

THE 2011 BECHTEL LECTURES
“There was no one here when we came”:
Overcoming the Settler Problem

Roger Epp

LECTURE ONE
What is the ‘Settler Problem’?

Entangling History

In the cold wintry weeks of January – with these lectures very much in mind – I took part in two solemn, sacred gatherings. One of them was an aboriginal round dance on my home campus. I will have more to say about it later. The other was my uncle’s funeral in Saskatchewan. He was lowered to sleep with his ancestors in the historic country cemetery at Eigenheim, the oldest continuing Mennonite congregation in the Canadian northwest. My father is buried there too. It is sacred ground, our family’s compass point, though most of my generation did not grow up there. *Eigenheim* – literally, a home of one’s own – was the name given to the district in which my paternal ancestors were among the first settlers. They came from Russia after a successful scouting trip. They accepted the geographic order of the dominion government’s square survey grid, more isolating than the old country villages, but they filled its spaces with gathering places and outlandish German names filled with desire: *Frieden, Hoffnung*. My grandfather was among the first babies born in the community. My great-great grandmother, Judith Epp, the family matriarch in North America, was among the first to be buried in the Eigenheim cemetery. A handsome column rising straight above the January snow still marks her grave.

Historian Frances Swyripa, in a new book, *Storied Landscapes*, describes the significance for settlers of such “places for the dead” – her words – “where the certainty that they would rest apart from their ancestors, their bones being literally part of a new land, drove home the finality of their

decision to uproot and relocate.”¹ The European settlers’ cemeteries, their churches, schools, and halls – and the names they gave them – claimed, defined, and “storied” the landscape in familiar terms. But, Swyripa adds, with gentle understatement, that “[n]ewcomers often failed to realize that western landforms had aboriginal names that told stories, explained the universe,” and oriented people’s travel. This displacement of names was not so much a matter of conquest as it was the sense of absence: “In fact, the words settlers used to describe the West – empty, virgin, alien, unpeopled – ignored the indigenous presence as they set about . . . claiming this space as their own.”² This is the point at which Jacqueline Baker begins her novel *The Horseman’s Graves*, set in a German Catholic immigrant community tucked up against Saskatchewan’s Great Sand Hills. Her narrator observes that by the time the settlers arrived, “the ghosts that had once walked the hills had vanished or were, at least, imperceptible to those already burdened by the past of another country.”³ For ghosts, think stories: the formative stories, sometimes unspoken, that tell us who we are, who is “we,” who is not, and what to fear.

From the Eigenheim churchyard it is less than 25 kilometers due north to Fort Carlton, the Hudson’s Bay Company provisioning post on the North Saskatchewan River where in 1876 – only 18 years before the Epp family arrived – Treaty 6 was negotiated and signed in the presence of Cree lodges. It was at Fort Carlton in 1885 that the Cree leader Big Bear, one of the early holdouts, surrendered to the authorities who had had been looking everywhere for him as one of those responsible for the Métis and Cree uprisings. His show trial and imprisonment quickly ensued.

From Eigenheim in 1897, it was possible to hear the cannon fire across the river to the east, directed at the poplar bluff where the alleged Cree cattle thief Almighty Voice was captured to be hanged at Duck Lake – a story, at once, of hunger, daring, and settler fears. From Eigenheim, it was not far to the corner of the closest reserve that had been set aside for the Willow Cree people. But it may have been too far to hear the small dramas that preceded

¹Frances Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2010), 44.

² *Ibid.*, 45.

³ Jacqueline Baker, *The Horseman’s Graves* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007), 1.

the departure of generations of children for the residential school, most likely in Duck Lake.⁴ The Mennonite settlers had troubles enough of their own. In his fine history of the Eigenheim congregation, Walter Klaassen writes that the Cree “were on the fringes of our life and consciousness.” Contact was incidental or else instrumental: peddling firewood, hiring out at harvest-time: “The two communities have lived side by side for a century, but no lasting bonds have been developed between them to this day.”⁵ His observation can be read either as an indictment, softened just enough to fit into a congregational history, or as an expression of regret, or simply as a neutral statement about the kind of near-solitudes so characteristic of newcomer-aboriginal relations in North America.

In my family history, the most dramatic story of side-by-side isolation is one I began to tell in an essay that appeared in its first form in *The Conrad Grebel Review*.⁶ The story began with two grandmothers remembered in the intimacy of long, unbraided hair. The first was the writer Scott Momaday’s grandmother, as he described her in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, his account of the Kiowa of southwestern Oklahoma. The other was my maternal

⁴ St. Michael’s Indian Residential School in Duck Lake (1892-1964) was one of more than 100 operated across Canada between the mid-19th century and the late 1960s as a partnership between the federal government, with its interest in assimilation, and both Catholic and primarily the major Anglo-Protestant denominations, for which the schools were an extension of missionary activity. The last school was closed in 1996. Indian, Métis, and Inuit children were often forcibly removed from their families and home communities, and typically were forbidden from, among other things, speaking aboriginal languages in the schools. Many also experienced physical, emotional, and, in some cases, sexual abuse. In 1998 the federal government made its first formal statement of regret and “offer of reconciliation,” including compensation, which a successor government in its 2008 apology (see fn. 12 below) reinforced in much more precise language. Church bodies have also issued various apologies in recent years. Among standard histories see J. R. Miller, *Shingwauk’s Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1996); John Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System* (Winnipeg: Univ. of Manitoba Press, 1999); and Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1988).

⁵ Walter Klaassen, *The Days of Our Years: A History of the Eigenheim Mennonite Church Community, 1892-1992* (Rosthern, SK: Eigenheim Mennonite Church, 1992), 28.

⁶ “Oklahoma: Meditations on Home and Homelessness,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 16. no. 1 (Winter 1998): 61-69. An expanded version is found in my *We Are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays* (Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta Press, 2008).

grandmother as I remembered her, missing Oklahoma, the place she had been a girl, the place she and her family and her future husband left in 1918 and 1919 for Canada, for Eigenheim, in the face of war and the local nativism unleashed under its respectable cover against German-speaking pacifists, native Americans, socialists, and others. My family had settled in Washita County, if “settled” is the right word for a quarter-century, in the land rush that followed the redistribution of tribal lands in the name of civilization, progress, and individual property. Here my great-grandfather Jacob Klaassen came with his brother, lived with his livestock in a sod shack, and built the impressive farm about which he had dreamed in the watermelon fields of southern Russia. Here he grieved a wife, an infant daughter, a son crushed beneath the loaded grain wagon he was driving – all of them buried in the country cemetery of the Herold Mennonite Church, where he was also an ordained preacher. Here he grieved, not least, to leave for Canada, to join his sons but to live thereafter as a stranger.

This family story is set in the same small part of the world into which the Cheyenne, like the Kiowa, had been compressed after a series of post-treaty brutalities. They included the massacre at Sand Creek inflicted by Colonel Chivington’s Colorado Volunteers in 1864 and then the surprise attack in 1868 by General Custer’s Seventh Cavalry along the banks of the Washita River, where the Cheyenne peace chief who had received President Lincoln’s flag and medal was among those killed. I did not know, however, how small a world it was – or why I couldn’t let go of these parallel stories of displacement – until our family drove to southwestern Oklahoma one summer. This was scarcely a mainstream vacation destination. It was in the county museum in Cordell, north of the courthouse where a hostile judge routinely sent Mennonite boys to military prison – my grandfather’s cousin, indeed, was shipped home dead from Fort Leavenworth, wearing the uniform he had refused in life – that I found a county map dated 1913. It was full of surprises. Within two or three miles of the river, the map is a checkerboard of alternating Mennonite and Cheyenne landowners. Among the latter, there was also a familiar name. White Buffalo Woman was a girl in 1868 when the Seventh Cavalry attacked the Cheyenne camp. Her description is an important part of the oral history of that event. In 1913 – though I still cannot say beyond doubt it is the same person – White Buffalo Woman is

listed as the owner of two 80-acre blocks of land. One runs alongside the river. The other borders my great-grandfather’s farm.

That discovery gave new clarity to the understanding that the story of my family in North America could not, and should never, be disentangled from that of the Cheyenne or the Cree. I am a product of Indian policy on both sides of the 49th parallel. I am a treaty person. Like my grandparents and parents, I have lived most of my life on Treaty 6 land in Saskatchewan and Alberta. For reasons I cannot really explain, it has been given to me to ask what it means to live where I do as the descendant of settlers, what sort of inheritance and obligation, what sort of thinking and acting, it entails.

The Settler Problem

In these lectures, I want to do that thinking in a way that is mindful of their location and the very contemporary local conflicts over land and treaties along the Grand River in Ontario. In approaching this subject, it is necessary to be tentative but not timid. Perhaps “humble” is a better word than “tentative.” For one thing, I am out of place in southern Ontario. I know only what I have read about Caledonia, the Haldimand Tract, the two-row wampum.⁷ For another, I am acutely aware that the very mention of those words – or other words like “aboriginal,” “treaty,” “land claims” – will likely evoke weariness or anger or guilt in any Canadian audience.⁸ Why can’t we

⁷ In 1784 Governor-General Frederick Haldimand, representing the Crown, issued a proclamation granting land along the Grand River for the settlement of Haudenosaunee/Six Nations people following the American Revolution, in which they had fought alongside the British. While the legal status of the proclamation and subsequent land transactions remains a matter of contention, and the subject of numerous claims, large portions of the tract have been opened to non-Six Nations settlement – including Mennonite settlement – starting at the end of the 18th century. The most recent flashpoint has been a housing development in the community of Caledonia that prompted an occupation and eventually compensation paid from the provincial government to homeowners. One scholarly historical account from a Mennonite perspective is E. Reginald Good, “Lost Inheritance: Alienation of Six Nations Land in Upper Canada, 1784-1805,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 92-102.

The two-row wampum is a traditional purple-and-white beaded belt rooted in the Haudenosaunee diplomatic protocols that Europeans once had to learn in order to conduct relations with an important political federation. The belt signifies a relationship based on principles of friendship, peace, and respect between peoples who are distinct – hence the two rows – yet woven together by agreement.

⁸ For a sense of non-aboriginal impatience around the Caledonia situation, see journalist

just put the past behind us? Why can't we just all be Canadians? It is hard to find a fresh approach to the subject that encourages rather than polarizes or paralyzes its audience.

So it is necessary for me to begin personally, by locating myself and my inquiry in terms of particular places and stories; it is important not to tell stories that are not mine to tell. Above all, I do not want to participate in the patronizing talk that has offered various solutions to what Duncan Campbell Scott, the poet-bureaucrat who was Canada's Deputy Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs in 1920, famously called the "Indian problem."⁹ My interests lie instead in what I have called the "settler problem" and in the complementary claim – one I have borrowed for a book title – that in this country we are all "treaty people."¹⁰ The latter phrase has become familiar, if still provocative, in parts of the prairies. I first heard it in a classroom 15 years ago from a middle-aged aboriginal woman. Like it or not, she said, we are all treaty people. She meant it as something other than a statement of solidarity. Rather, it is the right we exercise by living where we do. It is the history in which we are entangled, though not, of course, in the same way or with the same need to remember it.

Christie Blatchford's *Helpless: Caledonia's Nightmare of Fear and Anarchy, and How the Law Failed All of Us* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2010). Newspaper excerpts and promotional appearances by the author in late 2010 had served to rekindle and polarize public discussion in the months prior to these Bechtel Lectures.

⁹ See Brian Titley, *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1986).

¹⁰ While my publisher and I have a certain investment in this phrase as a book title, I am aware that it is not free of contention in some aboriginal circles. Taken literally, it may be perceived as excluding Métis peoples, who generally were denied treaty and therefore fall outside the relationship it implies. Additionally, some First Nations elders insist their treaty relationship is with the Crown, not their settler neighbors. Both concerns are a reminder of the limits of language. But note that historian J. R. Miller has made the case that we must all recognize ourselves as treaty people – as participants in and beneficiaries of treaties – in the conclusion of his *Compact, Contract, Covenant: Aboriginal Treaty-Making in Canada* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2009), 306, 309. The same phrase is used to promote the work of the Office of the Treaty Commissioner in Saskatchewan, established by agreement between the Government of Canada and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations to work independently to advance land entitlement agreements and public education. See, e.g., the Office's video, accessed on June 12, 2011 at www.otc.ca/WE_ARE_ALL_TREATY_PEOPLE/.

If we are all treaty people, what is my work, our work, to do? In part, I have proposed, it is to reverse Duncan Campbell Scott’s powerful act of verbal displacement and ask: What is the settler problem? In that inquiry, in other words, we become the subject under scrutiny. The question is no longer about what “they” want – land, recognition, compensation – and therefore what “we” can live with. Instead, it is about what Taiaiake Alfred calls the “colonial mentality, moral indifference and historical ignorance”¹¹ that stand in the way of a different relationship. It is about the stories we tell ourselves. It is about the fears and emotions so close to the surface.

In a new book, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Paulette Regan takes up the same problem. She writes: “The singular focus on the Other blinds us from seeing how settler history, myth and identity have shaped and continue to shape our attitudes in highly problematic ways. It prevents us from acknowledging our need to decolonize.”¹² Regan has served as Director of Research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which was established by the courts as part of the settlement in a class-action lawsuit brought by residential-school survivors and supporting groups.¹³ It is safe to say the Commission is unknown to most Canadians. Its work in hearing and archiving the stories of residential school survivors may have gained profile at least momentarily as a result of Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s formal apology in 2008 for the abuses suffered and perpetrated. That apology was itself surprisingly frank and unequivocal. Judging from the reactions of aboriginal people, it was received for the most part as genuine and powerful. It said that the burden of what survivors had experienced – above all, the state-sponsored, church-delivered attempt to strip peoples of their languages and cultures by taking their children out of their communities – needed to be borne by the Government and the country, and the attitudes that inspired the residential school system had “no place” in contemporary Canada.¹⁴

¹¹ Taiaiake Alfred, Foreword, in Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 2010), x.

¹² Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 11.

¹³ For information on the Commission, see www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3.

¹⁴ Government of Canada, “Statement of Apology – to former students of Indian Residential Schools,” June 11, 2008. www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ai/rqpi/apo/sig-eng.pdf.

Regan's point, though, is that the apology did little to "transform the settler," or to reverse the "rush to put the past behind." She wonders why Canadians had known so little of this history – or had "selectively forgotten it" – even while they lived alongside of its survivors, and therefore whether they can consider the apology as a genuine opening to "rethink our past and its implications for our present and future relations."¹⁵

The settler problem in this formulation shows itself as what another scholar has called a "longing for oblivion – for the luxury of forgetting . . . for the absolution of amnesia."¹⁶ All this is true, I think, and the consequence is that our own past is not fully available to us. We are afraid of it, or afraid of the contention it invites. But so far we have not gone far enough in our inquiry, and we are unlikely to have moved those whose reflex is to resist. It is natural enough that outcomes should be framed in terms of settlements and resolution when so much of the aboriginal-settler relationship is now, often by political default, mediated by the courts. Arguably, the residential school story has elicited a certain degree of empathy among Canadians – enough for the current government to have made the apology it did. Canadians could understand something of the harm inflicted, even while worrying about how much financial compensation would follow.

Land and land claims, however, are a different matter altogether. Here the longing for closure, the willful amnesia, is embedded more profoundly in the mythology and legal fiction of *terra nullius* – no one's land – whose grip on the colonial imagination has been renewed as opportunity in every settler generation. If anything, that grip has tightened with the passage of time and the realities on the ground. It is unthinkable, threateningly so, that the status of land ceded once and for all should be placed in doubt by peoples thought to have been safely quarantined and destined for obsolescence. There is no issue more volatile in this country. Why?¹⁷

"In the beginning," wrote the 17th-century English philosopher John Locke, "all the world was America."¹⁸ In this crude political creation myth, the

¹⁵ Regan, *Unsettling the Settler*, quotations at 42, 6.

¹⁶ Keavy Martin, "Truth, Reconciliation, and Amnesia: Porcupines and China Dolls and the Canadian Conscience," *English Studies in Canada* 35 (March 2009): 61.

¹⁷ The next several paragraphs offer a condensed version of the argument made in the title essay of *We Are All Treaty People*, esp. 127-35.

¹⁸ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*. 1690. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), ch. V, para. 49.

case for limited government and private property rested on a social contract that had delivered some of our ancestors from a state of nature that was either barbaric, insecure, or merely inconvenient because it left us to enforce our own justice. Locke’s America signified the world before government and property, though it bore little resemblance to reality. It was a philosopher’s thought experiment, a singular developmental anthropology that needed a primitive state against which to make its point. In that developmental story, the justification for property was efficient use – that is, cultivation – so that God’s creation, given in common, could meet human need most abundantly through the work of appropriation from nature and then trade.

There is a direct line to trace from this state-of-nature story to the arguments made in 18th-century international law: namely, that the “wandering tribes” who “roamed” North America’s “vast tracts of land” – more than they could ever occupy or “use” – had no right to keep it to themselves. They could be confined legally to smaller tracts.¹⁹ Versions of this intellectual argument are still made. Professor Tom Flanagan, for example, has claimed that the march of civilization is marked by two characteristics: first, the rule of organized states over stateless societies and, second, the displacement of hunter-gatherers by cultivators. The last act of this great civilizational drama, as he puts it, is “the spread of agriculture around the world.”²⁰ The fact is that the first planters in the Americas, if we accept this hierarchy – and I should add that western ranchers never have – were not Europeans. Not even close. And on this St. Patrick’s Day we might note that it was the indigenous peoples of the Andes, not the Irish, who gave us the potato in multiple varieties through the application of practical knowledge.²¹

The settler mythology, however, is more powerful and ideologically attractive than any corrections proposed by historians. For it has continued to offer something more profound: a “sacrament of innocence,”²² a “new world,”

¹⁹ Emmerich de Vattel, *The Law of Nations, or the Principles of Natural Law*, 1758. Trans. Charles Fenwick (New York: Oceana Publications, repr. 1964), 7, 81, 207-09.

²⁰ Thomas Flanagan, *First Nations, Second Thoughts* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 2000), 39.

²¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), esp. ch. 9.

²² Sheldon Wolin is particularly insightful on the attraction of social contract theory – memoryless, dehistoricized – as it has been shaped in the North American experience. See

a fresh start, a clean slate, and a justification of hard work. The mythology is much the same in Canada, in South Africa, in Israel – wherever settler people say, “There was nothing here when we came, and we made something of it.”²³ *Terra nullius*. Empty land. Vacant, uncultivated, unproductive. Somehow lacking or incomplete. Frances Kaye has made the provocative point that homestead settlers in the American and Canadian west saw the land as “deficient” and “felt entitled to reclaim [it] from deficiency.”²⁴

An important theological dimension is common to the settler mythology as well. While the Government of Canada may have recruited many thousands of immigrants to the prairie West for the material purpose of export grain production, accommodating to that end the desire for ethnic-religious bloc settlements, versions of the idea of “new Jerusalem” were quickly projected onto the region by many of those communities: “covenant people establishing the Kingdom of God in virgin country.”²⁵ The biblical story of chosen-ness, exile, and deliverance has been ready to hand in European settler societies. The peoples of God do not identify with, or play the part of, the foot soldiers of Assyrian or Babylonian colonization. They are those who take possession of what is promised or restored to them. The Mennonite story from the 16th century forward is one of migrant peoples who themselves did not fit easily into the religious and geopolitical imperatives of early modern Europe. For all that, their resettlement often followed closely and unproblematically on another people’s dispossession. In North America, however, they did not necessarily need to be outsiders in the project of cultivation so long as the land and its productivity were to be wrested not from the nobility but, or so it seemed, only from nature.²⁶

his *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), esp. chs. 2 and 8.

²³ Trevor Herriot, *Grass, Sky, Song: Promise and Peril in the World of Grassland Birds* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2009), 226. Herriot’s point is that the story that there was no one here when we came and we made something of it involves a lingering, parallel disrespect of aboriginal peoples and of the land itself.

²⁴ Frances W. Kaye, *Goodlands: A Meditation and History on the Great Plains* (Edmonton: Athabasca Univ. Press, 2011), 5.

²⁵ See, e.g., B. G. Smillie, ed., *Visions of the New Jerusalem: Religious Settlement on the Prairies* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1983); quotation from the editor’s introduction, 2.

²⁶ See also the essay, “Statues of Liberty: The Political Tradition of the Producer,” in *We Are All Treaty People*, esp. 78-80.

On the Sunday morning that our family worshiped in the Herold Mennonite Church in Washita County, Oklahoma, beside the country cemetery where my great-grandmother lies, the preacher’s text was the promise in the book of Joshua that the land would be given to those delivered from oppression in Egypt. There was no one here when we came, and by hard work we made something of it. That’s what Canadian thinker George Grant called “the primal spirit of North America.”²⁷ That’s the settler problem.

For all its power, though, the simple mythology of emptiness and entitlement is confounded by the reality that aboriginal peoples are still here. It must continue to obscure the complex entanglements of history as they are threaded through places and families,²⁸ and to discount the small acts of cooperation and coexistence that happened wherever real settler and aboriginal communities lived side-by-side. Correspondingly, the retrieval of those entanglements and small acts is itself a step beyond the settler problem. They make it possible to imagine a different reconciliation than mere forgetting.

It may help you to know, for example, that the young Almighty Voice not only risked his life to cross the South Saskatchewan River at spring breakup to bring food to the desperately poor Mennonite Emilia Wieler and her children, living on a homestead well beyond the circle of her “own kind,” but also that she fed him, a fugitive, when he stopped at her cabin.²⁹ It may help to remember similar acts of reciprocity along the Grand River in Upper Canada (Ontario) between Six Nations people and Mennonites, each displaced there by war. And it may help to know, in shifting from the

²⁷ George Grant, *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969).

²⁸ Among the best of entangling personal histories is Vernon Wishart’s *What Lies Behind the Picture? A Personal Journey into Cree Ancestry* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2006). Wishart, a retired United Church minister, chronicles the “family secret” of his Cree lineage that came to light only after his father’s death. I have also been privileged to receive and read a powerful, entangling work of creative non-fiction by Naomi McIlwraith, “*Nitohta anohc. Nākatohke. Now Listen. Listen Hard: A Creative Study of Nehiyawewin, the Plains Cree Language, and the Reasons for its Preservation*” (M.A. thesis, Department of English and Film Studies, Univ. of Alberta, 2007).

²⁹ This fascinating story is told in two parts by Carl A. Krause, “A Woman of Stamina and Courage,” and “Emilia Wieler and Almighty Voice,” *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian*, April 2007, 21-24; July 2007, 15-17.

historical to the contemporary, how unremarked it was that on that bitterly cold morning at the Eigenheim cemetery, three of the grandsons who carried my uncle's coffin from the hearse to the grave were aboriginal.

“There was no one here when we came”: Overcoming the Settler Problem

Roger Epp

LECTURE TWO The Stories We Tell Ourselves: A Practical Hermeneutic of Neighborliness

Uncommon Ground

The second solemn, sacred gathering in which I participated in January 2011 was a round dance, the first ever at my small university campus on Treaty 6 land in Alberta. It was part of our centennial celebrations. The previous fall I had presented tobacco to an elder, a former student of mine, to ask whether he would oversee the ceremonies and protocols. He agreed. A stickman was selected – two, in fact – to orchestrate the dancing. Word went out to singers and drummers across the prairies. Our food services staff agreed to make bison stew, biscuits, and a blueberry dessert for an indeterminate number of people. Donations were collected for the “giveaway” dance – one of those recklessly generous, redistributive social practices, like the potlatch, that would have elicited bureaucratic and missionary disapproval at another time in history. The eagle feathers were ordered through official channels for a special part of the evening.

Late on the Saturday afternoon of the dance, the fire suppression systems were turned off in the building as negotiated, and a smudge-fire was lit in the gymnasium. The elder took charge. He said a blessing, took the pipe, and passed it around a circle that included university leaders, the mayor, the local member of the legislative assembly, some staff and students – aboriginal and not – as well as several residents from the federal corrections healing center located on the First Nation where the elder is responsible for cultural programming. By the elder’s preference, only men were allowed in the pipe circle. When the pipe had gone around, it was time for the feast. Hundreds lined up to eat.

Inside the building, the smell of sweetgrass began to permeate. Outside, volunteers watched the fire built partly to warm the skins of the

drums. And the people came: from up the street, from other campuses of the university, from communities in Alberta and Saskatchewan. The singer Susan Aglukark, who has become an important mentor to our students, was there. She was one of two Inuit present. The other was a graduate returned from Iqualuit, capital of the territory of Nunavut, in ceremonial sealskin skirt, vest, and boots. Because this was a centennial year, we had made a special invitation to aboriginal alumni to return for the round dance. We had not kept such a list before. It turned out to be surprisingly long, reaching back to the 1950s.

At one point in the evening, the dancing stopped and several elders came on stage as planned. I called forward by name those who had earned degrees in the decades before we adopted the new University of Alberta practice of having an elder present an eagle feather to each aboriginal graduate at convocation. The feather honors not just the achievement of a degree but the hard work of living in two cultures to achieve it. The powerful emotions in the faces and bodies of those who walked across the stage to receive their feathers told the truth of that hard work. I will never forget it. And then the recipients formed a semi-circle on the floor, the elders said a blessing, an honor song was sung, and the dancing resumed. By our best estimates 1,000 people came together that night – young and old, aboriginal and non-aboriginal. There were some 60 singers and drummers, an impressive measure. At midnight they stopped for the customary bologna sandwiches. At 2 a.m., the gym emptied, the singers lined up for their payment, and an efficient clean-up crew went to work.

For that long night our campus had become what literary theorist Daniel Coleman calls *uncommon ground*. Not common ground. Not middle ground. Uncomfortable, risky, unsettling, transformative ground. For Coleman, uncommon ground is the space and the metaphorical space on which the familiar is disrupted and participants must pay close attention; we cannot simply colonize or “import the signs of the Other into our existing frameworks in order to find value in them.”¹ In other words, uncommon

¹ I am indebted to Daniel Coleman, professor of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University, for this phrase and the model of his own “placed” scholarship in relation to what he calls “two-row consciousness.” His idea of uncommon ground is elaborated in a manuscript, “Beyond the Book: Reading as Public Intellectual Activity,” written for a collection of essays

ground disorients and transforms us. It calls for new words to describe what we have come to know.²

A Practical Hermeneutic of Neighborliness

In these lectures I am examining the settler problem – the sense of entitlement, indifference, and ignorance rooted in the mythology that there was no one here when we came – that is still powerfully at work in the resentment and guilt attending the reality that the aboriginal peoples are still here with fresh cultural confidence and historically-grounded claims to press. This is the dangerous tendency in all the important talk of reconciliation and apology: namely, that even honest admissions are about the desire for closure, not the hope of relationship.

But I have not come here to stand on a prophetic soapbox. I will not speak in the idioms of theology or even social justice – the latter with its impatience to put the world right. Rather, I want to encourage those of you who live alongside the Grand River to be seized by the practical hermeneutic imperatives of doing so.

What do I mean by this? For a start, it is probably necessary to liberate hermeneutics from its usual application to texts in theology and philosophy. A practical hermeneutic imperative arises from the following conditions: first, the recognition of enduring differences; second, the unavoidability of face-to-face encounters between those who represent that difference; and third, the need to understand them – not defeat or dismiss them – in order to live well in a particular place. In other words, the hermeneutic imperative is intensely local. Like the work of apology and reconciliation, it cannot be delegated as a matter of proxy; there is only so much that national political leaders can do. It is on a more local scale – often where the tensions and

in development under the title *The Public Intellectual and the Culture of Hope*, eds. Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam. See also his “Imposing subCitizenship: Canadian White Civility and the Two-Row Wampum of the Six Nations,” in *Narratives of Citizenship: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples Unsettle the Nation-State*, Aloys N.M. Fleischmann, ed. (Edmonton: Univ. of Alberta, 2011).

² This point is not so different from the one Charles Taylor once made against an earlier generation of social scientists in “Understanding and Ethnocentricity,” reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2: *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985).

risks are much higher – that the work of imagining an uncommon space is also most real, most urgent, and most meaningfully undertaken. At the local level, too, platitudes and romanticized caricatures frozen in time cannot be sustained for long in the face of everyday life.

The hermeneutic imperative starts with honest human encounters, not with policy or justice or high drama. That is my ordering. The first step outside the settler mythology is to be a neighbor, not an advocate. It is to build relationships, not to propose a solution. You don't enter into relationships to fix a problem or find a solution; you do so because you share living space, because you might learn things and enjoy someone's company. Put another way, it is better to know aboriginal people than to know about them.³ Where such relationships exist, the courage to stand alongside people will come when it is needed.

Another prairie example will illustrate what I mean. Stoney Knoll is the high point in a triangular tract of land – close to 80 square kilometers – situated along the North Saskatchewan River, west of the village of Laird and the first Mennonite settlements at Eigenheim and Tiefengrund. The land had been set aside under the terms of Treaty 6 as Young Chippewyan Reserve No. 107, though the band, in its adaptation to a post-buffalo economy and a leadership succession, did not take up continuous residence there.⁴ In 1897 the federal government took back the land without the consent required in

³ I owe this point to a lovely essay in creative non-fiction sent to me by an undergraduate student from another campus and a community where racial tensions are often raw. He had read my essay "We Are All Treaty People." He wrote about his clandestine Grade 6 visits after school to the reserve.

⁴ I am grateful to researcher Leonard Doell at MCC Saskatchewan for materials relating to the Young Chippewyan claim and the 2006 gathering at Stoney Knoll. His own involvement dates back at least to the 1980s. See "Young Chippewyan Indian Reserve No. 107 and Mennonite Farmers in Saskatchewan," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 165-67; and, earlier, "Call to support Indian land claims in Saskatchewan," *Mennonite Reporter*, January 7, 1985. The gathering is documented in a short video produced as part of MCC Canada's Indigenous Works project, "A Mennonite Reserve . . . Within an Aboriginal Reserve," accessed on May 23, 2011 at <http://mythperceptions.ca/more%20myths/mennonite_reserve.html>. The regional weekly newspaper also provided extensive, positive coverage at the time. See Rod Andrews, "Historic gathering at Stoney Knoll leads to signing of Declaration of Harmony and Justice," *Saskatchewan Valley News* August 30, 2006, 1; and "'We are all Treaty People,'" 2. Note that the precise place reference varies. Stoney Knoll is sometimes known as Stoney Hill or Stony Hill.

the Indian Act, and made it available instead to Mennonite and then German Lutheran immigrant homesteaders. Members of the Young Chippewayan band were relegated to the status of squatters in other communities. Their dispossession, however, was a persistent source of grievance. In the 1970s, the intention to reclaim the land was communicated in threatening tones to local residents, sometimes by young Cree who drove onto farmyards. Provincial First Nations leaders began to raise the matter of “stolen” land with the federal Minister of Indian Affairs. The response was fear and disbelief. There was no one here when our ancestors came; this was empty land, and we made something of it.

I do not know the full story of the next 30 years. For our purposes, though, it came to a decisive point – not an end, not an attempt at closure – on August 22, 2006, 130 years to the day after the signing of Treaty 6 downstream at Fort Carlton, when settler and Cree descendants gathered on Stoney Knoll for a pipe ceremony, a feast, and the signing of a Declaration of Harmony and Justice. *We are all treaty people*, they said. Together, they committed to work so that the Young Chippewayans’ claim for a land base could be resolved and future generations could live in peace, justice, and sufficiency for all. That is, they made uncommon ground – all those who gathered on the hill, erected the teepee, prepared the food, smoked the pipe, eased nervousness with gentle humor, told stories, exchanged gifts, and gave thanks to the Creator. In the eloquent words of one participant:

We settlers are unsettled on our own land. We don’t know the language. We don’t know the liturgy. But we recognize the love, the respect for land. . . . The prayers, the drums, the singing, carry us into the day. Two communities . . . step over risk and embrace stories, losses, strength and dreams. . . . Hope is in the hearts and hands of those who chose to set their chairs on this hill on this day.⁵

Another participant, Barb Froese, a pastor who also farmed with her husband at the base of the hill, presented a Mennonite Central Committee quilt to the Young Chippewayan chief and his wife. In doing so, she said: “Many hands gathered pieces to make this blanket. In the same way, many

⁵ Unpublished reflections by participant Eileen Klaassen Hamm, August 29, 2006.

hands prepared and gathered the pieces for this day.” On the hill, she reflected later, “we sewed all those pieces together.”⁶ In the gathering’s aftermath, Mennonites continue to be involved in raising funds for genealogical research to help establish the validity and scope of the Young Chippewayan claim.⁷

Paulette Regan describes an equally powerful feast in northern British Columbia. It was organized by the Gitksan First Nation as an occasion for United Church of Canada leaders to make a public apology for abuses at a residential school operated under its authority and for school survivors to come home and be reinstated formally as members of the community. She writes: “The Hazelton feast hall in Gitksan territory is a long way from the urban office towers where we can safely feel distanced from the victims of our benevolent peacemaking. Shifting from denial to recognition requires engaging history authentically. . . . The challenge for settlers is to listen attentively, reflectively, and with humility when we are invited into these spaces.”⁸

Regan’s account begins to name the attributes, the points of openness and awareness, that are demanded by a practical hermeneutic imperative of settler-aboriginal neighborliness. From the stories recollected above, I would add several others:

- acceptance of the obligations attached to proximity and place, of the gift of living where the need for reconciliation is a meaningful, everyday reality;
- willingness to respond positively to an invitation and to the experience of reciprocity without being the ones to offer it;
- openness to being unsettled, to the risks and uncertainties of a direct encounter;

⁶ Barb Froese, “Reflections on Stony Hill Celebration,” materials collected for the Mennonite Central Committee Saskatchewan meetings, November 4, 2006.

⁷ First Nations and settler communities gathered again on the treaty anniversary in August 2011 to renew their commitment to a just outcome for the band. Chief Ben Weenie told the gathering that “the struggle is not with the settlers but with [the Department of] Aboriginal Affairs in Ottawa who legislated us out of existence.” See Rod Andrews, “Laird community, Young Chippewayan band mark 135th anniversary of Treaty 6,” *Saskatchewan Valley News*, September 1, 2011, 1, 5.

⁸ Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 211.

- respect for cultural protocols and sacred spaces, beginning with one's own;
- refusal to accept that the past is past, that the "modern" world is fixed on a certain path, and especially that aboriginal cultures are so absolutely, essentially, and unalterably incommensurate that there is no real hope of a decolonized understanding on the part of settlers;
- willingness to face up to our history, told differently, to confound the mythology that there was no one here when we came, to wonder who the "we" is, to tell entangled stories about families and regions and the entire country.

Inside this practical hermeneutic imperative, it matters what stories we choose to tell. What if, for example, we choose to understand Canada as having been founded, as James Tully suggests, "on an act of sharing that is almost unimaginable in its generosity"?⁹ What if along the Grand River you choose to make the two-row wampum a foundational text and Six Nations elders its primary interpreters, assuming that it can inform how you live entangled lives as neighbors in this watershed?¹⁰

One more prairie story deserves mention in relation to the hermeneutic imperative, though it is about a meeting of two people, not side-by-side communities. In the opening pages of the book *Stolen Life*, the reader is told how a Cree woman, Yvonne Johnson, an inmate at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario who was convicted of first-degree murder, will come to write her story with Rudy Wiebe, a Mennonite man, a settler, a writer, whose novel about her great-great-grandfather Big Bear she had read with reluctance. What could a stranger understand? Wiebe's novel, however, had "slapped her in the face." She wanted to know: "How is it that you came to know as much as you do? What was the force behind you? Who are

⁹ James Tully, "The Negotiation of Reconciliation," in *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, vol. 1: *Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 244.

¹⁰ Once published, Coleman's essay, "Beyond the Book," will be richly suggestive in regard to its call to read the two-row wampum.

you?”¹¹ She had taken the initiative to contact him. He chose to respond, not shirking the responsibility of the words he had sent into the world. She wrote feverishly. She trusted him with her audiotapes and her annotations on court transcripts. “Our past,” she wrote to him from prison, “has given each of us a gift of understanding.”¹²

I want to be careful not to say that Mennonites as such have any self-appointed special role when it comes to the work of understanding and reconciliation. The story of Stoney Knoll is not the norm; it took exceptional leadership and relationships built over time. Nor is the MCC Ontario presence at Caledonia or at Ipperwash, site of a long-standing land dispute and the 1995 police shooting of a Chippewa protest leader,¹³ widely appreciated in member churches. But there is work to do in most of the places in Canada where Mennonites have settled and now live. We have been given the gift of proximity, of being in the way; and we can choose to accept it. And we do possess resources that can serve as bridges to understanding.

Those of us who are attentive to our own stories of sorrow, displacement, and loss; those of us whose ancestors were once outsiders in this country, linguistically, culturally, and politically, and indeed were once attracted to it because it promised room for difference; those of us who are still rooted in real places with complex, layered, entangled histories; those of us who know the meaning of land, the way it shapes identities, the ethos of stewardship it requires; those of us who can treat understanding as a gift when it is hardest

¹¹ Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1998), 8-9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ The final report of the provincial inquiry into the police shooting conducted by Judge Sidney Linden can be found at www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/inquiries/ipperwash/mandate/index.html. The report, released in 2007, found that the provincial leadership of the day viewed the occupation as a “law enforcement issue,” not as an action to be understood in the context of history and an ongoing land claim, and that in its “racist comments” and desire for a swift end it created a climate that led to the shooting. In his statement at the public release of the report, accessible at the same website, Judge Linden also noted the Caledonia conflict: “The single biggest source of frustration, distrust, and ill-feeling among aboriginal people in Ontario is our failure to deal in a just and expeditious way with breaches of treaty and other legal obligations to First Nations. If the Governments of Ontario and Canada want to avoid future confrontations they will have to deal with land and treaty claims effectively and fairly.”

to achieve; those of us who are capable of giving and receiving hospitality, beginning with food; those of us who live with humility and reverence – which is to say, a large number in total, with plenty of room for more conservative members too – we have work to do. Or better to say that the work will find us. The uncommon ground into which we are invited will surprise us. And we will be *encouraged* to let go, to imagine and participate in something new – without certainty of the outcome.¹⁴

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THE BECHTEL LECTURES

The Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies were established at Conrad Grebel University College in 2000, through the generosity of Lester Bechtel, a devoted churchman with an active interest in Mennonite history. His dream was to make the academic world of research and study accessible to a broader constituency, and to build bridges of understanding between the academy and the church. The lecture series provides a forum through which the core meaning and values of the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith and heritage can be communicated to a diverse audience, and be kept relevant and connected to today's rapidly changing world. Held annually and open to the public, the Bechtel lectures provide an opportunity for representatives of various disciplines and professions to explore topics reflecting the breadth and depth of Mennonite history, identity, faith, and culture. Lecturers have included Terry Martin, Stanley Hauerwas, Rudy Wiebe, Nancy Heisey, Fernando Enns, James Urry, Sandra Birdsell, Alfred Neufeld, Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, and Ernst Hamm.

¹⁴ I have been helped to think about political courage and encouragement in new ways by Darin Barney. His related article, "Eat Your Vegetables: Courage and the Possibility of Politics," is found in the online journal *Theory and Event* 14, no. 2 (2011).