

On the Turtle's Back
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On December 19, my family and I gathered up our passports with our newly received Immigration Visas and did what you might call *le tour des portes*, or the tour of the entryways. We drove to the border, crossed into the US and took a sharp U-turn back to Canada. It's not a very exciting tour – and yes, we did have to open the trunk of our car for the US border guard -- but that's the quickest way to make things official. We had to leave the country and re-enter in order to activate our new status.

Goodbye USA. Hello, Canada. Hello, Quebec. We are now permanent residents. Finally, after four years of worry and about two and half years of paperwork, we are home free. Tears came to my eyes as we left the Lacolle Immigration office. How can I describe how I feel? I'm a permanent resident. In less than a year and a half I will be able to apply for Canadian citizenship. I'm staying here. My family can stay. I feel incredible relief. I feel I have come home.

John Ralston Saul writes in his new book *A Fair Country* that 85% of the immigrants who come to Canada become citizens, as opposed to only 40% in the US. What is it that makes me want to stay and to become a citizen? I wasn't forced out of my homeland. I am not running away. I can always go back, yet I have no desire. You are my people now.

The subtitle of John Ralston Saul's book is *Telling Truths About Canada*, and that's what I hoped to find in my reading this week. I want to know the truth about this country (Oh, about the word *truth*, well, we'll talk about that next week). Saul says you can't understand a country until you understand its central myth. More than that, the way we choose to perceive ourselves shapes who we are as individuals and as a people. Change our perception, embrace our true story, and we can become a changed people and a changed nation.

Saul makes some intriguing arguments when talking about the complex origins of this country. "Any attempt to 'tell truths' about Canada is bound to be controversial," says my colleague Steven Epperson in Vancouver who read the book with 35 members of his congregation during a six-session adult education class. The group had many critiques about Saul's writing style, his methodology, his facts and his thesis – but they found the experience to be enlightening and exciting. (If anyone is interested in leading a similar group here, let me know!)

In *A Fair Country*, Saul rants about many things – he's got a long laundry list – and he could use a good editor. But the cover illustration by cartoonist Mike Constable gets right to the heart of the matter. His simple line drawing shows a turtle floating in the water and supporting Parliament Hill on its back. Saul never talks about it in his book, but this is Turtle Island, the earth on the turtle's back, the translation of the name for the continent of North America in the languages of many First Nations.

As the Onondaga version of the story goes, long ago there was nothing but sky and water.¹ One day the wife of the chief of Skyland leaned upon the branches of the Great Tree and fell through a gaping hole in the sky. The animals below saw her falling and realized that she would not survive without their help. They decided that she was made to live upon the earth, but the only place that earth could be found was at the bottom of the sea. All the animals tried to dive down and bring up a handful of earth, but failed. Finally the muskrat succeeded. But the earth could not float on the water, and so the turtle volunteered to carry it on his back.

The turtle holding up a quintessential symbol of Canada on the cover of Saul's book is no accident. Saul argues that we are a Métis civilization, a coming together, a living and mixing together of Aboriginal and other peoples into something new. He says we make a grave mistake when we try to convince ourselves that we are a civilization of British or French or European inspiration. Instead, Saul argues,

"We are a people of Aboriginal inspiration organized around a concept of peace, fairness and good government. That is what lies at the heart of our story, at the heart of Canadian mythology, whether francophone or Anglophone. ... Indigenous peoples are already there, at the core of our civilization. That is our reality. Our challenge is to learn how to recognize what we have trained ourselves not to see."

We have a unique culture that was formed as "both the French and the British adapted to Aboriginal ways, first to survive and then to do well." Consider that it was the Aboriginal canoe and not the wheel that made movement and expansion possible here. The strength of what the Aboriginals knew and understood when the first Europeans arrived lasted centuries. It was only later, Saul argues, that the European elites tried to reshape history into their own image and replaced *fairness* with *order* – as in *Peace, Order and Good Government*, rather than *Peace, Welfare (as in Fairness) and Good Government*, a change that happened in 1867.

Please understand that Saul makes it very clear that he is not talking about a romanticized view of Aboriginal society. This is not James Cameron's *Avatar*. Nor is he trying to fabricate a sanitized pre-history. But he asks us to consider that we, who are non-Aboriginal, tend only to think of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada in terms of "them over there, outside of our lives in small isolated, unsustainable communities, usually reserves, or the poorest parts of our cities." We think in terms of sympathy or guilt but, he writes,

"We don't ask ourselves whether sympathy and guilt are appropriate reactions. Of course," he says, "the Canadian government was right to apologize in 2008 for the destructive residential school system. It should and could have done it in the 1980s or 1990s. And Canadians were right to believe that the apology should be made. It was an act of dignity as befits an adult nation."

¹ Told by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, *Keepers of the Earth*

Yet in daily practice, we concentrate “only on what doesn’t seem to work, so that we have no idea what or how much does work or how well. ... We cannot see how much of what we are is them, how much of what we think of as our way, our values, our collective unconsciousness, is dependent on what we slowly absorbed living with them or near them over the centuries.”

Saul argues that the foundation of who we are has always been firmly planted in the Aboriginal tradition of the ever-expanding circle. Look at how we handle the diversity of immigrants and new citizens here. We are not a melting pot. People are not expected to assimilate and give up their unique cultural identities. We allow for difference, and we manage to live together. “This is not a Western or European concept.” This comes straight from Aboriginal culture that is “based on the idea of an inclusive circle that expands and gradually adapts as new people join us.”

Saul says that language fails us as we try to explain who we are. *Multiculturalism* or a *Community of Communities* doesn’t really express it. He prefers *interculturalisme*, a term defined here in Quebec and used in the work of the Bouchard Taylor Commission, which Saul greatly admires. The term comes the closest to describing how life is actually lived here as dovetailing interconnections between peoples, rather than life lived in separate multicultural solitudes.

Saul makes the case that the Aboriginal view of creation itself is key to understanding how this all works. In the indigenous tradition, creation is a shared activity. Think of the animals in the story of Turtle Island. They work together to find a solution, and out of chaos they build harmony. Saul points out that this differs from a Judeo-Christian-Islamic view that sees creation as a solitary, individual act of perfection where there can only be “right and wrong, good and evil, winners and losers.” When you begin with a vision and expectation of perfect harmony, chaos is always around the corner.

In the Aboriginal view of creation, reality is complex, and total equilibrium is impossible. The Trickster in the Aboriginal tradition is “neither pure or a virgin or a martyr or a hero to be followed. [The Trickster] is us.” Out of that worldview comes the idea of a society that is non-monolithic. Society can’t be rigid, because things are expected to be imperfect and changing.

“The idea of difference is central to indigenous civilization,” Saul writes. “These differences are not meant to be watertight compartments, not vessels of purity.” It is all about “a complex society functioning like an equally complex family within an ever-enlarging circle. That is the Canadian model.”

When we deny our Aboriginal roots, that’s when we get into trouble. That’s the ranting part of the book, hundreds of pages for you to explore and to see if you agree. But I will spare you that, for the moment. We may be off track right now, Saul says, but if we fully embrace our story as “a people of Aboriginal inspiration organized around a concept of peace, fairness and good government,” imagine what we can accomplish.

Critics say that Saul's methodology is weak, and his history inaccurate. As a newcomer, I can't judge. The history is not in my blood. Yet the picture he paints is the reason I am here as an immigrant. Is it reality? I suppose you might say I don't know yet. But I want to be part of a society that welcomes difference in an ever-enlarging circle.

A Fair Country has caused me to stop and question whether we have left out the third leg of the stool here. We frequently consider our European roots, but we don't often explore what the Aboriginal tradition may bring to us. We tend to consider it as something foreign, separate from us. Or, often, in my case, I worry that we will misunderstand, misappropriate or accidentally do harm out of a lack of knowledge. Cultural sensitivity is critically important, but when it turns into political correctness it can straitjacket us into fearful silence. How do we take risks and make room for others to say "ouch" when we misstep? We have a lot to learn.

As I look out at our new members who have joined us today, I want to welcome you into this congregation. And I want to ask this congregation to welcome you into an ever-enlarging circle. May you each know that you are welcome as you are, as individuals who are seeking understanding and meaning on your own terms. The richness and complexity of who you are is welcome here: Gay or straight, bisexual or transgender, agnostic, atheist, mystic or theist, whatever racial, ethnic, cultural identity you call your own.

May the creation of this community be a shared and sacred activity, one where we accept that things will never be perfect, where it is okay to make mistakes, to take risks, to dare to listen and learn from each other. With warmth, may we welcome and nurture each other. With courage may we inspire and challenge. In this way, may we act together.

I want to end with a quote from *A Fair Country*.

"Some thirty-five years ago, Chief Dan George wrote:

Am I to come as a beggar and receive all from your omnipotent hand? Somehow I must wait. I must find myself. I must find my treasure. I must wait until you want something of me, until you need something that is me. Then I can raise my head and say to my wife and family ... listen ... they are calling ... they need me ... I must go.

"I feel that need," John Ralston Saul writes. "For myself. For the country. This is the missing key to making sense of what we have and what we feel is not being fulfilled."