that calls us to examine, accept and integrate our shadow side, on both personal and collective levels. Such a journey empowers us with greater freedom to choose to be the kind of person (and collectively the kind of people) we want to be. We are no longer captive to our shadow patterns.

Through this lens, the Idle No More movement might be understood as an invitation to all people in Canada to examine our shadow side. It will necessarily involve the work of 'bringing to consciousness' the many ways that we have been shaped by unjust and racist social structures, policies and attitudes towards indigenous peoples.

Too much of this has remained unconscious for us. Our society has hidden much of the history of colonization that shaped us. In addition, our political process teaches us to look at the poverty of Indigenous peoples with a narrow lens. We all want to see better housing in First Nations' communities, but how many of us are ready to do the sustained work of identifying the systemic and relational barriers that prevent us from moving forward? We want quick, superficial fixes instead of deep, systemic change.

Transformed consciousness emerges in connection with our efforts to create systemic change. This is the work by which we carry forward the evolution of consciousness; it gives concrete grounding to the spiritual moments in which we sense our deep unity with each other.

As we join with others to change the social, cultural, political and economic structures that have shaped distorted relationships, our consciousness evolves. We grow toward a graced awareness of the ways in which our own inner patterns can be oppressive or liberating – to ourselves and others.

A Pivotal Moment?

In many ways, the Idle No More movement reminds me of the symbol of Table Fellowship that we see in the Christian scriptures. Jesus challenged strict social boundaries by gathering people from different social groups to listen to each other as they shared a meal together. It was the kind of meaningful dialogue that could open eyes and hearts to the barriers experienced by others.

It gave people a glimpse of what it meant to participate in communion.

But I imagine it also raised all kinds of ethical conflicts — ethical challenges that provoked greater consciousness, greater awareness.

Ethical conflict spurs the development of consciousness, but it does so only if we allow ourselves to be engaged by the conflicting attitudes and values that confront us.

Can we listen for what is true in Chief Teresa's Spence's comments without needing her to be perfect?
Can we hear the ethical challenge in protest actions even if we don't like the disruption they create?
Can we listen to others without using their flaws as an excuse to shut them down?

Idle No More can take us even further if we will let it: Is it not challenging us to learn to live, choose and act from an awareness of our connection to the whole? Is it not stretching us to create structures that enable all of us to flourish, Indigenous peoples and settlers, land and water, trees and animals?

The issues that are being raised are calling us to trust the depth of our interrelatedness. Indeed, such issues can draw us into the spiritual depths of communion if we will open ourselves to be changed by the voices we hear. An ethic of communion implores us to engage the issues of our day in a way that acknowledges ourselves as part of the problem and part of the solution.

How is the Idle No More movement calling me to change; calling us to change?

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