

STAN MCKAY

CALLING CREATION INTO OUR FAMILY

WE ARE A PEOPLE of the oral tradition, and I recognize some ambivalence about putting our stories and teachings into written form. Our elders say that when our thoughts are put into written form they lose life, especially when we share important learnings and understandings about our relationship to the creation.

But the present urgent need to come together for a healing vision for the earth, "our mother," has led our elders to advise us to share and risk even by writing.

Art Solomon is an Ojibway spiritual elder from Ontario who attended the World Council of Churches meeting on the island of Mauritius in February of 1983. Art wrote this prayer for the diverse group of people of various faith communities who had gathered there to prepare for the WCC's Vancouver general assembly:

Grandfather, look at our brokenness

Now we must put the sanctity of life as the most sacred principle of power, and renounce the awesome might of materialism.

We know that in all creation, only the family of man has strayed from the sacred way.

We know that we are the ones who are divided and we are the ones who must come back together, to worship and walk in a sacred way, that by our affirmation we may heal the earth and heal each other.

Now we must affirm life for all that is living or face death in a final desecration with no reprieve.

We hear the screams of those who die for want of food, and whose humanity is aborted and prevented.

Grandfather, the sacred one,

we know that unless we love and have compassion the healing cannot come.

Grandfather, teach us how to heal our brokenness.

It would be possible to say no more than what Art Solomon has shared in the prayer and to allow you to ponder from that prayer alone how simple our spiritual world view is — and how profound.

Those of you who come from a Judaeo-Christian background might find it helpful to view us as an “Old Testament people.” We, like the Israelites, come out of an oral tradition that is rooted in the Creator and the creation. We, like Moses, know about the sacredness of the earth and the promise of land. Our creation stories also emphasize the power of the Creator and the goodness of creation. We can relate to the vision of Abraham and the laughter of Sarah. We have dreams like Ezekiel and have known people like Pharaoh. We call ourselves “the people” to reflect our sense of being chosen.

Indigenous spirituality around the world is centred on the notion of our relationship to the whole creation. We call the earth “our mother.” The animals are “our brothers and sisters.” Even what biologists describe as inanimate, we call our relatives.

This calling of creation into our family is a metaphorical construction that describes the relationship of love and faithfulness between human persons and the creation. Our identity as creatures in the creation cannot be expressed without talking about the rest of creation, since that very identity includes a sense of the interdependence and connectedness of all life.

Our elders have told stories about the destruction of Mother Earth. In their dreams and visions they have known from time immemorial a deep caring and reverence for life. Living in very natural environments, they taught that we are to care for all life or we may die. The elders say: "If you see that the top of the tree is sick, you will know that it is dying. If the trees die, we too will die." The earth is our life. It is to be shared, and we know the Creator intends it for generations yet unborn.

Because we understand that life is a gift, it makes no sense within our native spiritual vision for either us or others to claim ownership of any part of the creation. Our leaders have often described how nonsensical it is to lay claim to the air, the water or the earth because these are related to all life and are shared by all life.

Chief Dan George expressed it this way in a book entitled *My Heart Soars*:

Of all the teachings we receive, this one is the most important: Nothing belongs to you of what there is. Of what you take, you must share.

The political process that has become known as "land claims," and in which many of our First Nations are involved with the federal and other governments, is devastating to our cultural values. In order to participate in the process, our statements and language are forced to become sterile and technical. Our documents must be written in language suggested by lawyers and understood by judges. The legal jargon we must use contains concepts of ownership that directly contradict our spiritual understanding of life.

As a marginalized people, forced to live on tiny plots of land, we encounter the worldview of the wealthy and powerful in the land claims process and are forced to compromise or die.

Yet we believe that the earth is to be shared, and we continue to challenge faceless corporations to be faithful to their humanity. Even as we are being pushed into the land claims process, we hold on to our heritage and are motivated by a love of the earth — a concern for the survival of the creation. Our Mother

Earth is in a time of pain, and she sustains many thoughtless children.

The vision that moves us in the struggle towards aboriginal sovereignty is integral to our spirituality. The elders speak to us of our need for balance between the physical and spiritual aspects of our being. They would caution our political leaders not to become so caught up in the struggle for power that they compromise the spiritual heritage that shaped our being. The tradition of the vision quest is founded on the knowledge that we are led by the Creator to spiritual truths that shape both our individual and our corporate journeys.

We understand that the Great Spirit moves through all of life, and is the "Cosmic Order." Our view of creation and the Creator is an attempt to unify the worldview of human beings who are interdependent. We are a part of all life and have no need for dogmatic statements, since our spiritual pilgrimage allows for many truths from a variety of experiences and calls us to live in harmony with other communities.

The word "respect" is central to our movement into harmony with other communities. Respecting others means we accept diversity within the unity of the Creator. We can then engage in dialogue in a global community that does not fall back on defensive arguments to protect any one truth. Instead of making dogmatic pronouncements, we can share stories. Instead of just talking, we can listen.

Living on the earth in harmony with the creation, and therefore the Creator, means moving in the rhythm of the creation. It means vibrating to the pulse of life in a natural way without having to "own" the source of the music.

We have developed myths and rituals that remind us of the centrality of the earth in our experience of the truth about the Creator. We seek to integrate life so that there are no boundaries between the secular and the sacred. For us, the Great Spirit is in our daily, earthly concerns about faithful living. Each day we are given is for thanksgiving for the earth. We are to enjoy it and share it in service to others. This is the way to grow in unity and harmony.

The coming of Europeans to the land we used in North

America led to a conflict of understanding that centres on this concept of the ownership of land. The initial misunderstanding is not surprising, since the first immigrants were coming to “take possession” of a “vacant, pagan land.” What is surprising — incredibly so — is that this perception continues after five centuries. Equally surprising has been the historic role of the Christian Church in this process of colonization, which was based upon the division of the earth and its degradation into a mere possession.

The colonial process also undermined the culture and the spiritual values of the aboriginal people. Through generations of genocidal oppression, various agencies have attempted to destroy our cultures. Churches played a role in the repression of our spirituality, and some churches continue to attack the teachings of our elders because their members fear our understanding of the Creator.

One of the major factors in the assimilation process was the policy of taking aboriginal children to residential schools — a practice that isolated whole generations of our people from their culture. The various Christian denominations took on this work of destroying our languages and our stories (under contract with the federal government) precisely because they recognized that they were engaged in a spiritual struggle.

During the colonial period and right up to the present day, the dominant society has also succeeded in turning aboriginal communities themselves into part of the problem. As our self-esteem has diminished and we have accepted the values of the dominant culture, we have begun to oppress our own children. We have denied them the spiritual teachings that could prepare them for a life of wholeness. This situation is now changing.

Recently, some aboriginal people asked the United Church of Canada to apologize for denying the values of aboriginal spirituality. In 1986, at its national General Council meeting in Sudbury, Ontario, after much preparation and discussion, the church did make a formal apology. It was a recognition, by that denomination, of its role in spiritual oppression. The moderator of the United Church read the statement:

Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your elders an understanding of creation, and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich and to be treasured.

We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were blind to the value of your spirituality.

We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ.

We imposed our civilization as a condition for accepting the gospel.

We tried to make you like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result you and we are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by the Great Spirit to be.

We who represent the United Church of Canada ask you to forgive us and to walk together in the spirit of Christ so that our people may be blessed and God's creation healed.

As a native person, I see this apology from a major Christian denomination as a beginning in a process of liberation that will include a renewed confidence in our own spiritual teachings.

The project of rebuilding our culture and spirituality is supported by teachings of humility, sharing, caring and healing. But we will not be able to call the resulting structure a "sovereign spirituality" for aboriginal people, since that would be a contradiction in terms. Our teachings about spirituality focus on the connectedness of the whole creation; the Creator places us in relationship to all that is. The relationship we hold is therefore based on respect, and our spiritual truth is not meant to destroy but to heal. It is a spiritual vision of Shalom that calls for our full participation as aboriginal people in shaping our future.

The historic process has driven us to become dependent on the dominant society for all our needs. We have wakened from a long sleep, and our dream is now focused on gaining independence.

While this is a necessary part of the growth and healing of the aboriginal people, our spiritual teachers tell us we cannot

stop with an image of sovereignty that ends when we regain our political power. Our spiritual calling is to continue the process until our pilgrimage brings us to the place of interdependence. This is the time for the many peoples of the earth to acknowledge our family relationship, which includes us all.

Many teachings among the aboriginal nations of North America use the symbol of the circle — the symbol for the inclusive caring community, where individuals are respected and interdependence is recognized. In the natural order of creation, human beings are a part of the whole circle of life. Aboriginal spiritual teachers speak of the re-establishment of the balance between human beings and the whole of creation as a mending of the hoop.

Those of us who are at the same time aboriginal and Christian face a special challenge and a new responsibility. Since the church has been a part of the oppression, we must redefine what it is to be the church. We must also be reunited with the spiritual strength of our aboriginal culture.

We need to know more about what the elders describe as the balance of body, mind and spirit. Perhaps our greatest challenge is to recognize the danger of being caught up in our political struggle to the extent that we lose again our vision for the healing of creation.