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Alcohol is a great destroyer: A call for insight on ceremonial approaches for coping with FASD

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Abstract

As a seasoned community helper, I worry about the generation now assuming roles as healers, leaders and warriors, and continuing the fight for fundamental change in the relationship between Canada's Indigenous peoples and those privileged to inherit colonial legacies of European global colonization. I now view my personal journey of self discovery as an unending marathon. I honour "Runners" like Tom Longboat who represented the strength and vitality of healthy and sober communities. Traditional runners were as dependent on path-finders as we are today, yet they travelled with dedication and carried important information that sustained community integrity. Open discussion about the devastation of FASD is the most important conversation required across our territories today. We need to prepare good messages and good minds for the next generation to bring forward. This self-reflective paper seeks solace in rituals such as the Haudenasaunee Reqickening Addresses to allow those who suffer to "stand again in front of the people."

Introduction

"'Now, moreover…it is…the calamity, so direful, that has stricken thy person…I shall speak such words that I will soothe and appease by [caressing] thy guardian spirit…. The being that is demonic in itself…the Great Destroyer, that it is, that every day and every night roams about… [where] it exclaims[s] 'I, …will destroy the Commonwealth [the League],'…now we have wiped the tears away from our faces…that customarily takes place when a distressful event has befallen a person, that the flesh [and] body…becomes obstructed…. Moreover, the

powers of life usually are lessened.... [When] it comes to pass where a direful thing befalls a person, that the Sun becomes lost to that person, customarily.... Now, I have set in order all thy affairs...it shall be possible that they shall again set his face fronting the people, that they shall again raise him up [requicken him], that they shall again name him, and that also he shall again stand in front of the people." (Hewitt, 1985)

I have recently returned to community service work in youth mental health and once again have come face to face with the devastating impacts of prenatal exposure to alcohol, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). The tragic life trajectories of prenatally exposed alcohol affected men, women and children cry out for a multi-generational recognition and mourning of colonial trauma. Alcohol was a currency in the fur trade and available at all negotiations, treaty or otherwise (Koptie 2009b), and continues to be a currency of dispossession and loss today. The Honourable Frank Iacobucci (2013) opened his Independent Review Report "First Nations Representation on Ontario Juries with the following dedication;

> This report is dedicated to the men, women, and children of First Nations in Ontario whose perseverance and courage in the face of adversity and challenges continue to be an inspiration. (Iacobucci, 2013)

The Honourable Frank Iacobucci (2013) reported on consultations with Indigenous lawyers, scholars and community stakeholders'. One of these summaries stands out as a powerful reminder of the vast misunderstandings and impasses between Canadians and Indigenous peoples of the Canadian Dominion. Indigenous men, women and children living with FASD remain the most vulnerable to these chasms.

Summary 26 of that document calls to Indigenous scholars and writers, referencing cultural interference cloaked as "best practices," "evidence-based," and "the violence of benevolence" (Wesley-Esquimaux, 2011) by Canadian "helpers." Wesley-Esquimaux (2011) calls the "violence of benevolence" the intentional institutionalized incapacitation of Indigenous peoples humanity. Wesley-Esquimaux (2011) calls for those have never considered Canada's hybrid history legitimate, to "Get Out of the Way," so the restoration and reclaiming of Indigenous Knowledge and Ways can flourish. The Honourable Frank Iacobucci reports;

> (26) ...First Nations leaders and people spoke about the conflict that exists between First Nations' cultural values, laws, and ideologies regarding traditional approaches to conflict resolution, and the value and laws that underpin the Canadian justice system. The objective of the traditional First Nations' approach to justice is to re-attain harmony, balance, and healing with respect to a particular offence, rather than seeking retribution and punishment. First Nations people observe the Canadian justice system as devoid of any reflection of their core principles or values, and view it as a foreign system that has been imposed upon them without their consent (Iacobucci, 2013).

Indigenous peoples are challenged to engage in modern warfare against disadvantage, to end the legacy of vulnerability challenging our collective humanity through the spirit called "alcohol" (Duran and Duran, 1995). It remains a constant companion and a source of false solace in places where despair reigns. Will future generations learn from our stories of resistance, resentment and rebellion waged against colonial inertia, because we will have stood strong, and declared, "no more?" Will we wipe our tears, clear our throats and unplug our ears so we can escape the impact of alcohol damaged men, women and children across our lands? We can fight for everyone.

Eduardo Duran encourages a "Hybrid Approach" to deconstructing internalized oppression:

> *Hybrid* is a term that has emerged out of postcolonial thinking and basically means there can be two or more ways of knowing and this can be a harmonious process. The concept of ideas existing without hierarchy is key to the liberation and healing process. Decolonizing is a process of liberation. In other words, we are going beyond colonizing, because colonizing is a dehumanizing activity. It is important to mention that I believe we must transcend the notion of "cross-cultural," "cultural sensitivity." and other such ideas that have been in vogue for some time in our fields. (Duran, 2006:14)

Although I have extensive social service training, a research background, as well as "on the ground" experience as a community worker, I wish to briefly put aside the wisdom I have accumulated over 30 years of community service, with great humility to address the true heroes of alcohol warfare, people living with FASD and their caregivers. I could reflect on numerous lessons learned, strategies attempted, and agonizing failures to mitigate the damage done by undiagnosed FASD amongst those I have had the privilege to work with, but I want to acknowledge what we have through the strengths of our Elders and traditional ceremonies.

As I search for kind and gentle service practices to emulate the great teachers who have guided as well as inspired my life work, I am inspired by the concept of "Wise Practices" for community re-development within Indigenous communities (Wesley-Esquimaux, Snowball 2011). This concept speaks to the remembering of "our own ways" when it comes to cultural integrity and the restoration of communal acknowledgement and care. Indigenous peoples have struggled as "warriors" in the war against colonization or as "runners," collecting and delivering messages from good minds with good intentions to ensure the continuity of good will across our territories for generations. FASD in our families and communities remains an attack on the integrity of our future generations that we have the power to arrest.

In 2002, at Hamilton, Ontario in a workshop on FASD, Mohawk Elder Tom Porter posed a troubling question, "How many of these children can we care for?" Have we answered this query effectively as of yet?

I can confirm as a family therapist, working in a Toronto Youth Mental Health agency, that the life-long complications of FASD cross all racial, cultural, and class structures and goes far beyond impacting what society has come to regard as "Drunken Indians" (Koptie, 2009b). I trace my ancestry from the Six Nations Mohawk peoples. I, like so many of my peers, have struggled to reclaim the teachings of my ancestors, through the generosity and kindness of Elders, Story-tellers and Wisdom Keepers. This paper is framed to prompt Indigenous Research of Indigenous Knowledge, because we must awaken the utility and promise of ceremony. We must see ceremony as a powerful reminder of our responsibility to the vulnerable and yet unborn. It is in our power as Indigenous Nations to stop the damage and protect and revitalize the "good minds" of our peoples into the future.

In 2003, Caroline L. Tait authored, "Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Among Aboriginal People in Canada: Review and Analysis of Intergenerational Links to Residential Schools" for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. Her text provided a valuable critique of FASD literature, and discussed the "limited range of variables, the focus on information that is mostly medical, behavioral, justice and educational in nature, and how limited attention is given to research on intergenerational and collective trauma (Tait, 2003: XVIII). She noted that Indigenous peoples in Canada are negatively represented in each of those spheres, with little contextual representation of the realities of colonial "best practices" such as residential schools and adversarial child welfare systems. Canada's hidden history of "inferiorizing Indigenous communities" (Lee Maracle and Koptie, 2010) requires the kind of research attention that would expose the resulting colonial poverty generated by intentional design and neglect. This paper is an invitation to join in ceremonies or rituals of grief for the *intentional victims* and the destruction that alcohol has unleashed over the past seven generations among Indigenous Peoples globally.

In addition, Duran's (2006) hybrid idea has not been taken into consideration when it comes to treatment, education and creating relevant avenues of support for families and caregivers impacted by FASD. There is no systemic accommodation for Indigenous knowledge or traditions to cope with the simplest to the increasingly extreme circumstances many communities face with increasingly prevalent rates of FASD in their midst (Tait, 2003). The disproportionately high rates of men, women and youth with FASD in the justice system has demonstrated connections to FASD secondary disabilities and the social markers of permanent brain structure damage related to prenatal alcohol exposure (Conry and Fast, 2000). This discussion on FASD societal impacts is valid in many sectors of our society, not just disadvantaged Indigenous peoples. The conversation must be put front and centre so the affected can "stand in front of people" as reminders of our obligation to provide care and protection, and, to teach the truth.

In 2010, working in the Ontario public service in Aboriginal justice, I was instructed to not talk about FASD because the government did not want "everybody" to think FASD was just about Aboriginal people. This scourge is most certainly not "just about Aboriginal peoples." It is an element of over-representation of all damaged Canadians from the violence of alcohol abuse, but especially of Indigenous men, women and youth in the justice system:

> While [aboriginal] people comprise 2% of the total Canadian population, they represent 13% of the federal correctional institutional population. The rates may be higher for women and youth (Conroy and Fast, 2000: 51).

I was raised off reserve, on a travelling carnival, a dispossessed Indigenous man with no natural Indigenous Knowledge, struggling to revive what is retained in my blood memory. I trace my Indigenous ancestry through my Mohawk mother and like Fred Wheatley, at age 57, I can with painful humility say "I do not know enough about my traditional ways." My greatest shame is not being able to recite the Thanksgiving Prayer in my mother's language, Mohawk. Walking in two worlds can create perceptual, spiritual and cultural confusion. I also carry many observations and recollections of being a "carny bum" witnessing the dark experiences of so many men, women and youth who I now suspect were living with FASD. Allan Shows was a structured, controlled environment where "roustabouts"[1] could escape excessive expectations and for their families a 6 months respite. Who knew what eccentric behaviors were? Who cared if you were hiding from the justice system? The only worry was having enough weekly "stamps" for "EI," Employment Insurance, income security for winters.

[1] Also known as carnival workers.

There were seasonal carnival workers who, in the fall, would turn themselves into the justice system to "serve their bit," to serve their most recent sentences or commit small crimes to be incarcerated before winter. These miserable people (Les Miserable) escaped homelessness and hunger through incarceration. The residual impact of FASD on men, women and children warehoused in jails speaks loudly to fixation on colonial justice. Charles , Victor Hugo and Fydor Dostoyevsky eloquently told stories of brutal injustices. Many Layers of Thank You to Lee Maracle, Thomas King, and Richard Wagamese for their eloquent story-telling to record our traumatic experiences.

I am drawn back to a moment as a young mental heath worker, hearing the late Anishnawbe Elder Fred Wheatley declare, "I am 72 years old and I don't know anything." Fred Wheatley was responding to a Corrections Canada worker's question, "Why don't you Indians tell us anything?" Fred Wheatley's gentle honesty as a survivor of multiple wounds from his life experience of fending off traumatic colonial attacks on his humanity remains a powerful life-guide for me. Fred Wheatley with great humility, courage and respect explained to people most familiar with "Drunken Indians" that Indigenous peoples are just beginning to understand the painful legacies carried forward by the trauma of residential schools, land dispossession, Treaty violations, and child welfare attacks on First Nations communities.

No scientific research has provided concise answers to "why Indians drink". Yes, we know that alcohol has been the currency of colonialism in every euro-centric exchange. No government consultant on "best practices" will truthfully include the suffering of our ancestors as root causes to the social turmoil endemic to epidemic calamities such as FASD. It is current and next generations of Indigenous scholars that will hopefully close the gap of understanding by following the path of Indigenous philosophers, wisdom keepers and Indigenous Knowledge carriers, such as Ernest Benedict, Oren Lyons and Seneca scholar, John Mohawk who have long championed, "Thinking in Indian" (Barreiro, 2010).

Like many of my generations' peers we watch, listen and learn how to reclaim our human right to know our traditional Indigenous ways. As our history is corrected and shared we are learning to be proud of the great sacrifices and contributions our ancestors made to Canada. Our past has always been to survive to fight another day (Koptie, 2009a). And yet, walking in two worlds can create perceptual, spiritual and cultural confusion.

As we recover our true identities and mourn traditional wisdom decimated by a massive collective dispossession story, I have learned to value life-long learning as a path to reconstituting the ideas of great faith-keepers like Dr. John Mohawk.

Reading Dr. John Mohawk's condoling essays in *Thinking in Indian: A John Mohawk Reader*, restored my hope, as John Mohawk guides, "Culture provides the lens that lends meaning to what we see." Oren Lyons an Onondaga faith-keeper in the foreword to "Thinking in Indian" honoured the life work of John Mohawk;

> We depended on John Mohawk known as Sotsisowah (Corn Tassel) among his people, to translate that Native wisdom into the language of the colonizers. He was in my judgment the resident intellect of Iroquoia.

Jose Barreiro who lovingly compiled John Mohawk's essays offers a fundamental framework gifted by John Mohawk in "Thinking in Indian;"

> But there is also in our culture a core requirement that ultimately, whatever our beliefs are we are encouraged to maintain the tradition of *Clear Thinking*.

Canadians must be patient and tolerant as Indigenous peoples recover, restore and re-instate traditional pathways to healing and wellness even as new battles unfold over resource sharing, land claim settlements and the tragic travesty of FASD. Ongoing political battles over lands and resources have continued to circumvent the good life, good mind needs of those who are regarded as "in the way" of progress and Canadian economic development. Studying Canadian mining, forestry and water rights foretells more frontier towns of depravity, ecological destruction, drunkenness and human exploitation.

In January 2012, at a gathering of the Prime Minister and First Nations leaders, Prime Minister Stephen Harper when addressing the oppressive Canadian Indian Act spoke these powerful words; "To be sure our government has no grand scheme to repeal or unilaterally re-write the Indian Act: after 136 years that tree has deep roots-blowing up the stump would just leave a big hole." Haudenosaunee peoples follow the "The Great Law of Peace" and the iconic representation of the "Great White Pine Tree" peace symbol. Long before there was colonization and an Indian Act, great civilizations flourished through-out Turtle Island. Prime Minister Stephen Harper's reckless metaphoric reflections confirm the great peril Indigenous people continue to face in Canada. Abrams (1961) calls myths "widely held fallacies which serve explain why the world is what it is and why things happen the way they do." Earlier, on September 25, 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared at a G20 Summit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania that Canada had no history of colonialism (AFN, Press Release, September 30, 2009), what myths informed his unfounded ruminations?

Prime Minister Stephen Harper perpetuates Canada rhetorical historical myths when he dismisses colonialism and discusses tree stumps blown up to satisfy the global drunken quest for spoils that has reached across the past 600 years, a timeframe that could easily be mythologized as Canada's Dark Ages by Indigenous Peoples in Canada. We are inspired by words of hope such as those from the Honourable Frank Iacobucci who seeks paths to Truth and Reconciliation. Indigenous scholars and writers must provide the guidance to address tragic inter-generational trauma along with the destruction by colonial weapons like alcohol, the "Great Destroyer." Canada's Prime Minister can provoke "IdleNoMore, resistance while informed leaders like The Honourable Frank Iacobucci can create peace, friendship and respect to restore reciprocity, inter-dependency and non-interference between Canada and its Indigenous people. A Prime Minister's apology is a testament to honour, but reckless rhetoric sustains a sad "false-face".

Denis Foley writes about Haudenosaunee efforts around ceremonies to condole with new metaphors: "removing the fog that prevents one from seeing the truth, removing dirt from one's ears so the story of the Iroquois people can be heard and washing the blood of the Iroquois people from the white man's hands so that they may know the clasp of true friendship" (2010: 31). Foley reviewed the condolence ceremony of the Six Nations of the Grand River, the Haudenosaunee peoples, and the power inherent in these ceremonies to unite and strengthen the path forward. Haudenosaunee ceremonies and protocols to mourn collective disasters have great utility in addressing and soothing the severe societal complications of FASD, regarded by many as a direct implication of the foregoing history and continuing arrogance of the Canadian State. We, as an entire people, from every Nation, are truly responsible to produce clear minds and mend individual, community and First Nation suffering from the misuse of alcohol. The personal and social warfare in our territories where alcohol destroys future generations must stop. Foley reflects on the late Cayuga Chief Jacob (Jake) Thomas, a traditional wisdom keeper from Six Nations, and

the Condolence and Requickening Address to express the impacts of colonial practice in North America, Turtle Island, back to "those who are not honest allies" (Foley, 2010: 32). Chief Jacob Thomas could iterate words that would strengthen the resolve to fight the enemy of the unborn; alcohol addiction and historic intergenerational pain:

> We hold in our hands fourteen strings of purple [strings of wampum]; these we hand, one by one, to you – authors of many [American/Canadian] history books, writers of cheap, inaccurate, unauthentic, sensational novels, and other writers of fiction who have poisoned the minds of young [Americans/Canadians] concerning our people, the Red Race of [America/Canada]; to the producers of many western cowboy and Indian television programs; to those treaty breakers who delight in dispossessing Indian Peoples by constructing dams on Indian Lands in violation of sacred treaties; and to those of this our country, who are prone to build up glory of our ancestors on the bones and life blood of our Old People,
>
> With this string of wampum we take away the fog that surrounds your eyes and obstructs your view, that you may see the truth concerning our people. (Chief Jacob Thomas no date, Foley 2010: 32)

The Haudenosaunee condolence ceremony, observed to this day, called people to three principles: health of body and mind, and righteousness in conduct, equality and justice among people, and the maintenance of authority. Remember, after great colonial destruction came the grief and loss that Indigenous peoples continue to experience and perpetuate through the destructive forces of alcohol and FASD on the bodies and minds of subsequent generations. Ceremonies were, and remain integral to mourning rituals, and have long been regarded as "reciprocal civil protocols with profound significance at an individual level and also at a more general societal level" (Foley 2010: 27). These are ancient words of wisdom that we must all listen to and hear, because if not us, then who?

Alcohol is a great Destroyer…

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