NEWCOMERS, BE TRUE TO YOURSELVES

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ABSTRACT

In the article, Chief Robert Joseph asserts that Multiculturalism is a strength and cornerstone for a greater Canada. Speaking on behalf of an Aboriginal community that still struggles with its own place within the Canadian tapestry, he wishes for immigrants to be true to themselves and believes they can play an active part in defining a new, more inclusive, Canadian identity. He feels that current immigration policies pose a threat to multiculturalism by mainly focusing on the economic, rather that cultural, impact of immigration. The many cultures that make up Canada deserve to be seen and heard, and deeper, more meaningful dialogue is needed: we must leave behind bigotry and racism. Aboriginal people have experienced this, and have much to contribute to this inclusive dialogue to create a true multiculturalism where divisions disappear, and diversity strengthens. It begins with you and I.

As an Aboriginal person I marvel at the changing face of our human landscape here in Canada.

There was a time in my earliest childhood where the only people living in our traditional territory were Kwakwaka'wakw. They spoke but one language, Kwakwawala, and practiced one culture.

Now the whole world is literally at our doorstep, as people flood into Canada from every region and corner of the globe. The cultural mosaic is breathtaking and boundless.

As a hereditary chief of the Gwa-wa-enuk tribe, I value the essence of this ethic and cultural diversity. It is a natural identity and has been a key to our survival as First Nations people.

When the first wave of newcomers came to our shore they attempted to assimilate us by destroying our languages and cultures. Thus we have a caution to make to our newcomers coming to our traditional home lands: "Be true to yourselves". Do not lose yourselves to assimilation in the name of Canadians.

Bring your foreign languages and your ancient rituals and practices with you. Your diversity strains to be acknowledged and respected.

As Aboriginal people we welcome you here. We are neither frightened nor challenged by your diversity and resourcefulness.

While Canada is preoccupied only with your economic worth and potential productivity, you must come with all that you are. The fullness of your true human worth must be acknowledged and respected.

Our experience with those who came to colonize our traditional territories was not good. They attempted to dismiss our history. We could not tell our stories for a very long time.

Now, we must provide our immigrants with time and space to tell their histories, their stories. As Aboriginal people we are interested in these matters, as should all Canadians.

We should all be curious and interested. Where do our newcomers come from? What languages do they bring? What beckoned them here? What values and principles do they bring that will enhance our own? How will these matters affect our quality of our life? How can we make our newcomers feel more welcome and embraced? How can we let them know that our interest in them goes far beyond their productivity, training or education? How can we convince them that they are more than modern day slaves to someone else's dreams?

My people, the Kwakwaka'wakw, have been here forever, millennia in fact. We strain to be included, but remain marginalized. Our hope lies in our common humanity and part of that nest with the potential that

newcomers can help to re-shape the Canadian human landscape to one that is tender, gentler and more inclusive.

There is one compelling desire that we share as Aboriginal people with all Canadians including those who have come from faraway lands and that is that we can create a better society for all of us.

It starts with you and I. A new and deeper dialogue must take place that begins to give face to a collective Canada that guides us on how we move forward *together.*

It is time to step back for a moment to reflect on our current immigration policy attitudes and practices.

While we invite and welcome our newcomers on our own terms (Canadian), we are both frightened and challenged by their diversity and resourcefulness. Our relationships fluctuate between fear and embrace as we gaze through restrictive lenses that limit us to seeing only their potential economic value.

Let us remind ourselves of what Vancouver Sun columnist, Douglas Todd, has told us, which is that Canada has the highest immigration rate per capita in the world. That four out of five Canadians either want immigration levels to stay the same or decrease. That these fears are always predicated by economic stress.

Foreign languages strain to be heard. Ancient rituals and practices ache to be seen. This thundering cacophony of ethnic diversity strains to be acknowledged and respected.

Every colour, every race, every creed has a right to be here. Every person or group of people has value, has purpose. In the absence of honoring all of that, we devalue the fullness of our immigrants' worth. We fail to see and lend importance to the natural world view of others. Because we do so, we limit our opportunity to see and experience the wonder of it all. In so doing we dismiss the very things that matter most to these brave adventurers-these matters that are the very essence of their soul. It is the spirit within that must be nurtured before all else. It is to start from the articulation of core values at the highest human level and then working through all the other levels.

Should there be additional investments made as we continue to attract new citizens? Absolutely! We must learn more about our new neighbours who come to Canada to be a part of us. This will lead to wholesome acceptance of each other and a better opportunity to create the just and equal society that we so desperately want. We must find new building blocks with immigrants to pave the way to human dignity and respect for one and all.

Failing to do so will harden the fraction growing in our communities. We must guard against old attitudes, bigotry and racism.

We should talk to young Canadians and newcomers because the language of divisive solitudes is beginning to creep into their jargon, and they are usually the most open minded.

Aboriginal people should be a part of this new reflection and dialogue because they have much to contribute. They have been subjected to genocidal intentions and attempts at total assimilation. They have survived and understand how they have made it to this time. In addition, aboriginal people have been multicultural since the beginning of time as they know it. Time and space does not warrant a full explanation of my last assertion. Instead, I quote anthropologist Irving Goldman:

"No part possesses a portion of the sum of all the powers and properties of the cosmos; each must share with all or the entire system of nature will die… Kwakuitl religion represents the concerns of the people to occupy their proper place within the total system of life and to act responsibly within it so as to acquire and control the powers that sustain life."

People want to belong. Immigrants are no different and should have value and purpose equal to all other Canadians. As we move away from the darker periods of our history we must do so with a certainty of conviction that old and prevailing attitudes of superiority are not a part of the equation.

We have a high number of immigrants here already and their interest and sense of well-being must be maintained and guarded to protect the integrity of our whole society. Meanwhile, as we contemplate additional newcomers let us build the cornerstones to a strong and viable society to which we invite them.

Let us have a deeper dialogue about this issue. Let us develop meaningful relationships that honor our past and our present. Let us as citizens in our own communities take responsibility for welcoming our newcomers. Let us encourage our children to walk together where they live. Let us celebrate our differences and diversity into a collective that gives us untold richness of fabric and spirit.

We are all responsible and as Aboriginal people, like myself, we can help with the unique experiences that we have. It begins with you and I.