

A METIS COUNTRY: HOW ABORIGINAL CULTURE HAS SHAPED CANADIAN VALUES

Reading – Isaiah 11: 1-9

We are each born into a mythic world. I know that's a funny thing to say in this age of science and reason, but it's true. We are each born into a mythic world.

Some of the myths that shape our lives are known and obvious; others are a little more hidden. There are myths about the culture in which we live. There are religious myths that shape our moral codes, language and to an extent our system of justice. There are myths that define our relation to the environment. There are family myths that define who we are and what we should or should not be able to do with our lives.

I am obviously not speaking here about "myth" in the popular sense of something which is untrue. I am, rather, using myth defined as a "traditional narrative" or an "idealized version of the past". These stories may or may not be completely true in a factual sense, but there's no denying their power to shape us.

In his 2008 book A Fair Country, the respected Canadian Scholar John Ralston Saul challenges the traditionally held foundation myths about Canada and suggests that there is another, hidden mythic structure about how our country came to be. He suggests further that as a nation we more often follow this hidden myth the one we studied in school because this hidden myth is, in fact, far better suited to us than the elitist colonial one foisted upon us a century and a half ago.

And if 'elitist', 'colonial' and 'foisted' sound like loaded words, then good, for Saul's book is anything but a distanced, balanced academic investigation. It is rather a very passionate book designed to make a point powerfully.

It is an imperfect book, and a controversial book, and, for me, the most important, most eye-opening, and most helpful book about Canada that I have ever read.

(1)Saul's main contention in the book is that Canadians describe themselves the wrong way, and that this causes us great problems To quote from his opening lines: *"A dancer who describes himself as a singer will do neither well. To insist on describing ourselves as something we are not is to embrace existential illiteracy. We are not a civilization of British or French or European inspiration. We never have been. Our society is not an expression of peace, order and good government. It never was."*

He sets out first the traditional story of How Canada came to be – the one that he says is wrong, and that gets us into a lot of trouble when we insist on embracing it.

Before the Europeans came, this traditional story begins, this land was populated by Aboriginal people who lived simple hunter gatherer tribal lives. They struggled against the elements, never built any lasting monuments nor developed significant institutions. Their religions were pagan and because they were unaware of the Christ, they lived in moral darkness.

That began to change, it continues, when the Europeans came and created colonies. The clever fur traders developed friendly relations with the noble savages who did the hard work of trapping and cleaning the furs which were then bought for simple inexpensive tools, clothing, ironware and a few trinkets. The priests and ministers brought them the light of God, and royal representatives made treaties that purchased land. In spite of the occasional uprising, the governments formed alliances with natives that helped us fight off the Americans in both 1776 and 1812. And then we began to assimilate the dying First Nation peoples for their own good.

Meanwhile the Europeans brought farming and herding to the country, developing orderly colonies supervised by a benevolent and loving King through the offices of the Governor General. The goal of this slow and careful colonization was the creation of 'peace, order and good government'.

By the mid-19th century this colony of French Canadians and loyal British subjects had grown sufficiently large that it earned the right to self-govern and to form itself into a country of sorts as the Dominion of Canada. But Canadians would chafe under this limited freedom and would continue to press for a fuller independence from London.

One landmark would be the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917 when Canadian troops fought as a unit for the first time under Canadian command and showed the world how a battle could be won.

A next step would come after World War II when London's Privy Council gave up its final powers over Canadian laws and would culminate in the 1981 repatriation of the Constitution.

(2) Now I may have just done some of that summary in a somewhat sarcastic way, but it is mostly the history and therefore the mythic story I learned in school.

What's wrong with it? Well, according to Saul, what's wrong is that it's simply not true. It's not true overall, and it's particularly not true as regards the early contact between the Europeans and the indigenous peoples of this land.

The plain fact is, Saul writes, that the first trappers and colonists were absolutely dependent on the natives who generously taught them how to survive in this often harsh land. He points out, for example, that the defining icon of the fur trade was the canoe – an Aboriginal vehicle. He points out that most fur traders '*married up*', that is married native women in order to become part of the extended family and build business, and that far from being used and then abandoned, most of those so called 'country wives' continued to do very well after their husbands returned to Great Britain.

He points out that in the Revolutionary War the famed United Empire Loyalists were mostly non-British. They were African former slaves, German Mennonites and people from other parts of Europe who fled a war that was essentially waged between English brothers, which is why Kitchener, Ontario was first called Berlin.

He also points out that in any number of pre-1867 documents the phrase used to describe the life of the emerging nation was '*peace, **welfare** and good government*' – a phrase that reflected an aboriginal sense of care for the common good. That was yanked for no explained reason in the final draft of Confederation's BNA Act with the word '*welfare*' replaced by the word '*order*'.

In other words, the foundation myth that comes to us from the British elites who ran Upper Canada is not particularly accurate, nor does it serve us well.

Why? Because today we self identify as being of European – and mostly British descent – formed to pursue peace, order and good government under a European model based on the exploitation of natural resources. Though independent, we continue to cling to a colonial mindset that says that any really good idea, system or product comes from somewhere else.

We are always looking over our shoulder for approval – once to Great Britain, but now increasingly to the United States of whom we have become an economic and cultural colony. We may try to claim to be something approaching an independent equal – usually pointing to universal health care -but in all honesty in most matters we are a colony that watches American movies and TV, sells our resources south and buys products north, and that has sold many of our major companies to US and offshore corporations.

In recent years our governments have steadily chipped away at things like health care and the social safety net to bring them more in line with their US model.

Saul attributes this rapidly increasing giving away of our heritage to a misunderstanding of our foundation myth – or more correctly, to our buying in to an incorrect mythic tradition.

(3) So who are we if not a people of British, French or European inspiration? Again from the introduction: "*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. If we can embrace a language that expresses that story, we will feel a great release. We will discover a remarkable power to act and to do so in such a way that we will feel true to ourselves.*"

He then goes on to describe Canada as a Métis (small 'm') nation - a mixed race country melding the best of all three cultures. We are a society that has three legs, British, French and Aboriginal, with the Aboriginal leg being by far the most significant in the early years of this nation, and yet the most ignored today.

He points out that aboriginal people had sophisticated societies and complex inter-tribal relationships long before Europeans arrived. Their structures and relationships were just differently framed and were, therefore, unrecognizable or misunderstood by the Europeans.

Their culture was based on being in relation to the land, not dominating it, something that still is very evident in Canada's north. This led to a similar philosophy governing their relationships within the tribes and between the nations.

He points out, too, a key cultural difference in negotiating styles.

The First Peoples understood treaties – whether among themselves, or with the Europeans - to be milestones marking an ongoing relationship, not end points. Treaties establish connections and are meant to be renegotiated, usually annually. Europeans originally understood this and participated in these annual gatherings. But as the 19th century dawned and Canada grew, governments shifted policy until treaties became final sale documents and ongoing relationships were abandoned. What had been a relationship between equals became a case of conqueror figuring out how to assimilate the remnants of a population believed to be dying off.

But then Saul notes that in spite of all our efforts it is the aboriginal framework that remains and continues to shape our response to challenges. We do not talk of revolution in Canada as they do in the US. We talk...and talk...and talk...

How long have we discussed constitutional reform? The structure of the social safety net? Relations between Quebec and the rest of Canada?

How long? Forever. How long will we continue? Probably forever. That's who we are. We have inherited the aboriginal tradition of ongoing negotiations where nothing is ever final, and the style has worked!. That is not the European style. It is distinctly Canadian and grows from this métis, mixed race three-pronged culture.

And the moment you accept the possibility that there might be something to this métis myth, then every news story you read changes. Though Ralston Saul does argue in maddeningly broad strokes and sometimes with distinctly un-Canadian rudeness, He does make a very compelling case that many of our social ills come from misunderstandings of who we really are as a nation, - come from ignoring the real foundation myth of our country.

History, of course, is not a science. History is the art of describing the narrative of a people, and its importance lies in the truth that without a story, we are not a people.

Regardless of what one might think of John Ralson Saul's conclusions, it is unquestionable true that our understanding of history has largely ignored the Aboriginal involvement in the development of our values. And it is also true that today there are more First Nations people than there were at first contact, and that the size of the Aboriginal population is growing more than any other segment of our society. More significantly there are exponential numbers of

aboriginal people – like Dana Lyn - who have or are getting higher education. Only a generation ago there were but a handful.

If we haven't figured it out yet, the drive to assimilate the First Nations failed completely. Yet our various levels of government, in spite of a few truly bright spots, continue to treat this vital and growing community with 19th century paternalism.

The First Peoples were a founding culture of Canada. They have had far more impact on our approach to problems, negotiation and the common welfare than we have ever acknowledged. And in this environmentally charged time, they are the only members of the three founding communities that has consistently had a reverence for the land, air and water.

Of course, I have only scratched the surface of Saul's various arguments. So let me leave you with his conclusion where he muses about the greatest gifts inherited from our aboriginal founders:

“At the core of Canadian civilization there exist ideas used and shaped over four centuries [that we received from the first peoples of this land]. Our idea of citizenship as a circle that welcomes and adapts, [for example]. [Or] Our conviction that fairness and inclusion are the keys to how we function.....These also are simple ideas. But all successful civilizations are built upon simple realizations, usually dragged out of difficult circumstances.Our ideas are particular to our experience...Canada has no model for the world. But the long Canadian experiment with complexity and fairness has never appeared more modern.”

And is it just me? Or can you not hear in all of this echoes of an even older vision – the biblical vision of a peaceable Kingdom where, in Isaiah's words *“the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together...”* where *“they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain: for the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea”*

Thanks be to God. Amen.