

**Dr. E.H. Johnson Luncheon Address**  
**Rev. T.L. LeBlanc PhD (ABD)**  
**Tuesday, June 8, 2010**

When asked by some young ones about the meaning of the words in their language for the Creator, an elder said, “The one who has made all things is so much a mystery that a name does not capture or describe but only helps us distinguish between what has been created from the one who has created.” Then he told this story...

*Many years ago in the times of our ancestor’s two men went walking. It was on the flat land. As they walked, they noticed a hill far in the West and said to each other, “Let’s go up that hill; let’s see what is on the other side!” So they walked and walked until they got to the hill and had climbed it to the top. On the other side they noticed yet another, larger hill so, in the fashion of the many curious people before them, they decided to climb it as well. They had not even finished climbing that hill and they saw a third, even larger one looming behind the one they were climbing.*

*One after another, hill after hill, they kept going on throughout the day. Following each previous hill they climbed an even larger one emerged above them in the distance.*

*Now in those times, people could walk great distances in a single day; so as you might imagine, they covered a lot of ground by the end of the day.*

*Finally, as the sun was setting in the West, at the top of the biggest hill yet, another looming high above them in the distance, they said to one another, “This must be what the Creator of all things is like!”*

June 24<sup>th</sup> marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the baptism of Henri Membertou and, depending on which story you read, 20 to 33 other Catholic converts to the French Jesuit expression and teaching of the Christian faith. The monument marking this historic incident stands today on the Listuguj reserve. Unfortunately these events seem not only distant in time but also, perhaps of greatest concern to us today, remote to the contemporary experience of the vast majority of Mi’kmaq people.

I say French Jesuit expression for a specific reason. The Jesuits were the earliest missionaries, since well before the Celtic believers of the medieval period, to develop and employ a context-sensitive, inculturative approach to mission. Clearly evident from the oral Mi’kmaq tradition and a reading the Jesuit Relations, the faith to which Membertou and others were invited was different than other European cultural expressions of Christian faith. The French and their faith offered openness to the Mi’kmaq people that did not have as a first order of business, the social and cultural assimilation of us as a people. Quite the contrary, the French were so openly disposed to the Mi’kmaq, they freely intermarried with us – and not just in the tradition of taking a “country wife.”

The reality for many today, however, is that Membertou’s baptism is simply an historic memory. It has become so intensely coloured by the past 150+ years of Christian work among us that many call its very occurrence into question, others vigorously dispute it in revisionist fashion. That a Sagamou of Membertou’s status would embrace Christianity – and his family with him – in even the small numbers reflected in his conversion and baptism is alien to the experience of Mi’kmaq today.

The response of some is a return to a wide variety of “traditional” religious ways. Increasingly this ‘neo-traditionalism’ captures the allegiance of many. Some, in reaction, rebuke Mi’kmaq and other Native North American spiritual and cultural ways as alien and antithetical to being authentic followers of Jesus. Yet there is another option. To some extent it is a contemporary embrace of an old method; in

another sense, it is a new advance altogether. It is an approach to faith and mission that sees the potential for our traditional ways and understandings, firmly ensconced in a faithful walk with Jesus, to contribute not only to our own understanding of the Creator, but to the understanding of others also. In short, we think it is a way that is neither antithetical to our faith nor at odds with the existence of our traditional understandings.

The way forward, however, requires training previously not made available to us. And that is where the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies (NAITS) enters the picture. It is my work with NAITS for which this award is being given and, about which I would like to make you more aware today.

When Bob Faris first approached me about receiving this award I looked over the list of previous recipients. There I discovered, as with Ernie Regehr, a list of extraordinary receivers and found myself wondering if there had been an error. Ernie's comments couldn't have captured my own thoughts better. I had to do some serious searching to imagine what I had done to warrant this honour. But Ernie found solace in the words of Rev. John L. Bell, the 1999 recipient of the E.H. Johnson award in which I also take some comfort: "...when I looked at the list of my distinguished precursors, I could see clearly why they were given the award, but I couldn't fathom why I should be a recipient."

Relief for my anxiety was provided in a limited exploration of Dr. E.H. Johnson's early mission work with the SVM. Together with my own knowledge of that movement's philosophy of mission I am now confident that were Ted Johnson with us in body, not simply spirit, we would hear him exclaim his agreement in our hearing not simply our souls. Furthermore, I believe he would see the need for a shift once again in the missiological thrust of the church engaged with the mission of Jesus such as we are proposing within the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies. I do pray he might also express his affirmation of my remarks here today, finding in them some sense of hope for the future of missions – at least as it is undertaken among First Nations, Inuit, Métis and other indigenous peoples.

And so, to the committee and members of the society who oversee this award made in his honour, I say Welalin! Thank you!

The North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies – or, NAITS for short – was founded in the belief that without significant change, the North American Christian church would continue to ignore Native North American people and their cultures in yet another, albeit this time mostly unintentional, effort at assimilation into mainstream Christianity. In the face of the growing self-awareness of Native people of their historic cultures and religious traditions, the church – irrespective of denomination – could easily, therefore, become virtually irrelevant. Desirous of introducing change, NAITS therefore emphasizes the inclusion of indigenous worldview(s), especially as they relate to training future indigenous leaders in theology, biblical studies and missiology.

Many paths have converged within NAITS to create a roadway of scholarly inquiry and instruction – one that is rooted in an extensive personal and collective praxis of ministry and mission. During the period since our early formation we have come to affirm the words of fellow Native scholar, Taiaiake Alfred, who asks and answers what has been a pressing question for our community:

*What is "Indigenizing the academy?" To me, it means that we are working to change universities so that they become places where the values, principles, and modes of organization and behaviour of our people are respected in, and hopefully even integrated into, the larger system of structures and processes that make up the university itself.*

To date, together with seminaries of differing traditions of the church, we have found partners willing to embrace the question of Taiaiake Alfred and seek workable answers. It is gratifying and encouraging to us that these institutions are willing to stretch their existing paradigms of education and work together with us to create new ones. As the story I began with suggests, in part, there are horizons to our Creator that yet remain unknown – a mystery.

In the ten years NAIITS has been in existence, its growing team of practitioners and academics has undertaken the intentional development of Native North American scholarship in the areas of theology, biblical studies and mission. During this period, NAIITS has hosted six symposiums focusing on Native North American theological and missional issues; it has published six volumes of what has become an annual journal, featuring the presentations and papers of each symposium; and, has facilitated the publication of Native authors in various mainstream missiological and theological publications.

Beginning in its relationship with Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, NAIITS has or is in the process of developing working relationships and partnerships for graduate and post-graduate study with a number of other institutions in Canada, the USA and, Europe. As a result of this intentionality, NAIITS has recently graduated two students with PhD's and one with a D.Min – one PhD is in theology, one in Intercultural Studies; the D.Min is in Native North American Mission studies. We have a further six students in current doctoral training, four of whom are ABD. What's more, having graduated two M.Divs in the past two years, there are almost a score of students in or entering graduate study this fall. In the history of advanced training of Native people within the traditions of the church from which its founding members have come, this represents an unparalleled achievement. Simply put, what NAIITS is doing works! And, it works because it is we who have constructed it. Taiaiake Alfred once again notes that

*The machinery of Indigenous education may simply replicate European systems. But, even if such education resemble traditional Native American systems on the surface, without strong and healthy leaders committed to traditional values and the preservation of our nationhood they are going to fail. Our children will judge them to have failed because an education that is not based on the traditional principles of respect and harmonious coexistence will inevitably tend to reflect the cold, calculating and coercive ways of the modern state. The whole of the decolonization process will have been for nothing if Indigenous education has no meaningful Indigenous character.*

Attempts to train pastors and educators from among First Nations people have met with limited – some would say dismal – success. These attempts have focused on things external to, things foreign to, the way of being and thinking of Indigenous people. They have introduced us to conflicting feelings and attitudes about education in general, theological training in particular. Anti-intellectualism rooted itself into many of our peoples' thinking. This, of course, is not the intent of education, to bring confusion and cognitive stress. And yet, increased conflict has been the most significant outcome of attempts to educate Indigenous peoples using European methods and philosophy that sought to write on the "empty slate." As Roberto Dansie describes it, education as originally devised, focuses instead on "bring[ing] forth what is within." Dansie expands this further noting,

*That [this] is the original meaning of "education." And that is exactly what was not given to the American Indians after colonization. Formal education for the Indigenous people had nothing to do with them, their history, languages, cultures and values. It was an imposition. The more they were exposed to formal education, the further they got from themselves.*

From another front, Presbyterian scholar Bonnie Sue Lewis comments on the lower standards of education in effect for Native students preparing for ministry in the past noting, “little effort was made to encourage students to receive further training elsewhere....” She goes on to say that the western systems [consistently] fail[ed] to establish a connection with any institute of higher learning...” so that ‘Indian’ students might advance to parity.

If and when higher education was made possible for Native people, it was only on condition that they leave their community and context entirely, a move that ensured they were all but unsuited to work effectively among their own people when they returned. Bonnie Sue Lewis observes that the Session “no longer allowed Native pastors to receive theological education while performing ministry.” It stacks up to no education of any significance happening at all.

It is imperative therefore, that any new educational endeavours, whether in their philosophical development, the construction of models or the creation of methods of implementation, strive to “bring forth what is within” – within the individual and the community – even as we introduce materials and understandings which have been historically foreign to the native student and their society.

### **The Changing Context...**

There are three shifts we are trying to make in hopes of helping provide an environment that is more conducive to developing Native leadership within the wider church. We believe the most effective way to help move these shifts along, is by a resurrection of story or narrative which places Aboriginal people clearly in the mainstream of the plan and providence of God.

The first shift is found in a rediscovery of the story.

Our focus seeks to develop practical wisdom and understanding in how to embrace the gospel story as the starting place for evangelism and discipleship – in essence, a resurrection of the aspects of narrative so familiar to the traditions of the Native community. Story addresses the issues that people are actually dealing with. At the same time, it creates confidence in the way narrative works, so that one does not lapse into a revived pharisaic attitude intent on building fences, one truth on another. Good fences it turns out do not make good neighbours, only placated or enslaved ones.

We need to embrace an understanding of the issues of Aboriginal life in the context of the theological enterprise – one that will get us to that point. Thus, there is a need to embrace the source of theology, our Indigenous spirituality and the gospel story – that is the story of God. And, it is a story that is inclusive of Native people – as they are! Sitting Bull observed correctly,

*"If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man he would have made me so in the first place. It is not necessary for eagles to be crows."*

This resurrection of story also necessitates a resurrection of orality in several forms: First, preaching for us must shift from the transference of information to a communal proclamation of the gospel story. This should be central to the Christian formation of Native peoples and to their development in Christian leadership within this new approach. Second, while this theological training may, for those who so desire, lead to a degree at a bachelor or masters level, we attempt to break the material into pieces that take theology to the lay level so that Christian formation is primary. In so doing the appreciation of Christian higher education grows as people are engaged in a unified way and at all levels in the training of leaders. We are not teaching theology, we are teaching people to teach think theologically so as to

be able to teach theologically as they journey through life. Finally, we seek to be in peer-to-peer relationships between learner and instructor – which are, of course, mostly expressed orally. Theology must happen on the margins, engaging with students by resurrecting dialogical learning in which they live as they do theology.

The second shift moves us away from being theological scientists to becoming theological craftsmen and women.

There is a need to move away from theology as the realm of experts to something that the common people understand, taking ownership over its transmissibility. It encourages the community to learn discernment so as to pass on the story to subsequent generations. Thus we are making an intentional shift away from institutionalization, seeking instead to use the institution to give its legislated authority to the moral authority already granted by communities to their respective leaders. In this way we are moving to limit the effect of any single institution to require conformity, attempting instead to legitimize naturally occurring innovation where authority rests with the larger community. The learning environment is similarly being expanded to include aspects of traditional learning previously considered secondary or irrelevant. Place will be more significant in this model; adult-focused where the learner participates in the instructor's environment, will be a more prominent approach.

Furthermore, the learning environment is being expanded to include a re-appropriation of the ethics and practices of orality. This element of learning already exists to a greater degree in Native communities than in Euro-American, but it does need revitalization. This will not downplay the importance of literacy, but by reviving orality, or dare we say a hybrid of the oral and textual, we seek to build communities of unity instead of extreme individualism and isolation. All of these movements are aimed at further developing what already exists in Aboriginal communities. We simply turn from pressing students to conform to a certain way of thinking to helping them expand their thinking.

The third and final shift we are making is to move from a position of isolation to one of community and communication.

The Westernization of our communities has had many negative effects - and a few we can identify as positive. But, instead of trying to co-opt Western methods which, as Freire makes clear, often lead to harsher impositions of Western standards than the West would make itself, we are attempting to create a learning community that intersects with the cultural community of the learner.

This means that we seek not to isolate the instructor from the learner's community. The instructor travels to the place of the learner and vice versa. As place-based education makes clear, this already makes the task more likely to impact the learner in a significant way. Rather than attempting to entice them out of their life experience, teach them a new life experience and then inject them back into their community, hoping they fit, we encourage the context be a part of the learning process and therefore a more likely part of the transformed life experience. We find we have more immediate feedback so that our teaching achieves praxis in the short term, as well as long term.

A traditional model of Western education assumes that bringing the learner out of the aboriginal community into the Western learning community will hopefully, prayerfully produce a leader who takes relevant information and experience back to the Aboriginal community. The intersection point between the Aboriginal community and the learning community is extremely limited. Given that the Native philosophical bent is toward community, and community requires relationship, how then is it possible to achieve relationship in the absence of actual engagement with communities, not just individuals?

NAIITS is both reactive and proactive. It is envisaged as a transitional, and hopefully, also transformational approach. It is reactive in that we are moving to help our people transition from a

colonial, through a post-colonial experience of the world of knowledge and wisdom. It is proactive in that we are seeking to move past de-colonization to fan the flames of Indigenous thought so that the church might be enriched through a reinvigorated Indigenous knowledge context.

We are attempting to build upon the existing strengths of both western academic tradition and Aboriginal heritage. In so doing, there are several shifts that we need to hopefully promote. These shifts may be more difficult to manage for existing educational and theological institutions specifically as it concerns infrastructure – it is difficult to invest millions in a building and then not use it for training – than for the Aboriginal community for whom adaptation is life's byword.

What's more challenging in all of this is the inherent difficulty for Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people alike to believe that education that occurs in a local context – one lacking facilities and history – can carry the same prestige as that gained in a place which has significant infrastructure and history.

But we are making progress.

Welalin (Thank you)!