WE ARE ALL TREATY PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

The Ancestors of the Aboriginal people of Saskatchewan, specifically Saskatoon and the surrounding area, have lived on what is now Treaty 6 territory since time began. Like other cultures around the world, each Aboriginal group has its own distinct culture, language, spiritual beliefs and practices. In a local and contemporary context, these are the times to actively reflect on the longevity of the treaties that are meant to last "as long as the grass grows, the sun shines and the rivers flow." In the last two decades, the City of Saskatoon has been involved in many various facets of building bridges among Aboriginal People, recent newcomers and the mainstream population through different avenues such as recreation, culture and business.

INTRODUCTION

"21 years ago I immigrated to Canada – an intentional choice given the nice things I had heard about the land of milk and honey—my future home. I had the language skills and hence the settlement process was easier but still consisted of the usual: finding a job and home, getting engaged in activities, learning winter driving, making new friends, explaining 'where I came from,' etc. In the process, the notion of 'Aboriginal' never quite blipped on my radar screen – the 'you don't know what you don't know' syndrome. It wasn't until a few months later and the timely release of Dances with Wolves that Lt. John Dunbar kindled a certain sense of curiosity about the cultures and customs of the original peoples of the Americas. Up until that point, I was only aware of the 'cowboys and injuns' version of the story, coupled with the colonial history that Christopher Columbus 'discovered' America. As the settlement and integration process continued, my source of information about Aboriginal People was what I read and saw in mainstream media – patriarchal at best and stereotypical at worst. Disney's animated film Pocahontas (albeit controversial from a race theory perspective) affirmed the sleeping awareness within that there is a definitive clash in what I was hearing as the 'popular' versus the 'true' story of Aboriginal People. There have since been a couple of learning opportunities in the form of presentations and field trips. Presenters would ask the room how many of us considered ourselves as Treaty people, and in my unsophisticated naivety, I was one of many that would not raise our hand. After all, I had arrived as a 'landed immigrant' and had taken the Oath of Citizenship to Canada. I did not know that I too was a Treaty person. Moreover, the presentations hovered around the cultural aspects and perhaps the residential schools... never the land. Three major events in the last five years have provided me with the sum total of an 'aha' moment. Firstly, an innocently made derogatory remark about Indigenous people by one of my immigrant students (this required a quick intervention of some historical research and facts); secondly, the 2008 Government of Canada apology to the Aboriginal People for the history of systemic racism and discrimination against them; and lastly, an internal debate on publicly releasing an information pamphlet with the heading of 'We Are All Treaty People.' These three situations led to a digging beyond culture, costume and custom – and the beginning of my understanding of the treaties and the sacred relationship between people and land in its many manifestations, from political to environmental. It was like seeing this invisible material that held all of this together, and will be the material that will bridge the gap between Aboriginal People and immigrants – whether they arrived recently or in the course of the last 400 years, whether they are 'newcomers' or 'oldcomers.' My story with regards to Aboriginal People unfolded because my radar screen was intercepted with these moments of query. But I wonder how many others would even have or avail themselves of these opportunities? Given our current situation, I don't think many. My children completed high school in Canada with a minimal mention of the treaties – my older one heard about it in an 'elective' class, and the younger ones had a mention of it in social studies, with little information on what is outlined in it and what the implications are. I have often wondered of all the learning that has not happened with generations of immigrants, and all the unlearning that needs to happen. A contemporary reality to have a Canada that works for all of us (I think of my children and grandchildren and future generations) requires a fundamental change in how we phrase the conversation around who are the immigrants and First Nations People, and then the interpretation and understanding of the treaties which bind all the peoples of this land."[2]

Although Saskatoon may have many similarities in terms of historical experience with other settlements across the country, its founding has symbolic and historical significance. In the summer of 1882, an encounter between Dakota Chief Whitecap and Mr. John Lake, a Methodist church minister from Toronto, led to the birth of the city of Saskatoon. This meeting, albeit brief, was with the purpose of creating a new settlement for the Temperance Colonization Society. "At a time when newcomer-Aboriginal relations were strained, with one group wanting to find new land for themselves and the other trying to retain the land it could, this was an example of what newcomer-Aboriginal relations should have been: two nations working together with the goal of living side by side. It also reflected the original idea of Saskatoon as a kind of utopia, in this case, a place where newcomers and Aboriginals could live together peaceably."[3] However, as time passed, this ideal never truly came to be. With a rapid increase in the number of settlers to the prairies and the declining buffalo herds, Aboriginal People risked losing their cultures and ways of life in the face of European settlements. Although Aboriginal People negotiated their land for very little in return in the signing of Treaty 6, the original spirit in which these treaties were signed was overshadowed by the Federal Government's passing, in 1876, of the Indian Act, in which Aboriginal People were decreed legal wards of the state.

The outcome of this Act has undeniably contributed to ongoing negotiations and strained relations among various groups in the context of the Canadian cultural and historical landscape. With an eye to understanding that "the participation and contribution of all citizens in the development of a community is vital to meeting the challenges of the future,"[4] in 1989 The City Council adopted a recommendation for establishing a Race Relations Committee to deal with these existing and emerging issues.

Over the years, a comprehensive Cultural Diversity and Race Relations (CD&RR) Policy,[5] which includes four community outcome statements along with indicators of success, has made room for multiple initiatives to be undertaken, initiatives that have brought together Aboriginal People and newcomers to gain a mutual respect for and an understanding of one another and address common experiences.

LIVING IN HARMONY

In efforts to achieve its vision of "work[ing] with community organizations, business and labour, all orders of government, and other stakeholders to create an inclusive community, where ethno-cultural diversity is welcomed and valued, and where everyone can live with dignity and to their full potential, without facing racism or discrimination,"[6] the City of Saskatoon has created a variety of programs and initiatives.

These efforts span the spectrum, from annual events like the "Living in Harmony" Awards that commemorate the UN's declaration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, to ongoing tools for monitoring progress. These tools include perception surveys, focus groups, and community involvement, as well as modeling leadership, in order to foster integrated and synergistic partnerships internal and external to the City of Saskatoon.

To facilitate the development of mutual awareness, understanding and appreciation among racial, religious and ethno-cultural groups, and to cooperate with other groups and organizations, in 1990 City Council proclaimed March as Cultural Diversity and Race Relations Month in Saskatoon. The City is striving to provide significant recognition for this important issue by providing an expanded opportunity for public awareness and community participation. During the month of March, the City of Saskatoon works with local school boards to host the "Living in Harmony" Awards. "Living in Harmony" is an annual program that encourages individuals to explore what intercultural harmony means to them and to share their ideas with the community through submissions of visual, literary or performing art. "Living in Harmony"[7] is an annual program that encourages individuals to explore what intercultural harmony means to them and to share their ideas with the community through submissions of visual, literary or performing art.

UNITED WE STAND

In 2002, 2005 and 2007, the City of Saskatoon conducted surveys on race relations perceptions and, subsequently, organized both adult and youth focus group discussions with two main objectives: first, to gather recommendations on how the municipality and community partners could address race relations and racism, and guide future activities of the CD&RR office, and second, to provide a safe, open discussion forum to explore race relations issues.

Following the adult focus group, it was clear that it was important for these discussions to continue. From this, a series of Conversation Circles was organized. Conversation Circles was a series of four conversations with representatives from various disciplines and "community drivers." The circles were of a round-table format, and the hope is to progressively challenge barriers to anti-racist public education and awareness in Saskatoon. These conversations were held from the immigrant, Aboriginal and mainstream perspectives.[8]

Correspondingly, to follow-up the youth focus group, "Unified Minds: Youth Action Network"[9] is being developed in partnership with Youth Launch, the western hub of the Students Commission and the Centre for Excellence in Youth Engagement. It is a network of young people in partnership with adult allies who aim to promote positive intercultural relations in our community. The main purpose of the Network is to provide an open forum for people ages 13 to 18 to come together and share their ideas on racism and discrimination, youth engagement and civic participation.

SPREADING THE WORD

In the City's efforts to promote education and awareness, the CD&RR Coordinator and the Immigration Community Resource Coordinator are often called upon to present at workshops and participate in sessions and conferences to cover such topics as "Who are the Aboriginal People?," "What is the true history of Canada?," "How do people get here?," "Differences between an immigrant and a refugee," "What are the similarities/differences in experiences?" and "How does all this fit into the context of a multicultural Canada?" The Coordinators also contribute to a monthly Calendar of Events and Newsletter to share information on events and resources that increase and promote cross-cultural understanding and interaction. In partnership with internal departments, namely Human Resources, and external community-based agencies, the Coordinators also collaborate on such initiatives as offering intercultural competency training and hosting workshops on anti-racism.

In the last couple of years, a tour called "Discover Saskatoon" has been offered to newcomers in order to familiarize them with civic facilities and provide them with a short introduction to the city. Part of the tour includes a drive by the first Urban Reserve in Canada, created in Saskatoon in 1988.[10] The Muskeg Lake Cree Nation was designed specifically for urban economic development; it was unique because of a series of agreements between the City and First Nations regarding compatible land use, services and tax loss compensation. This provides us with an opportunity to talk about Aboriginal and newcomer relations from a historical and contemporary perspective.

COLLABORATIONS: A NATURAL EVOLUTION

Saskatoon is experiencing an exponential increase in immigration. This can, in part, be attributed to the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program. Immigrants are arriving not only as skilled labourers, but also as entrepreneurs. In matching potential entrepreneurs to businesses (including businesses on reserves), one of the factors identified was an increasing need to foster mutual understanding and dispel myths between Aboriginal People and newcomers. From this need came a collaborative project entitled Building New Relationships. The goal of the project is to raise awareness and ensure that newcomers and First Nations People are educated about one another. The primary partners are the Saskatchewan Ministry of Advanced Education, Employment and Immigration, and the Office of the Treaty Commissioner. Representatives from the City of Saskatoon and the Newcomer Information Centre were on the Joint Management Committee for the project to provide feedback on the curriculum. With the Office of the Treaty Commissioner, the curriculum is now complete and, in the late fall of 2011, the first round of "train-the-trainer" sessions was held to create "champions of understanding." Some staff from various immigrant serving agencies and ethno-cultural groups participated in this to see how they could incorporate some of these concepts into English as an additional Language classes and/or Life Skills classes.[11]

The Community Development Branch of the City of Saskatoon strives to be a leader within the institution as it endeavours to serve as a catalyst in the community by bringing together a network of volunteers and agencies capable of addressing issues that affect the quality of life in the community. To meet these objectives, while fostering a welcoming environment through an integrated approach, the Community Development Branch works with community-based organizations to offer a Youth Leadership Summit for Aboriginal youth, open also to newcomer youth. This is an endeavour that fosters authentic community collaboration in support of youth involvement in the promotion of cultural diversity and positive intercultural interactions and relations in the community. The focus and goal is to increase the participation and leadership of youth in addressing the issues of racism and discrimination, youth involvement, and the promotion of civic participation, while creating an opportunity for youth to collectively identify and bring forward issues that are relevant to them. Recognizing the need among other target groups, leadership capacity development workshops were also given on International Women's Day, during which women from Aboriginal organizations and the International Women of Saskatoon were brought together to talk about leadership and what it means to them.

RENEWED BEGINNINGS

Throughout the last four centuries, migration has led to many waves of interactions of the varied cultural groups in Canada. The City of Saskatoon has been involved in many facets of building bridges among Aboriginal People, recent newcomers, and the mainstream population through different avenues such as recreation, culture, and business. Treaty 6 was signed 136 years ago, so this is a relatively new concept. Contemporary realities in the context of

environmental, political, economic, and social happenings further lend to the influence, interpretation and wisdom of the treaties. Consequently, there is a need to proceed with deliberate attention toward the principle of *mutual* benefit and to continually honour the intent under which the treaties were accepted. In providing a sense of vision for the future of Saskatoon as an inclusive and integrated city where people of all ages, genders, ethnicities, religions and socio-economic statuses are welcomed, valued and respected, it is time to actively reflect on the longevity of the treaties that are meant to last "as long as the grass grows, the sun shines and the rivers flow."[12]

"Whether they are newcomers or part of families that have been here for several generations, most people in Canada do not know a lot about Aboriginal People, our history and our cultures. From an Aboriginal perspective, the original spirit of the treaty agreements was to share the use of the lands our ancestors lived on. It was not understood that the land was being given away. The Canadian government and many Canadian people have started to realize the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada have been treated unfairly. With shifting demographics and a renewed spirit, we are now working hard to develop new relationships based on fairness and respect because indeed… We Are All Treaty People."[13]

NOTES

[1] The authors would like to acknowledge Lynne Lacroix, Manager of the Community Development Branch of the City of Saskatoon, for her constant encouragement in the work that we do and for her contribution to this article.

[2] The lived experience of an immigrant, which perhaps parallels that of many others (This is a verbatim testimony from an immigrant who wishes to remain anonymous. It was recorded in October 2011.).

[3] *The Founders, City of Saskatoon, 2008.*

[4] http://www.saskatoon.ca/DEPARTMENTS/Community%20Services/Communitydevelopment/Documents/CDRR_Policy.pdf

[5] http://www.saskatoon.ca/DEPARTMENTS/Community%20Services/Communitydevelopment/Documents/CDRR_Policy.pdf

[6] http://www.saskatoon.ca/DEPARTMENTS/Community%20Services/Communitydevelopment/Documents/CDRR_Policy.pdf

[7] http://www.saskatoon.ca/DEPARTMENTS/Community%20Services/Communitydevelopment/Cultural%20Diversity%20and%20Race%20Relations/Pages/Cultural%20Diversity%20and%20Race%20Relations%20Month.aspx

[8] A comprehensive report on the "Conversation Circles" recommendations will be made available in 2012.

[9] http://www.saskatoon.ca/DEPARTMENTS/Community%20Services/Communitydevelopment/Cultural%20Diversity%20and%20Race%20Relations/Pages/UnifiedMindsYouthActionNetwork.aspx

[10] http://www.saskatoon.ca/DEPARTMENTS/Community%20Services/PlanningDevelopment/FutureGrowth/UrbanReservesandTreatyLandEntitlement/Pages/UrbanReservesandTreatyLandEntitlement.aspx

[11] We are currently reviewing similar curricula with the Gabriel Dumont Institute to ensure that there is similar awareness and understanding about the Métis people.

[12] — (2008). *Treaty Essential Learnings: We Are All Treaty People.* Saskatoon: Office of the Treaty Commissioner (ISBN 978-0-9782685-9-5).

[13] The experience of an Aboriginal person, which perhaps parallels that of many past and present generation (This is a verbatim testimony from an Aboriginal person who wishes to remain anonymous. It was recorded in October 2011).