

Why Are We Here? A Meditation on Canada

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The story is told of the encounter between a Tsimshian chief and one of the first Europeans who had arrived on the west coast, in the area now known as British Columbia.

“Why are you here?” asked the chief.

We have no report about the response of the European. We do know the question is with us still, if we are still, if we pay attention. The question winds its way through the centuries and up through the layers of soil and self and spirit.

The question about the meaning and purpose of life is as ancient as it is always new. It is deeply personal and worthy of life long, longer than life, consideration. It is also a question that shapes cultures, empires and nations. As the 150th anniversary of Canada approaches, the question of the Tsimshian chief now addresses us as a country. For we are all here and now, indigenous peoples, settlers and newcomers. And why are we here in this place and at this time? What is the meaning of the Catholic Health Alliance – in this time and in this place?

The question is stunning in its simplicity. It must be taken to heart and mind and lived alongside. It invites a more meditative way. Thus, the following reflections include, but are not limited by, the insights of artists, political and economic analysis and historical research. Most importantly, they reflect the perspective of newcomers to this country, not only the newborn children but also immigrants and refugees. I have listened to them. Who you listen to affects what you hear. Everything changes when you hear the echoes of the past together with the voices of the future.

Northern Lakes and an Urban Street

For the last twenty five years I have lived with refugees, most of them children. They have become the eyes of my eyes and the ears of my ears. Through their eyes I have seen a country that is better than I thought, worse than I knew. Through their ears I have heard the clear bell question of the Tsimshian chief. I have listened and watched in the Emergency rooms of Catholic hospitals, in the obstetrics wards and the ICUs.

Let me tell you two stories. One takes place by a northern lake and the other on an urban street.

In the summer, the refugees I live with discover that the direction of hope lies north. This is the time when we, a group of fifty refugees and their Canadian

friends, go for a weeklong vacation in the lakes and forests of Manitoulin Island. The refugee campers are from all over the world, from a wide variety of cultures and countries.

During the months preceding this trip, their first experiences of Canada have taken place in a large metropolitan city where they feel somewhat at home. They will have studied English and learned something about the history, culture and political structure of Canada. This they memorize dutifully, carefully.

However, the burden of this obligatory past begins to lighten as we drive north in an old school bus and a caravan of cars, past the suburbs and smaller towns and beyond cottage country until we reach the road to Turtle Island. For the next week these newcomers “discover Canada” and they will begin to understand why they, and we, are here.

I recall the day when we were out on a hike to a rugged trail overlooking the North Channel of Georgia Bay. One of the older men ran up to the top of the promontory and raised his hands to the sky shouting “Canada I love you. I will always love you.” Later that afternoon, the kids discovered a large rock leaning out high over a small, cool, spring fed lake. They raced up the slope to the rock, glistening, screaming with glee, and then they jumped off, toes pointing down and wings outspread, turning towards the land as they flew, saluting with their right

hand to some unseen flag, to their country, to their place. That was the day they became Canadians.

For the past twenty five summers, I have wondered why this experience of the north seemed so important to these newcomers, most of who had lived in large urban centres in other countries.

In the mind of my heart an insight has slowly formed: Anthropologists tell us that identity is shaped along two vectors: the sense of time and the sense of space. If one of those vectors of identity is weaker, the other becomes, of necessity, stronger. For better or worse, our sense of the history of Canada is relatively recent and weak. One hundred and fifty years is neither very long nor epic as the history of nations go. Although indigenous peoples have long histories, these have been diminished or destroyed and only now are in the process of being reclaimed.

It is not surprising then that a sense of geography and place would become so pivotal for newcomers to this country. In the space of the North, my refugee neighbours felt they could love this place, that they could belong here. It was not their “native land” but it had become their “promised land”. They knew it was the homeland of the first nations peoples but they felt welcome. There were no immigration officers at the entrance to Manitoulin Island asking them to justify their existence. Canada was no longer a question to be answered on an exam. They

had arrived not to conquer and own the land but to inhabit it. The newcomers began to see themselves as inhabitants of this place.

The glee of the kids as they flew into the waters left them bathed in gratitude. Through the eyes of my eyes I could see that geography was as important as history as a ground for beginning to live here, for belonging. As I watched the kids I saw my country as if for the first time, never to be taken for granted.

I can also tell another story that provides an important urban balance to this northern point of reference. In the south, I have lived with refugees in an old three story brick house in a middle class area in the west end of Toronto. In this neighbourhood we have struggled, in a small way, with the very big question that we face as a nation: What do we hold in common?

The answer was not obvious and it was a long time coming. As neighbours we did not have a set of common values, a common language or religion. We came from diverse cultures and had different political views and educational backgrounds. In this mixed income area, it seemed as if we just existed side by side, hoping for the best and sometimes fearing the worst.

When we first moved onto this little street I was completely oblivious to the rest of the neighbours on the street. However, they certainly did notice us and all

the “different” people who moved in and out of the house. That difference soon exploded the bland indifference of the neighbours. When we made an application to renovate our old coach house garage in the backyard, many of the neighbours organized and went down to city hall to stop our renovations. A motley group had quickly united in their fear of the strange and unknown people who seemed to pose a serious threat. Much was said that many would later regret. “They are going to build a ten story addition, there will be prostitutes and drug dealers and they will multiply like rabbits!” For a while I was sure that we would have to move out of the neighbourhood. I wondered what we could possibly hold in common. In the absence of any positive sense of being together, the neighbourhood had taken shape through a negative sense of who and what they were against.

However, slowly, very slowly, through a thousand acts of kindness, we became neighbours . We learned how to respect differences in a way that went beyond indifference.

It started with the decision to hold a street party. At first, the party was small but then it became larger and was open to anyone who wanted to contribute to the potluck supper or the talent show. Now this street party is considered the most significant community event in the neighbourhood. We have all walked through walls. There is now room enough for anyone who wants to contribute to the neighbourhood. We have found a positive ground for being together.

It was during one of the first street parties that I realized that we as neighbours did hold something in common. What we held in common was the street itself. Another insight that was stunning in its simplicity.

Each of the houses on the street was what is usually called “private property”, the space of the personal, the family and the home. We learned that being a good neighbor does not necessarily mean going in and out of each other’s houses, as family and friends do. What good neighbours share is a whole other space, the in-between space which is particularly evident in the concrete reality of the street. *This is the space that none of us own but all of us are responsible for.* It is the space that good neighbours keep clean and beautiful and safe. The street is also signifies many other realities that none of us own but all of us are responsible for: the flow of traffic through the streets, the quality of air, the viability of small businesses, the trees that act like a canopy for the area.

This is the kind of place and space that all can belong to, can contribute to, and can share in common. The differences remain, the houses and businesses remain private property but there is also the space in between that is the place of neighbourliness. Neither personal nor political, this is the common space, the place of the commons. That space is lost when anyone or any group tries to control or dominate it, to claim it as a right or to treat it as private property. It can also be lost when no one takes responsibility for it.

Security and Prosperity?

What do the stories of summer camp and a small street have to say to the country as a whole? Or to the Catholic Health Alliance? Surely the scale of the questions and answers change as we move from the local to the national to the global reality that envelopes all of us? Generalizations are always risky. However, the lack of vision and the social cruelty which can sometimes strangle our national discourse suggest that a different perspective should at least be considered. The stories I have related do not provide detailed economic and political solutions but they do suggest that reconsidering the question of the Tsimshian chief might be a good way to take our bearings as a country. The stories suggest that we could find a sense of direction by paying attention to the geographical realities of the place called Canada.

In this time of globalization the most challenging and promising discussions are taking place from global or local perspectives. The role of the nation state has been reduced to that of managing the economy, ensuring that rights and property are respected. Nation states, it often seems, are governed by managers who are accountable to taxpayers and consumers.

The story of our small street is a vivid reminder of what happens to any group that is held together more by who or what it is against than by who or what it

is for. It verifies that the garrison mentality, so aptly described by Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood many years ago, continues as a default position for us as a country.

In their reflections on the Canadian context, Frye and Atwood gave great weight to the formative experience of the first Europeans as they encountered the indigenous peoples and the vast geography of this land.

The imperative of survival moved the first Europeans to build little garrisons in which they could huddle together and protect each other from the forces of nature and the wild people they called the Indians. Within these garrisons of survival, according to Frye and Atwood, they developed an ethos of co-operation that would later become embedded in the Constitution and the various institutions of the emerging nation state -- respect for law, order and good government.

Many of the positive values that we now think of as “Canadian” can be linked this garrison culture. Some would argue that this experience laid the foundation for the social safety net which many today see as characteristic of Canada. The importance of caring for each other in good times and in bad times, of co-operating in order to survive seems to be part of our Canadian identity.

However, the garrison mentality also had its shadow side, a shadow that seems to lengthen even unto today. The garrison as a culture took shape as people

pulled together because there was a common threat. In other words, it is a culture defined more by what/who it is against rather than by what/who it is for. In response to the geography of this land the first Europeans shaped a culture that was not at home in nature and a society that was seriously separated from the people who were the original inhabitants of this place. If there is such a thing as an original sin in the history of a nation, then this is it.

We no longer build little garrisons in the snow. Through hard work and smart technology, we have learned how to survive well in the cold, how to spray away mosquitoes and how to fly over difficult terrain. And more. We have tamed nature and learned how to use it to make a living, to make a profit. We have treated nature as a warehouse of what we call “natural resources” – fur, then fish, and trees and wheat and metals and oil. We have prospered as we have used and abused nature even as we marked out pieces of geography as beautiful landscapes to look at, places to visit, and drive through.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the North today. It is a place of great natural resources and awesome beauty, a vast space accessible to mining companies, the military and for the few travelers who can afford it. The traders and tourists seldom meet the indigenous people who actually live there and call it their homeland.

One of the most serious consequences of our attitude towards nature has been our ambivalence towards the indigenous peoples – whom we have treated as either obsolete or as romantic artifacts to be looked at and preserved as some exotic creatures.

If we as Canadians today cast a quick eye over the geography of our country it is all too tempting to say: *We own this place*. It is ours to barter and sell, ours to direct and defend, ours to appreciate and enjoy. We assume we have a right to be here. It seems sufficient to say that we are here to make a living. How thoughtlessly, carelessly, we live on this land and live from this land but we do not live within it.

The garrisons are now part of our history but the garrison persists as a mentality whenever a threat, real or perceived, surfaces. Justice Thomas Berger has documented the various forms of exclusion that have shadowed the history of this country. In relatively peaceful times, he writes, Canada does seem to be a decent and tolerant country. Indeed, this is the way most Canadians think of themselves. However, he documents how that tolerance and decency seem to evaporate in times of social and economic stress. The garrison mentality reappears in new forms. He cites the treatment of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Quebec, the internment of Japanese Canadians, the exclusion of Jewish refugees during World War II, the

War Measures Act and the ongoing exclusion of the aboriginal peoples. His book *Fragile Freedoms* is aptly titled.

If Canada seems under threat today it is no longer because of the challenges posed by the natural world but because of the vast socio-economic forces, unleashed by the process of globalization.

In the face of these threats, we often gather together with those like us and build walls. The walls are now invisible but real, constructed through paper and policies and subtle prejudices. In times of threat, our country becomes a garrison of garrisons, a collection of small and competing visions of the good. Shame on the politicians and the pundits who fuel this sense fear and threat and divide groups from each other in the process.

It would be easy to blame this political protectionism on certain political leaders. However, the best and the worst of the garrison mentality are within each of us and we can choose how we weigh in with our lives. I am concerned that we are defining our country by who/what we are against because we do not know what we are for. We do not know why we are here.

One has only to listen to the very quiet ones, the ones still outside the garrisons of contempt to know that we are a country riddled with social cruelty. Yet, we cling to our myth of innocence, that we are good people who are incapable

of doing bad things. It is one of the temptations of a colonial people who tend to think that bad things are done to them rather than by them. The power to do great good and evil lies elsewhere, not here, not in a relatively powerless colony. It makes it harder for us to see the colonies that exist within our colony, the ghettos of poverty and gated communities, the reserves and the forgotten regions of this country.

We have developed what I would call a ‘branch plant morality’ that puts the blame for wrongs at the head office which is always elsewhere, anywhere but here. It is a dangerous innocence and blinds us to the very real good that we are capable of and the evil that we can manage on our own. For example, we protested mightily against the conduct of the American government during the Viet Nam war but didn’t notice that Agent Orange was being produced in the lovely little town of Elmira, Ontario. Our myth of innocence not only blinds us to the evil we are capable of but to the very real goodness that exists within the heart of America itself.

Our colonial resentments against the head offices elsewhere fuel our tendencies to define ourselves in terms of who and what we are against. Being Canadian means being anti-American. Being Canadian means being against Toronto. I think these considerations situate the long and seemingly fruitless conversation about Canadian identity, a conversation which is really about whether

we hold anything in common as a country. Is our national purpose simply to survive? to be secure and prosperous? If this is our only purpose we will inevitably become a nation of garrisons held together by a series of real or invented threats. A nation which is unsure of its positive purpose will resort to symbols as a kind of glue to hold the country together. It will roll out the flag and parade the Mounted Police, cheer for the national hockey team.

During this conference, in this historic location, I encourage you to ponder whether Catholic Health organizations are held together by who and what you are FOR rather than who or what you are AGAINST.

Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright turned politician, once wrote that the two contemporary materialistic worldviews, communism and western consumerism, relied on a great lie about happiness. The lie is that “you will be happy if you have a job, an apartment and a car.” Social change begins, he said, when people begin to say to each other: “It is not true. We are not happy. We need a reason to live; we need a sense of joy and purpose in life.”

What Are We For?

As we approach the 150th anniversary, we will have occasion to discuss what it is that defines us as a country. Is there a Canadian identity that encompasses all the various identities in the country? Do we have a shared sense of

values and institutions? There will be renewed and important efforts to rewrite Canadian history or to question whether this is possible. Do we have a history or are we are a collection of chapters in search of a book? We may look to the past for some answers to the question of identity with the hope that the history will give us vision of the future, a reason and purpose. We will take account of the aboriginal peoples and of the French and English settlers who shaped the political contours of the country.

Yet how can we evoke a sense of excitement, of glee and gratitude? How can we summon a sense of responsibility for this land of promise for the newcomers, the children, the immigrants and refugees, who can never share that history but who will be a significant part of our future?

Let me return to the two stories that frame an answer to the question of the Tsimshian chief. They suggest that what we hold in common as a country is the space that we inhabit.

If we pay attention to the geography of this place called Canada we must acknowledge the obvious: that it is a place marked out by a border. This border or boundary shaped partly by geography but mostly by the events of history. The borders exist and they are important but there is nothing sacred about these boundaries. They are not God given.

Nevertheless, these borders delineate the Nation State that we call Canada. Depending on how we see the country, we will treat these borders as barriers to protect what we think we own and possess as a country or we will appreciate these boundaries anew as the delineation of our sphere of responsibility for this earth. Why are we here? We are here to take responsibility for this place on earth, for the sake of the whole earth.

For better or worse, we know we are all living in one world. Through economics and technology our future is inextricably linked with the fate of the earth that we share. Indeed it is now more urgent than ever to affirm that the earth is the good that we hold in common.

I grew up in a household that was deeply committed to Catholic Health. My father was the Chief of Staff in St. Paul's Hospital in Saskatoon. My mother had worked as a Nursing Supervisor at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto. They were committed to the health of human beings as part of their commitment to the health of the world.

Nevertheless, care for the earth is a vast concern, so vast that it can leave us feeling powerless, can impel us to focus on the local realities that we can do something about. It is because of this that we need to find a new appreciation for

the role of nation states in which citizens can take responsibility not for the whole earth but for a significant and meaningful part of that earth.

Through the eyes of the Tsimshian chief, my neighbours and through the eyes of refugees I have seen that we do have a common good in Canada, a good that is so obvious it is elusive. We hold this place in common. How we hold this place in common, the fundamental attitudes we bring to this task, these are linked to our sense of why we are here.

If we cast our eyes around the geographical area defined as Canada by borders, we see vast urban geography of small towns and large urban areas in which sense of the commons is played out in real and exciting ways. We see vast areas of the north, that mysterious canvass on which settlers have painted their own projections and illusions. The place which is a homeland by aboriginal peoples and the creatures of the north. We have vast lakes and waterways, immense by any standards. We have oil and smokestacks spewing out toxic chemicals and polluting the rivers.

I now see that this is the kind of space that is so necessary for citizenship. It relies on a sense of responsibility for what is held in common, which no one owns but all are responsible for. The sense of the common good relies much more on a sense of responsibility than on claims to rights.

It collapses when a nation begins to think of the commons as a space which the state owns, which it holds as a possession.

Gratitude and Responsibility

The greatest impediment to taking HERE to heart and mind is that we take this place for granted. We cannot see the ground beneath our feet, we take the way it holds us up and surrounds us for granted. We know our country but only numbly so. The beginning of wisdom would be to return imaginatively to the awesome moment of creation, to the moment that was “in the beginning” when the earth and the universe came into being. To pay attention to this mystery is to awaken to gratitude. We are inhabitants of an earth that can never and should never be taken for granted. The earth is a gift; it is the common good that we share with all living beings..

We are Canadians because we inhabit a particular place on earth that is defined by national borders. We take this too for granted. What a liberation it would be to pay attention to where we are, to be astonished by the gift of living in this particular place on earth.

It makes all the difference in the world whether we see this country for granted or see it as a gift.

It makes a difference whether we see the earth as an object that we have the right own, possess and use or whether we see the earth as the place we inhabit and have a responsibility for.

It makes a difference in public policy, economic and social priorities and environmental awareness. It makes a difference in how we situate Catholic Health in the context of this time and place. We do what we do because it is how we take responsibility for the common good.

It makes a difference in how we see our national borders in relationship to the good that we hold in common.

It would mean treating this country not so much as a possession or even as an achievement but as a promise to be fulfilled.

The next 150 years will be about finding our true place in the world. Not as peacekeepers in some distant places, not as some soft middle power, not as a storehouse of natural resources to be bought and sold. Our future depends on a profound shift in our attitude towards the place on earth that we inhabit. It will mean refusing to treat this place as some chunk of earth that we own, that we can sell and buy back and profit from. This kind of possessive nationalism lies at the basis of the arrogant assumption that we own this place, that we have the right to decide who gets in and who stays out.

We need to find our way back the Tsimshian chief, and all those whom he represents, to rediscover this place on earth as a gift to be shared. We need to listen to the newcomers, the children, the immigrants and refugees who are seeking the place that they can be responsible for.

In a time of global climate change, our particular responsibility for the environment we live in and the environments affected by our actions takes on particular significance. If we take this on consciously together, the care for this particular place on earth, then we will find that which holds the immense diversity of this country together. We hold a street in common, a neighbourhood, a city, a village, a park , a vastness...we are not owners but inhabitants. .

We are inhabitants. Les habitants.

We cannot rewrite history to erase all the sins that have been committed against the first nations, we cannot right the wrongs done by the French and English against each other or the injustices done to groups and individuals. But we can repent. We can share a different future. We can sing of Canada “our home and promised land.”

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