

# OUR STARTING PLACE, OUR RESTING PLACE: SPIRIT OF THE LAND

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October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014 – A Chester Ronning Event – Presentation by Carmelle Javney Mohr “Reflections from Peru on our Relationship with the Land”, Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta

It is so good to gather with you this evening. I am humbled and honoured by your invitation to guide our reflections this evening, and I give thanks to be back home with you: my home community.

Let us acknowledge that this evening we gather upon the traditional Treaty 6 Cree Plains territory. We are guest, and for this we give many layers of thanks. Let us also acknowledge the settler and immigrant peoples who passed through this territory in search of new homes for their families.

As you know, this past year I lived in Peru working for a small environmental-justice agency there called DIACONIA and, later, in partnership with Mining Watch Canada and Stephanie Boyd. My most important task during this time however, was to be a great *listener*. In Peru, peoples and lands suffer extremely and most particularly from the impacts of our Canadian mining companies there. But it is our values as a non-indigenous society that found, maintain and perpetuate this suffering. I hoped that, through my life there, I might come to know the voices of those who suffer these impacts and, upon returning to my homelands, share these voices with you my sisters and brothers, until the day messengers are no longer needed to speak for others.

To my friends alongside whom I worked, I would often ask: “What would you have me tell my friends and family when I return home? What must they hear?” These are just three voices:

*“Around that corner, 3 of my friends died in the mine there. The mining company is from your country. The family who used to live on the land where the mine is now used to grow the most treasured native potatoes of this region. Long before the Spaniards came, the ancestors of this family passed down the potato seeds. For thousands of years, our knowledge was passed down and down like this, generation to generation, mother to son, father to daughter; and our people were fully themselves. But when the Spaniards came, they used weapons to expel us off our lands and silence this knowledge. Today, foreigners have even more power to expel us off our Land. Today, they use weapons of laws, markets, modified seeds, and mines. And your people do this believing that you are helping us! You have justified what you do. Your gadgets, jewels and fuel is more important to your people, than our land and lives. Our land is not just nutrients, our land is not a commodity, our Land is not dirt!  
Our land is our daughter. Our land is our father. Our land is living soil.  
We have cariño for our Land. Cariño is our word. Cariño is the love a parent has for their child.”*

*“The most important day in my life was the day I realized that the history books in my school were all wrong. They all said that the Spaniards conquered us. But, they did not conquer us! They divided us. Yes, this division has devastated our people and our land. But never, never, have we been conquered.”*

*“If I could tell your people one word, I would give you the word “enough.” Your people must live out this word right now. Who you are, those whom you have, and the Earth under your feet, is enough. All else is excess that burdens you. This excess you must surrender. You are scared because you know that you must give up your oil and silver. But, bear me. Your lives will be better without it. Do not waste more time. Our lives here are dependent upon your willingness to say ‘enough’ today.”*

I cannot offer you a summary of my life in Peru for I do not believe conclusions of living experiences exist. However, I can offer you 4 symbols from Peru that live with me now.

Each symbol is born from Peru's lands. In Canada, Peru, Estonia, Niger – we are a reflection of our Land. How we treat our land, manifests in us: physically, spiritually, individually and as a community.

**First: the symbol of a circle.**

Almost always, whenever a community gathers – a family, group of friends, town meeting – everyone gathers in a *perfect* circle. In a perfect circle, each can be seen and heard and valued. Each is an equal part of the whole.

Sometimes, when there is food, it is put into the middle of the circle, and because it is placed in the very centre of the perfect circle, all know how to share. It may be necessary that everyone take a bit less, but everyone takes less together. Gathering in a perfect circle is an organic way of being responsible and accountable and good to each other.

These community circles were also diversity exemplified. Intergen(d)erational! In all my days, I never saw a child ask to be excused from the table or the circle. I believe this is because the voice of each person - especially each child - is *valued*. Each voice is equally true; equally necessary.

One time, five thousand feet high in the Southern Andes, I saw a circle take shape for a community meeting. Every member of the 80 families gathered on the grassy clearing upon the mountain side. A perfect circle they formed. This day, this community was making the decision: to move off their native lands - lands with which their ancestors had lived since time immemorial - or, stay and perish with their lands, for their water source was nearly dry. Around and around the circle. Each shared their thoughts, stories, grief, songs. Each round: another opportunity to be heard. Around: until nothing that could be said was left unsaid. Around: until all the voices - even the smallest - had been heard.

May we ask ourselves: *Who is not a part of our circles? Who is not at our table? Whose voice is not here? Are we speaking too loudly to hear them?*

I saw these community circles take shape in the shantytowns of Lima, in the remotest fields of the Northern Andes, and in oases of the sand dunes to the south. East, West, North, South. From where might this beautiful practice of community – of gathering in a circle - come?

As I walked the Andean slopes, through rich diversity of flora and fauna, I came to wonder if this Circle was a reflection of the land. Perhaps this practice was something their ancestors had once learned from these lands, I wondered. Nature teaches us that an ecosystem's diversity is its resiliency. It is a Natural Law. So, too, may we apply this Natural Law to human communities! When individually unique and gathered together, the whole is strengthened. Thomas Aquinas once said that *"this is so that the perfection lacking to one, may be supplied by the other."*

Today, as we look upon our horizon of climate change and global inequity, may we hold close to this Natural Law for it proposes *community* as the answer! When our uniquenesses are gathered around a common table, we are the most sacred version of ourselves. We are whole. From the lands of Peru: the symbol of a circle.



## Second: **the symbol of...laundry.**

I first encountered this symbol when I lived in Cuba. Look up from the busy pedestrian streets and one shall see crisscrossing lines of the most colourful laundry, hanging proudly, swaying gently in the wind. The prayer flags of Cuba.

Truly, publicly displaced laundry in Cuba and Peru teaches a profound lesson in how to welcome the stranger.

The Matutes were a most kind family. Every Sunday I was invited to their home – like a long lost daughter. Each Sunday I would come into their home and their laundry would be on full display. Shirts, scarves, rags, blankets: hung from the ceiling and strewn across the chair. They had not cleaned or tidied their home for me. Everything was a bit dirty. The cupboard was a bit empty. You might say that I had simply walked into life as it truly was for the Matutes. But, I was *welcomed* into life as it truly was for the Matutes.

South America's proud laundry, teaches me how to welcome in the deepest way. It is to say: *"Come as you are, broken and whole. And I will welcome you into my life as one who has lightness and darkness also."*

I was welcomed like this every day I lived in Peru and despite three very significant factors. First, I was welcomed despite the fact that I would one day depart. Although *my* intent was to invest in relationship, I never dared imagine it might be reciprocated as readily, for that would be the most profound act of grace. Indeed.

I was also welcomed despite the fact that I was a visible minority whose skin and hair colour announce the extent of my socio-economic privilege in the world. To accompany me in some parts was to put their lives at risk beside mine. Nonetheless, accompaniment was always given to me.

Most humbling though, is that I was welcomed - like a long lost daughter - despite my nationality. I am of a nation that is not regarded as some say it once was. Canada is not known as compassionate, caring, kind, or just, in many places in the world. Especially not in Peru.

## **Silver and gold is the third symbol I carry.**

Briefly, let us paint the canvas with a different brush; a brush that paints with numbers. Seventy-five percent of Peru's population lives below the poverty line. In the last 40 years, 90% of Peru's population has migrated from rural landscapes to urban centers. This is due to land and water contamination from mining, forced removal from mining companies, and propaganda throughout the countryside that proclaims: *"in the city is opportunity, in the city are jobs, in the city is progress, in the city is dignity."* Peru's indigenous peoples are marginalized and stigmatized of the liking I can only compare with how those of indigenous story in Canada have been and continue to be treated. Unaffordable health care, political corruption, violence against women, mountain top removal, poisoned water, poisoned children.



The more I lived and listened in Peru, the more the heartbreaking reality of this world and our role in it was confirmed: injustices around the world are founded upon and perpetuated by the values we of non-indigenous society keep. I'll refer to just one example.

On May 14th, Mr. Harper visited Peru's President Ollanta Humala in Lima to discuss Canadian mining practices in Peru. Their conversation was not in regards to the tremendous rights-abuses of Canada's mining companies there. Rather, Mr. Harper announced our government's allotment of \$53 million of our humanitarian-aid money to Canadian extractive companies working in Peru, one of the most infamous industry's in the world known particularly for its cruelty within rural communities. Canada has tied its foreign policy to the success of its mining companies. The blood is literally on our tax-paying hands. Despite decades of evidence that proves the falsity of this neo-liberal "development" ideology (that is: that development is the degree to which a place is akin to North America's clothes and that poverty is the degree to which a place is not analogous), *we* elected a government that still proclaims this creed. And it is *campesino* after *campesino*, village after village, who suffer its consequences. Mr. Harper's announcement in Lima is merely the latest example of how the ideals *we* elected affect real lives and lands around the world despite the banners of "aid" "development" and "corporate social responsibility" programs and projects claim. Given the events of this past May, there may be no better time than today for Canadians to critically examine the effects our Free Trade agreements and values have on the rest of the world, and ponder the word "hubris."



But, this example is merely one manifestation of a much deeper problem. Government funded rights-violation is not simply a result of one 4 year slip-up of the Canadian majority. Our external ecological crises – from which climate change and global inequity manifest - are symptoms of a deeper spiritual and cultural need. This spiritual absence is the foundation of today's global society. It is due to our physical, spiritual, mental and emotional disconnection from our Earth. Today's story of extinction and poverty, individualism and mining does not call for "responsible resource extraction" and "corporate social responsibility." Today's story calls for something so much more profound. It calls for... a Story.

So I beg us: let us honestly consider this concept of extractivism. Extractivism makes all things commodities. Extractivism makes what was once known as a "relative" a "resource." Extractivism is the undercurrent mindset of colonialism yesterday and today; the antithesis of indigenous culture. Wood, copper, oil, women, children, post-graduates or a river basin, extractivism removes the relationships that give meaning to whatever is being extracted.

But the act of extraction also extracts something from the extractor. To frack the land is to frack the soul, to frack Creation, and to frack the Creator.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson of the Alderville First Nation writes: *"The act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning. My land is seen as a resource. My relatives in the plant and animal worlds are seen as resources. My culture and knowledge is a resource. My body is a resource and my children are a resource because they are the potential to grow, maintain, and uphold the extraction-assimilation system."*

The instability of our climate is by now undeniable. The contamination of land and water all around the world for unfettered resource extraction is proceeding at an extreme scale and pace. The

economic inequality between rich and poor is growing. We have exceeded the safe limit of carbon in the atmosphere. And so we ask, despairingly: “How do we change this? What does my small influence mean in the face of such extreme and global suffering? *Where on Earth do we begin?*”

Perhaps, within our very question, is our answer: On Earth. Begin on Earth. Begin with Earth. Again. And again. Again.



Whether we are of Indigenous, Immigrant or Settler story: we *all* care. We *all* care about our lands, waters, wildlife, communities and future generations.

But if this be so - if so many of us *are* working relentlessly to protect these gifts of life – how can it be that we so often feel alone in our works? Perhaps we are an invisible majority to each other. Perhaps because we do not recognize in each other the commonality we share.

Our works and stories (and opinions!) may be different, but there is a

commonality within our diversities. The Land that binds us and gives us life: this is our commonality! And, if we choose, the Land can be our common-work, common-place and common-story. If we are to live into the kinder future about which we all dream, we must recognize this sacred common we share: the sacred soil that makes our bones and bears our feet.

Today, the temptation may be to penalize, shame, damn, blame, discredit, and jail those who sit in positions of incredible economic and political power today: CEOs of mining companies, presidents and prime ministers whose policies commit millions to suffering and species to extinction. Many are referring to these sisters and brothers as “the big evil” of today. But, this is *othering* and it only increases our alienation. Violence of any kind, no matter its cause, only breeds more violence. We must oppose only the system that causes suffering - of which we are all caught.

Erich Fromm, analyzing pre-WWII German society discovered a people “free-from-belonging to a social order.” Fromm believed that it was predominantly social disconnection that allowed Nazi authority to capture German culture with relatively little inner resistance. What does it mean that today’s non-indigenous society is free-from-belonging to *both* a social- *and* nature-order?

Our crises today cannot be healed by opposing each other. Our crises today are not black and white. Our crises today cannot find peace through war-language, even war-language used by those very groups who strive for peace and justice. We cannot live into a *kinder* future with fear as our motivation and survival as our reason.

We are called to do something more difficult than *fighting* for something. We are called to *love* something - our Earth, and its fullness thereof.



One last voice.

*“Now, we do what we can here with your companies. When the time is right, we protest. When the time is right, we pray. When the time is right, we sing and dance our sorrow. When the time is right, we die for our cause. But we have been dying for 500 years. We, alone, are not enough, even though some of us have survived. We need you to share our cause because it is your people who do not know what they are doing. Bring home the word ‘enough.’ Go home and fill the hearts of those who rape our land with love. Share with them, embrace them, cook for them. Do not hate them. Love them, so that they too may live from this place.”*

### **One final symbol: Land.**

When we think of identity, it is often ethnicity, religion, gender or language which come to mind. However, I offer that *land* is our identity. The way my friends of indigenous story in Peru speak about their lands echoes how my friends of indigenous story in Canada speak about their homelands. This similarity is more than mere coincidence of course - it is of a long-ago shared story between South, Central, and North America, and across the Bering Strait. It is humbling and hope-inspiring that the opposition indigenous peoples all around the world express towards extraction stems from the same ancient story. In spite of 500 years of ceaseless onslaught, this powerful source lives on. This eternal source is love. Love for land. *Carino* for land.

I was high in the Andes among a small village. The community was making the decision: to move off their native lands, or stay and perish with their lands. I cannot imagine making that choice. I was told that the ancestors of this community chose to care for this place thousands of years ago because it was glacier fed. They believed the water source was eternal. But 12 years ago the glacier began to melt and this year, the ice did not return.

When I'd first arrived to this community, I was greeted by the three elder women. Waiting there on the lush green slope, they said to me so kindly, *"Welcome, sister. We are so happy you are here.*



*First, we will show you our garden." And so together, we hiked and hiked. (And hiked.) Up incline and at altitude that humbled even I, a child raised in these mountains.*

As we crested the mountain top... there, down upon the next valley, was a garden so spectacular and so humble. Fruit trees, vegetables, flowers, cacti. Bird song. Breeze. Eden. Then the women turned to me, took my hands in theirs, and said: *"This is our garden. And this is our cemetery. This is where we come to rest, and this is where we live forever."*

Death. New Life. And, in this moment, I began to more deeply understand what *carino* for land might be.

*"Where on Earth do we begin?"* We begin by re-belonging to our particular water- and landscapes. What radically ordinary work. When we begin to know our place, we begin to fall in love with it. When we love it, we begin to know how to care for. When we care for it, we care for *all*.

When the land is our starting place, we create that kinder future. That *Nirvana*, that *Kingdom of God*, that *Moksha*: becomes. We create it not because we understand we *have* to, but because we *love* to. Because we know and love what is.



To conclude, I will share the story of the time I came to know my own mortality intimately. When I came to know that I belong to this land.

I had a very close encounter with death a year and a half ago. A few weeks ago, I was reunited with an old friend whom I hadn't seen since before the incident. I have always appreciated her forthrightness, so it was no surprise when she asked me one evening, "*Carmelle. What's it like to die?*" "*How about I tell you what it is like to wake up,*" I said.

When I woke up in ICU, I was alone. It was dark. First, I felt my legs, feet and arms bound down. As I slowly gained consciousness, I felt in my throat and my lungs a machine breathing for me. I saw another machine, feeding me. Another machine, circulating someone else's blood, now in my body. I have never felt so alone. I had truly never felt worthless before. Waking up was, indeed, the darkest moment I have ever known. But, as the night wore on, slowly, this darkness began to lighten. As the night wore on, something my body knew began to be revealed to me. It was not my rational thought that revealed this

truth to me, rather, it was a truth my whole body held within it. Light began to fill the darkness because I began to hear from my heart, my skin, my blood, my bones, that I belonged. Even on this bed, in this state, I was no more, no less, than I ever was before. I simply belong to this Earth.

Walking out of the hospital many weeks later and ever since, it is as though I have a whole new set of eyes; as though I have woken up in a healing garden of sorts, one which seems oddly familiar yet is so much more beautiful and overwhelming than I ever used to know. The million moments a day, the "ordinary" moments of life, have become exhilarating. Each morning I wake up, I feel my lungs fill to their depths. I am often overcome by this miracle. I know that when I inhale, someone must exhale. And that when I exhale, someone else may inhale. When I see birds flying above me, I am so joyful, so "distracted" by their fluidity, their mystery. I notice the last leaf on a tree, hanging on with such resilience; I stop and watch its strength, reminded of the resiliency of the human spirit, something I witnessed every day in the hospital. When I glance down at my arms and legs and see only smooth, pale skin where they were once swollen blue and bloody from needles and procedures, I am humbled by how miraculous the body is that it can heal. I rejoice in the ability to run through cold air beside water. And when I begin to hear my heart beat, I remember the generous gift of blood a stranger has given me. Even looking through a window has taken on new meaning for I remember what I was able to push myself out of bed and look outside for the first time, I broke down, so moved by the gift of *life in Eden*.

Biological life can be sustained by plastic tubes; but life does not have meaning simply because of one's ability to live. What gave my life meaning was not that I woke up in ICU and was alive. Rather, it was knowing that I *belonged* to the Earth and its fullness thereof. Waking up on that bed in that state, I was no more no less than I ever have been or shall be. We are, and forever shall be, simply and miraculously, children of Earth.

Our starting place, our resting place.