

Hunger at the Banquet: A Faith and Justice Lens on Food, Land and Colonialism on the Prairie

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I want to bookend this talk with two poems. I will start with a poem by an Indigenous poet, and end with a poem by a non-Indigenous poet who grew up on a prairie farm.

First a poem by Joy Harjo, poet laureate for the US and a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation:

Perhaps the World Ends Here

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun. Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.¹

Ok, let's hope the world does **not** end at this table just now, but this talk begins there, taking inspiration from that opening line: "The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live."

We eat to live and there is a great table where we are all invited to share.

We are hearing the words "colonial," and "colonization" more than ever these days. And they have a certain pejorative valence. We don't want to be colonial anymore. Why? Because even the beneficiaries of colonization know that that beautiful table where the world begins—where "children are given instructions on what it means to be human"—is a sharing table where everyone should be welcome.

We recognize that colonizing is hostile to sharing; is more about taking and claiming. Unfortunately, that recognition seems to be about as far as most Canadians are willing to go in the work of decolonizing. If we can't get any further than that, cannot see how sharing the table might actually work, it is because we have let our minds and hearts be colonized.

All the lines we draw, all the divisions, categories, distinctions and boundaries we use to exclude, or understand or appropriate or possess have overtaken our values and beliefs. We have come to a place where we cannot believe that rocks, trees, and other creatures have spirit and intrinsic value, yet we have no trouble believing that a piece of paper with some ink marks on it gives a person or corporation exclusive rights to the private exploitation of a stretch of the earth marked off with boundaries that are equally imaginary. That a registered land title and the private rights it guarantees pertaining to land we call "real estate" is more real, say, than the rights of others, human and non-human, who have dwelt on that land for thousands of years.

¹ Joy Harjo, "Perhaps the World Ends Here," *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* (W.W. Norton & Company), 1994.

Look at the way we describe land on the prairie: we call it a legal land description. Farm people know it by heart: “North-east quarter of section 10, Township 36, Range 22 West of the 2nd.” Is this how we want to talk about land? Each piece of land gets a number so we can manage it? And of course, the Indian Act gave Indigenous people all a number too—for the same reasons.

But if we describe our home and connection to land that way—as coordinates on an artificial grid imposed on the earth to make it easier to parcel off pieces into private property—what does that say about us?

What does it say about the way we regard the land, the way we think of home? In a colonized landscape, home is for many of us just a depot—a place where you live while you produce, consume, store and transfer commodities for distant markets. In a depot culture towns and cities are supply and administration centres for extractive industries producing fuel, food, and fibre. And if these enterprises are not sustainable and hurt the land and rivers, maybe it doesn’t matter because *my* property is ok—I hide the waste, mow the lawn and keep it looking tidy—and anyway I can always pack up and move to BC if I don’t like the way things are going here. This is a very de-indigenized way of living, an unsustainable way of living.

We have been trying very hard to de-indigenize the people who have deeper roots in the land; who see the prairie and forests as a community to which they belong and not merely as a depot for commodities. And we’ve been using the same methods that de-indigenized us: remove the people from their lands, enclose and privatize the commons, replace local, embedded in the land economies with market economies based on global trade, and establish education systems that teach young people all of this is normal and even superior, civilized.

We know the bad news that comes out of this—it is in our media every day: young people dying on reserves and in inner city slums, homelessness, addiction, disease, dependence on government programs and assistance, violence.

But the beautiful, good news is that they have resisted being de-indigenized, resisted assimilation—it hasn’t really worked—the nations have survived every attempt to make them disappear. So many today are renewing their traditions, finding ways to connect to the land and be true to their ancestors—whether they are on reserves or in the city. The disadvantages and racism continue but they are re-discovering what it means to be Indigenous, even in a modern world that appears to be falling apart around them.

Of course, colonialism is not exclusive to North America. It's been practiced all over the globe, wherever agricultural civilizations undergo population pressure, fostering a hungry landless underclass, usually while outstripping the carrying capacity of the soil and ecosystems.

It makes the history books as empire and war but down at the ground level it is usually about mass movements of people. The surplus of people—the poor and landless—become the tools of colonization—many of our ancestors were exactly that: crossing continents and oceans to die on battlefields or trade with Indigenous people, eventually dispossessing and displacing them on the land.

All of which, however, relegates colonialism and its effects to the past—to the dustbins of history. But it is alive and well today—in our collective failure to equitably share the wealth of the land, in our destructive exploitation of the lands under treaty, in our enclosure and privatization of Crown lands and resources, in education, incarceration and child protection systems that continue to hurt Indigenous children and families.

Part of white privilege here on the prairie is our collective blindness to the ongoing truth of colonization. We can think of ourselves as moral, decent, hard-working people and show our abhorrence and shock at the latest revelations of abuse and death at residential schools, but until we are willing to face the truth of colonization as it continues today, we will remain tied up in the great “Social sin” of our inheritance as settler people.

American journalist Anand Giridharadas often talks about “decent people upholding an indecent system.” I think that describes a lot of the colonized world—that we are all in a sense trapped in an indecent system. And it continues today—where the colonizers once were deluded by their mission of bringing Christianity and the market economy to the unmapped world, now the mission is filled with Neoliberal lies about how capitalism will solve climate change and bring health and wellbeing to all.

The only way we can recognize it, see the trap we are living in, is to step outside our privilege and look at things from the perspective of those who have been hurt most by it: those dispossessed of their cultures and land and languages. I think it is starting to happen.

While colonization comes with its own special cataracts blinding us to our privilege and white supremacy, more and more people are seeing that the extractive colonial mindset and everything it does to community, to land, water, air, and human health is hurting all of us body and soul.

Things like pandemics, climate change, and biodiversity collapse—and the anxieties and addictions we develop in response to these—always hit Indigenous people and people of colour first and hardest, but sooner or later these things come to those at the other end of the table too.

As settler people we find ourselves increasingly looking for ways to justify the way we cleared the plains of its Indigenous cultures and economies. And then to justify the agricultural and economic systems we replaced them with. Climate change and all the talk of truth and reconciliation is making that harder to manage all the time, but you still hear the rhetoric: “we feed the world. Without our agriculture, potash and oil the world would starve.” That myth has never been true, but it is less true now than ever.

In a recent article in *Scientific American*, Raj Patel, a member of the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems wrote, “Over the past decade food production has generally outstripped demand—there is more food per person than there ever was. But because of global and regional inequalities, exacerbated by the recent pandemic, levels of hunger are higher now than in 2010. In other words, more food has accompanied more hunger. People are deprived of food not because it is scarce but because they lack the power to access it.”² Patel goes on to explain that this system of artificial scarcity amidst abundance is the legacy of colonization. It is happening to Indigenous people wherever colonization has removed local economies and replaced them with market economies based on the export of resources and concentration of wealth.

If we think this scarcity amidst abundance is not happening here in Saskatchewan, we are just plain wrong. Indigenous people make up a disproportionate segment of the clientele of our food banks. And the food banks just cannot keep up.

In Regina, an ER nurse, Danielle Froh, saw a lot of undernourished people in the community and in the Emergency Room—most of them Indigenous—so she started the Regina Community Fridge. Just a fridge and a pantry on the street where hungry people can come to get donated food. There are three now in the city but the first one is behind a pharmacy. The pharmacist was

² Raj Patel, “Agroecology Is the Solution to World Hunger,” *Scientific American*, November, 2021, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/agroecology-is-the-solution-to-world-hunger/>.

already keeping canned food behind the counter for clients who need something to eat.

Two of the three of the Regina community fridges are in areas where there are no grocery stores whatsoever—they are food deserts.

And as we know, Indigenous people suffer elevated rates of diabetes and other diseases caused by poor nutrition.

Ok, so how did we get to this place in a land of abundance? To move forward we need to continue looking deeply into the past to understand the roots of injustice and food insecurity. Here is a bit of Catholic social teaching on why we need to acknowledge our past:

Whenever the truth has been suppressed by governments and their agencies or even by Christian communities, the wrongs done to the indigenous peoples need to be honestly acknowledged... **The past cannot be undone, but honest recognition of past injustices** can lead to measures and attitudes which will help to rectify the damaging effects for both the indigenous community and the wider society. The Church expresses deep regret and asks forgiveness where her children have been or still are party to these wrongs. Aware of the shameful injustices done to indigenous peoples...the Synod Fathers apologized unreservedly for the part played in these by members of the Church, especially where children were forcibly separated from their families.³

Who wrote that? It was a pope and not a particularly progressive pope. That was Pope John Paul II.

So, what of our past here on the plains? In recent years we have been made aware of how the bison were intentionally exterminated and then First Nations, compelled by starvation, were forced onto small reserves—all of this happening from 1870s and 80s. After that, the Indian Act, Residential Schools, pass law, prohibitions against cultural practice, and so on—all contributing to the attempted genocide of Indigenous people.

³ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, 28, November 22, 2001, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20011122_ecclesia-in-oceania.html.

But the stage for all of that was set much earlier, reaching back into the late-eighteenth century at least. And it has much to do with food and injustice at the table.

Before going into some detail on that history, I want to read to you a passage from Charles Eisenstein's book, *The Ascent of Humanity*, that speaks to how colonial systems—the money and debt-based consumer economy—destroy more sustainable cultures and systems:

To introduce consumerism to a previously isolated culture it is first necessary to destroy its sense of identity. Here's how: Disrupt its networks of reciprocity by introducing consumer items from the outside. Erode its self-esteem with glamorous images of the West. Demean its mythologies through missionary work and scientific education. Dismantle its traditional ways of transmitting local knowledge by introducing schooling with outside curricula. Destroy its language by providing that schooling in English or another national or world language. Truncate its ties to the land by importing cheap food to make local agriculture uneconomic. Then you will have created a people hungry for the right sneaker.⁴

I recently read a book called *Pemmican Empire*.⁵ Written by University of Calgary historian George Colpitts, it argues that in this part of the world—the prairie lands of the Saskatchewan River, Qu'Appelle and Assiniboine River basins—the Hudson Bay Co and other traders exploited the existing gift economy of Nehiyaw, Anishinaabe, and Nakoda people, ultimately destroying them and replacing them with extractive economic systems.

Indigenous gift economies – in which you would give away surplus in moments of abundance, confident that the recipients would also aid you in future – became for traders a way to skim off enormous surpluses for export and private offshore profit. It turned the logic of Indigenous food systems on its head.

Through the early and mid-nineteenth century Indigenous people found themselves indebted and drawn into a foreign

⁴ Charles Eisenstein, *The Ascent of Humanity: Civilization and the Human Sense of Self* (Panentheia Press), 2007,

<https://ascentofhumanity.com/text/chapter-4-03/>.

⁵ George Colpitts, *Pemmican Empire: Food, Trade, and the Last Bison Hunts in the North American Plains, 1780–1882* (Cambridge University Press), 2014.

economy. After a period of what seemed like fair trade between nations, the investors of the British HBC over time cornered the market, exploiting the culture and labour of plains people to hunt and process bison meat and fat in a pemmican production industry. It was a factory production system—an early form of processed, industrial food.

Pemmican was essential as the fuel driving the fur trade to the north and west. It underwrote commercial expansion, improving transportation and feeding the first colonists in the Selkirk Colony where Winnipeg is today.

By subsuming its competitors, the HBC became a monopsony and started fixing the price of pemmican. As of 1861, the company had driven the price of a sack of pemmican (which included the meat of three bison and the fat of six), down to six cents. Plains' peoples by that point had become dependent on rifles and other trade goods, including alcohol, which they received in return for the pemmican they produced. By the early 1800s the trading companies were shipping more than 20,000 gallons of alcohol into the Northwest. In the face of lower prices for pemmican, Indigenous people suddenly were indebted to the HBC, which would give them food, alcohol and other consumer products on credit.

Dependent on a foreign economy based on currency, credit and interest, Indigenous people found themselves competing with one another for the remaining bison. They had little choice other than to kill and process even more bison. The Métis in particular switched to massive summer hunts where pregnant bison were killed, in turn driving the population declines that seemed to lead to even more intensive hunting.

Does this sound familiar? It should: industrialized food that depletes the environment, that best serves the interests of a multinational corporation, that traps the laboring class in a system that pits private interest against community values; a system where local product is displaced from site and community of origin, produced for distant audiences and external profits. It's the same model we see today in prairie agriculture, with the same results. Decent people trapped in an indecent system.

In this way it took only a few generations to replace the gift economies and self-sufficient food systems of Indigenous people with an extractive market economy based on indebtedness and private interest instead of mutual interest.

In some Indigenous cultures it is said that “You save your food in the stomach of your brother.” A hunter comes home with

moose or elk meat and distributes packages of meat around the community. The west coast potlatch—which Canada outlawed—was a ceremonial expression of a gift economy. Leadership and status come from rituals of sharing wealth to foster goodwill and community and sharing resources. Wealth is never hoarded. It is simply passed on to those in need. And the circulation of gifts ensures that they gather value as they move through the community, creating stronger and stronger bonds. Accumulating wealth in such an economy is a sign of a poverty of the spirit.

Ok, so what about farther back in the history of colonization, back to the place and time before colonization and capitalism got hold of us, making us into colonizers? Because that seems to be the historic process: the colonized in turn become colonizers, passing on the social infection of exploitation, debt injustice, and hunger. Simone Weil talked about the European disease of rootlessness: “Whoever is uprooted himself uproots others. Whoever is rooted himself doesn’t uproot others.”⁶

Well, if we look at our own history as Judaeo Christian people, we can see some of what we lost. It is possible to read the Bible with an awareness of debt bondage, colonialism and the need for an alternative gift economy.

One place we will find it is in the Jewish tradition of the Jubilee. A few weeks ago, I woke up in the middle of the night thinking about an old publication, a newsletter, called “The Ram’s Horn.” I knew that had something to do with the Jubilee but could not remember what exactly. Brewster Kneen, who wrote the newsletter with his wife Catherine, is a farmer and ecologically minded theologian, but really a modern-day Jeremiah. A voice in the wilderness of industrial ag. Anyway, I remembered that its masthead had something about jubilee. So, I consulted with Google and discovered that the word jubilee comes from the Hebrew *yôbēl*, the ram’s horn, which was blown to inaugurate the Jubilee year.

We are living in a time when we are being called to atonement, when the Ram’s Horn of the Jubilee is being sounded in the land—by Indigenous people, and they are inviting all Canadians to something that is very much like the Jubilee year as it appears in Leviticus. Here is how the Yahweh of Leviticus describes it:

⁶ Simone Weil, “Uprootedness” in *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind* (London: Rutledge & Paul, 1952).

you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces...The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.⁷

Every fifty years, the Israelites took a Jubilee year, a kind of an economic reset, a year of restitution and restoration throughout the land. It was a time to cancel debts, to restore people to their families and to ancestral lands, to remind the wealthy and privileged that the earth is not theirs to possess and exploit; to slow down all our reaping and sowing and gathering into barns and instead to share the land with the poor and with all of God's creatures. Such a wise thing—a Sabbath of Sabbaths to remind ourselves every now and then that the land does not belong to us, and therefore we should come to the banquet table of Creation more modestly and with a willingness to share with others—the human and more than human others who are also invited to the banquet.

In the New Testament we have Jesus doing his best to get the scribes and Pharisees at the table with the poor and the disprivileged—to get everyone to come to the feast. Begging the question of who is missing when we gather; how do we bring everyone to the table?

For us today here in this part of the world, we are asking ourselves, how we own up to and account for the injustices at the foundation of our privileges as non-Indigenous peoples. How we set about the work of restoration and restitution.

Let's take a look at the parables of the feast or banquet in Luke and Matthew.

So, in Matthew's gospel Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and religious leaders of the day and chastising them with this parable where the privileged people invited to a King's banquet decline and do not come, and this enrages the King, and he instead sends his servants out to invite people off the street. And there are some other grisly details I won't go into here—but the banquet invitation... What is a banquet invitation? To join in community and set aside

⁷ Leviticus 25:10-12; 23-24.

private, personal concerns for a time and become something more than our personal needs and desires. At its best it can be an act of communal sharing, a celebration of abundance in Creation that belongs to no one person but to all creatures. It is worth noting that the ones who ignore the banquet invitation in the gospel parable are said to just go off “one to his field, another to his business.” And then another one receiving the invitation actually kills the servants sent to invite him.⁸

A confusing parable in Matthew’s version. Luke’s is a lot better, and I will say something about it later but I think the banquet or feast image is a good one for us to keep in the back of our minds as we think about the history of colonization and settlement here on the prairie.

The feast or banquet is an important ceremony in almost all First Nations on the continent. At the earliest contact between First Nations peoples and our settler ancestors, the newcomers were generously invited literally but, more deeply in a figurative sense, to the banquet table of the prairie world, where there was enough abundance for all to share.

I am told that is how the nations regarded treaties—as a sacred covenant between the host nations and the newcomers, overseen by the power of the Pipe and the Crown—not to surrender lands for private wealth gathering but to find ways to share and care for the land together.

But as we know, after the treaties were signed, the colonial powers instituted the Indian Act unilaterally, and forced the first peoples onto reserves and residential schools, removing the wild bison, and giving the most fertile land to newcomers piece by piece.

But let us just think for a moment about what the land was like before the treaties were signed. What was the banquet to which we were invited and how have we received the gifts of that banquet?

In the area that eventually became Saskatchewan there were 60M acres of land with grassland aspen parkland and wetlands south of the forest. Until government policy and overhunting killed off the wild bison herds, the great plains was a North American Serengeti—whooping cranes, eagles, trumpeter swans, bison, antelope, plains grizzly; birds everywhere.

Those who signed the treaties, agreeing to share the wealth of the prairie with newcomers, were assured that they and their descendants would always be able to hunt and gather medicines and move through the prairie. No one mentioned that the land would

⁸ Matthew 22:1-14.

soon be plowed, turned upside down and cut up into parcels for the exclusive use of settlers.

Today we estimate we have somewhere near ten million acres of native grassland left in mostly small pieces in various states of degradation. That means we are down to less than 20% of our natural cover south of the forest. A recent report from the World Wildlife Fund shows that Saskatchewan continues to lose native grasslands and wetlands at an alarming rate—in some areas as much as 13% a year, the worst of any state or province on the northern Great Plains.⁹

In a mere five or six generations, we have squandered much of what we received at the banquet. A landscape that has lost more than 80% of its natural cover and wetlands is very vulnerable to flooding and drought, soil depletion; and will be hard put to adapt to the effects of climate change as they come our way.

The squandering continues today.

This fall, the Saskatchewan government posted 44 parcels of Crown land to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. Most of it land with forest, grassland and wetlands, some formerly protected by legislation as conservation lands—and all of it a remnant of the lands we were supposed to be sharing under treaty.

Reconciliation, atonement, is not just about making payments to residential school victims, as important as that is—it is also about the land we were supposed to share and protect under treaty; it is about finally living up to the spirit of the treaties.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with private property—it is one way for land to be used and cared for responsibly, but it is not working out that way because we are missing that Jubilee or Sabbath awareness that you can accumulate too much private land, and that the dispossessed and landless need to be given their just share.

We don't have any cultural or legal mechanisms in place that ensure that private rights to use land will foster economic justice in human communities and will not harm the long-term health of the land, and the water, soil, and wildlife we all depend on for our wellbeing.

A culture that is encouraged to use private land to concentrate wealth into the hands of the few, excluding others—especially the original inhabitants—has long ago forgotten the

⁹ *2016 Plowprint Report* (World Wildlife Fund: 2016), [https://c402277.ssl.cf1.rackcdn.com/publications/947/files/original/plowprint AnnualReport 2016 Final REV09192016.pdf](https://c402277.ssl.cf1.rackcdn.com/publications/947/files/original/plowprint%20AnnualReport%202016%20Final%20REV09192016.pdf)

message of the Jubilee and instead has converted the Lord's banquet—the gifts of the land—into a private country club.

Residential schools removed culture and language from generations and taught first peoples to hate their own heritage, but the reserve and land settlement process, giving most of the land under treaty to non-Indigenous people, removed the people and their land ethic from the prairie. And that removal is hurting all of us and will continue to hurt us until we bring everyone back to the banquet table as equals and re-visit what it means to live under treaty.

We have become fond of saying we are treaty people and mentioning that we are on treaty territory when we gather...all of which is good, but we need to go the next step and say, 'ok so we are treaty people, what does that mean? What do the treaties mean? And what do we need to do to honour them?

I am not going to try to give a final answer to that because it is something we need to discuss at that banquet table and see what we can agree upon. But I think I can tell you what it doesn't mean:

- It doesn't mean that the First Nations traded in all their lands for tiny reserves and a five-dollar payment on treaty days. Our settler culture is founded on a lie that preserves privilege and injustice with the fiction that the great leaders who signed those treaties did so out of a desire to surrender the very rivers, forests, and prairies that had nurtured their ancestors body and soul for thousands of years—in other words to give up their only home.
- Who would do that? To believe treaties are a surrender of land is to assume Indigenous people can be duped and that our ancestors duped them.
- But being treaty people also doesn't mean all the white people have to surrender their lands
- It doesn't mean we have to give up farming and private property, but it could mean we reform our governance around private property and how it is acquired, used and shared.
- **It does mean** we share responsibility for the care of our land and we share the rights and benefits of the land.
- **and** that treaties are living covenants that should be guiding our way forward not justifying the sins of colonization.

When the Cree, Saulteaux, Assiniboine and other nations met the colonial powers at the treaty table all the created things of the prairie world were present at the table too. Everyone there but the colonizers had had come to join in a sacred covenant about kinship, sharing and reciprocity. As the basis of an equal, sharing partnership—but those representing the Crown were not thinking about bonds of kinship. They had transaction in mind, deal making, and land surrender.

This is what needs to be restored; reconciled. A return to the original spirit of the treaties as a sacred covenant that commits us to receive the gifts of Creation, sharing and caring for them in ways that reconcile Indigenous and Non-Indigenous needs, values, and economic systems.

It is always tempting to prescribe solutions and specific ways of bringing economic and ecological justice to the land but ultimately that has to be left to those who come to the table.

I will only say that all sides—people from all religious and cultural traditions—have wisdom on land justice that should be present as we decide how to de-colonize and re-indigenize our relationships to one another and to the land.

From theologian Leonardo Boff:

the Earth as our mother is full of wisdom. First, it welcomes all beings; it has birthed forth myriad children, not only human beings. We form a great community of life where we are all sisters and brothers. All of us come from the same origin, the Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago. The Earth's wisdom is manifest in the diversity of her children – in the forest people, the mineral people, the animal people, human people, and the spirit people, as Indigenous Peoples teach us. They do not speak of the forest, but rather of the forest people. Both diversity and the interconnection of all were created simultaneously...Each being has its place within evolution, it brings a message from the universe, it is a written word from God in creation.¹⁰

All over the planet, nature is suffering most where Indigenous cultures have been removed.

¹⁰ “Caring for Our Common Home: A Dialogue Between Leonardo Boff & Mark Hathaway,” *Openspace* 13, no. 1/2 (September 2020): 9, <https://jesuitforum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Jubilee-for-the-Earth.pdf>.

Non-Indigenous civilization, relatively new to the planet, has fostered a conflicted and disrespectful relationship with the environment—where our economy and food systems extract the gifts of the land and convert it into toxic waste and by-products.

And our blindness to the gifts and generosity of our rivers, plains and forests is confluent with our blindness to the value of the cultures and languages of the original peoples, the people who in their long-standing traditions have always seen the rivers and land as home, who talk about respect for the earth and are now speaking out against pipelines and tar sands and other things that threaten our water and land.

Here is what Buddhist teacher and activist Derek Rasmussen says about our de-indigenizing civilization:

“What happens” he asks, “if you create a test-tube Non-Indigenous civilization, and let it parasitize the land and cultures of all the rooted Indigenous civilizations?

“War, climate upheaval, environmental destruction.

“We are passengers,” he says, “on a soaring De-Indigenized jet plane burning up the accumulated linguistic, cultural and biodiversity stores of the planet. The mature cultures look on at us in horror. To them our civilization looks like a lumbering juvenile delinquent on a binge. Arrogant, violent, and ignorant, we've stolen their wallet full of accumulated natural and cultural capital and we're spending like drunken sailors.

“Only now we're beginning to realize: our plane has no landing gear.

“And no parachute.

“This system was only made to go up.”¹¹

Of course, nature will survive without us at the deepest levels, where the networks of fungi hold everything together in the soil, but if we want to be around for a while yet we are going to need to foster and learn from the wisdom of indigenous cultures.

From Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*:

It is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects

¹¹ Derek Rasmussen, “Assimilating Canadians into the wisdom of Indigenous ancestors,” *rabble.ca*, April 22, 2013, <https://rabble.ca/environment/assimilating-canadians-wisdom-indigenous-ancestors/>.

affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. Nevertheless, in various parts of the world, pressure is being put on them to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects which are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture.¹²

35 times in *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis tells us that we must change our ways of living; that our current systems for production, consumption and distribution are destructive.

The prairie world needs a Jubilee, an economic reset, a time of restitution and restoration throughout the land; a time to restore people to their families and to ancestral lands, to remind the wealthy and privileged that the earth is not theirs to possess and exploit; to slow down all our reaping and sowing and gathering into barns and instead begin to share the land with the poor and with all of God's creatures.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of fear out there among church people and settler people in general—if we are all being invited to a new banquet, there are going to be those who ignore the invitation, just as in Matthew's parable.

There was an old tune my father liked to play on guitar when I was a boy—at the time I had no idea what it was about, but I remembered it this week in preparing my notes. I think it is based on the parable of the wedding banquet—not the version in Matthew but the one in Luke 14, where the rich and privileged ignore the invitation and make excuses and there is no violence handed out by the king. Sorry I just bought a field, or I just bought some oxen, and so on. And then the King invites the less privileged and fills the banquet with the lame and the poor, the excluded ones:

I cannot come to the banquet,
don't trouble me now.
I have married a wife; I have bought me a cow.
I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum.

¹² Francis I, *Laudato Si'*, May 24, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html.

Pray, hold me excused, I cannot come.

A lot of us will want to be excused—too busy maintaining our privilege, our fields and commitments, but that may not matter. But the excluded ones—who have had their lands and their languages and cultures taken away, they are going to be there. If we are brave enough to respond to the invitation, then how do we do that?

Here is a bit of a primer—not exhaustive, but some tips for responding to the call for justice in the land:

- First, set aside any notions of rescuing or saving. Most efforts to “help” Indigenous people have been misguided and tend to do more harm than good—imposing ideas and solutions that really are just about how to convert them into being more like us.
- Instead of trying to help, first focus on stopping the harm: what can we do to stop poisoning and restricting access to the lands and waters Indigenous people depend upon?
- Set aside the need to get results and answers and instead focus on building trust and relationships first.
- Come with a willingness to listen and learn, an open heart.
- Talk less. Don’t take the stage, leave space for Indigenous people present to do most of the talking.
- If you make a mistake just apologize and move on
- Show that you come with resources, fund a project at arms length preferably one that is led by and for Indigenous people.
- In every discussion of issues or plans that concern the public interest and social justice, look for ways to include Indigenous voices at the table as full partners.

The Christian church was used to justify the colonization of land and its peoples; We know this. It must be strong allies now in the de-colonization of land and the re-birth of its peoples.

Now, none of this is easy to do, none of it can be done alone. We need to work with people inside and outside our churches, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

When I was writer in residence at Campbell River staying at the Haig Brown House where naturalist and writer Roderick Haid

Brown lived with his wife Anne, I enjoyed looking through Anne's library which happened to contain a lot of social teaching and progressive theology. I picked up a book by Tom Ryan, called "A Survival Guide for Ecumenically Minded Christians."¹³ In it there was this epigram written by Reinhold Niebuhr, the theologian who also wrote the famous Serenity Prayer. Some of you may be familiar with this but I think it is worth repeating in light of the work we have ahead of us in Canada:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;
therefore we must be saved by hope.

Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete
sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we
must be saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished
alone; therefore we must be saved by love.¹⁴

I will close by reading Sheri Benning's poem from her newly released collection *Field Requiem*. This is "NE 10 36 22 W2nd."¹⁵

¹³ Thomas Ryan, *Survival Guide for Ecumenically Minded Christians* (Liturgical Press), 1989.

¹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 63.

¹⁵ For the text of this poem see Sheri Benning, *Field Requiem* (Carcenet Press), 2021, 67.

Trevor Herriot

Trevor Herriot is a naturalist, grassland conservationist, and the author of several award-winning books, including *Grass, Sky, Song* and the national bestseller *River in a Dry Land*. He has published essays and articles in *The Globe & Mail*, *Brick*, *Border Crossings*, *Canadian Geographic*, and several anthologies. Herriot appears regularly on CBC Radio Saskatchewan's Birdline and has been featured in several documentaries, including "Grasslands: a Hidden Wilderness," which appeared on The Nature of Things. He is a member of the KAIROS Prairies North Decolonization Group which is a small working group that collaborates with faith groups and Indigenous people to advance the conversations around decolonization. He and his wife, Karen, live in Regina, and spend much of their time on a piece of Aspen Parkland prairie east of the city.

The Michael Keenan Memorial Lecture

Michael Gregory Keenan, professor and dean of St. Thomas More College, was born in Toronto on 23 May 1937. After elementary and secondary education at Owen Sound and Toronto, he enrolled in psychology at Assumption University in Windsor, receiving his BA in 1961 and his MA the following year.

In 1962 he married Patricia Kohlmeier of Rochester, NY. They had three children, Kathleen, Kevin, and Terrence.

From 1963 to 1965 he was instructor at Christ the King College (now King's College) at the University of Western Ontario.

He came to St. Thomas More College in 1965 as a lecturer, on the invitation of the principal, Rev. Peter Swan, CSB, and held this position until 1967 when he left to take up doctoral studies at the University of Waterloo, where he received his PhD in 1971. While at Waterloo, he also served as lecturer at St. Jerome's College.

In 1971 he returned to STM as an assistant professor, and from 1974 as associate professor. In 1975 he was named first dean of the college, and he held this position for two five-year terms. After a lengthy battle with cancer, he died on 31 October 1986.

In December 1986, the Board of Governors of St. Thomas More College set up a memorial fund. In the spring of 1987, the college's faculty administration forum approved an annual public lecture by a distinguished visiting professor on topics reflecting the range of disciplines at St. Thomas More College. The lectures are held each fall on a date close to the anniversary of Dr. Keenan's death.



ST. THOMAS MORE COLLEGE
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