

Walking the Sweetgrass Road: Identity and Belonging - Where is this leading?

By Kim Wheatley Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother

Greetings and welcome to the month of Mukwa Giizis (Bear Moon) on the Anishinaabe lunar calendar. This is the season when bears begin to stir from their hibernation and cubs will begin their introduction to the world outside of the den. It is a time for Anishinaabeg to begin preparations for the arrival of Ziigwaan (Spirit of Spring). Feelings of anticipation are quietly nurtured under the beautiful white dress of rest that the earth still continues to hold at this time.

I for one look to the bear for many teachings and lessons as per Anishinaabe cultural teachings. This Being, the bear, is the symbol of protection and a teacher in our Midewiwin lodges. Bear Clan holds the community responsibility to stand at the door?the gatekeeper and protector of the people. Protection is serious work and there are many areas to consider when looking at what needs protecting.

Communities depend on some kind of order related to the needs of the greater good. How and what that order looks like depends on many things and can deeply influence identity and belonging.

The idea of identity and belonging is something being deeply explored today as Canada acclimates to the idea of reconciliation and just exactly how to walk that out. Some very unfortunate outcomes can be seen in the witch hunt taking place internally and externally on Indigenous identities. This is rife with judgements and frameworks directly tied to colonialism and its intergenerational degradation of Indigenous communities.

?Centuries of racism and dispossession have denied Indigenous peoples the opportunity to enjoy their basic human rights. In every continent in the world, Indigenous peoples are among the most marginalized, impoverished and frequently victimized members of society?

It's not so long ago when the country decided the Indian problem must be dealt with under colonial law making the Indian Act one of the best tools for conquer and divide. The intergenerational cultural genocide inherent in the policies and laws connected to the Indian Act are still being unpacked horror by horror today. Interesting to note that many Canadians are still resistant to these disclosed criminal truths on many levels and often in the court of law fall back on semantics to discredit challenges and claims.

The idea that one religious cultural group could decide the entire life of another spiritual cultural group, whose lands have been illegally possessed under a papal bull edict that only acknowledges religious affiliates endowed by a Christian God and then accepted as foundational truth, is astonishing even today.

As Indigenous people continue to point out the inequities and lawlessness of this continuing fallacy we are directed to colonial courts of law to ?hash it out? either until the challengers run out of money or just give in. This court of law protects and is founded on European ideals, beliefs and law systems and it does not adequately embrace other ways of knowing or other law systems like the ones Indigenous people of the Americas have utilized for time immemorial. Most recently there are modest changes that utilize Indigenous Justice Programs which provide culturally grounded alternatives to mainstream justice processes but there is still a long road of change to implement.

It is important to take into consideration the Canadian Government's imposition of creating an identification process of Indigenous people where deciding who is and who is not a recognized Indigenous person in this country has manifested into identity chaos. Settlers to Canada can claim their identity without the burden of blood quantum as inflicted on the First Peoples of these lands. The ease in retaining one's sense of belonging and inclusion as a Canadian citizen is a protected right for Canadians.

For Indigenous People it must be proved by a wide variety of colonial systems that must validate the percentage of blood quantum in a family bloodline. The Indian Act enshrined this self-appointed law, essentially dividing and dehumanizing generations of people

who are and are not recognized under the imposed and rigid colonial laws of identity. This control concept was introduced by government systems and is directly tied to the long-term fiduciary responsibilities of the Government of Canada to the original inhabitants of these lands. This Act also supports an ongoing agenda to displace Indigenous identity long term as a truly disappearing race.

The idea that Indigenous persons could not self-identify in their own homelands under their own legal, moral and community systems of law is ludicrous in my view.

One often hears the question how much 'native (blood)' are you? While it might seem innocuous, it is inherently tied to judgement and the perception of inclusion or exclusion. It puts some sort of power in the hands of those asking to defend ones' identity to some bar of measure that does not adequately encompass a wide variety of factors like adoption, record erasures, name changing, Christianity, cultural genocide through reserves and residential schools, and the list goes on.

As the conversation of identity continues to gain speed we must ask ourselves a few questions such as: 'Who is asking? Who is deciding? How is this being explored? What frameworks should be utilized or designed? And most importantly we must ask 'WHY Is this dialogue only coming to light now?'

Pretendianism is NOT new 'look at history ' so many have assumed the persona of Indigenous people and been accepted without judgement or investigation. Numerous examples are still exalted today but when you dig into the 'why,' my thoughts go to many places.

So now this broken and biased system has exploded in a culture rupture when it comes to the quagmire of 'pretendians,' meaning those who are imposters of Indigenous cultures in various capacities, across the country. The headlines of major news outlets are constantly highlighting their 'discoveries' of frauds and the result is suspicion and questioning internally and externally of Indigenous community identities. The question of how much Indigenous blood comes up again and again as colonial systems of identity validation are relied upon. Who is on the winning end of this rupture?

News folks spend hours digging through lineages and names to judge those frauds who claim Indigenous ancestry. Accolades are being removed from those that do not pass the inquisition. Indigenous communities are reeling internally with monitoring, validating, investigating and so many other emotional labours to deal with or define who, what, where, when. I suspect there is some sort of background glee in ensuring that this quagmire is destabilizing Indigenous identity as a whole.

I think it's high time that the Government of Canada honour the Treaties, the right to self-govern and the hereditary system of identity and belonging. Blood quantum is a racist act perpetuated and supported by a legal system of imposition directly tied to colonial superiority and racism.

The Town of Aurora is proud to be taking steps to renew and strengthen its relationship with Indigenous communities and residents. As part of this commitment, in partnership with The Town, The Auroran is providing this space to Anishinaabe Traditional Grandmother and Cultural Consultant Kim Wheatley to share insights, storytelling and teachings with the Aurora community.