

Education for Regeneration

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In reflecting on education and visions for a sustainable human society, I find inspirational this story by Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betamosake Simpson:

Ethically, it is my emphatic belief that the land, reflected in Nishnaabeg thought and philosophy, compels us towards resurgence in virtually every aspect. Walking through the bush last spring with my children, the visual landscape reminded me of this. We saw Lady Slippers, and I was reminded of our name for the flower and the story that goes with it¹, and then moss, and then butterflies². Then we saw a woodpecker³ and I thought of a similar story. Finally, we walked through a birch stand and I thought of Nanabush, Niimkiig and birch bark⁴. Our Nishnaabeg landscape flourishes with our stories of resistance and resurgence, yet through colonial eyes, the stories are interpreted as quaint anecdotes with “rules” of engagement and consequence. Interpreted within our cultural web of non-authoritarian leadership, non-

¹ For a written version of this story, see Lise Lunge-Larsen and Margi Preus, The Legend of the Lady Slipper (Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

² One version of this story exists in “The First Butterflies,” in Tales the Elders Told: Ojibway Legends by Basil Johnston (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1983:12-17); another exists in John Borrows’ Drawing Out Law: A Spirit’s Guide (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010:14-16).

³ Basil Johnston, “The Woodpecker,” in The Bear-Walker and Other Stories (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1983:49-55).

⁴ Niimkiig means thunderbirds. For a version of this story see Wendy Makoons Geniusz’s “Nenabozho and the Animkikiig,” in Our Knowledge is Not Primitive: Decolonizing Botanical Anishinaabeg Teachings (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009:136-140).

hierarchical ways of being, non-interference and non-essentialism, the stories explain the resistance of my Ancestors and the seeds of resurgence they so carefully saved and planted. So I could then assume my responsibility as a Michi Saagiiig Nishnaabeg to care take of their garden, eventually passing those responsibilities on to my grandchildren” (Simpson 2011:18).

The complexities of indigenous intergenerational cultural transmission are very different from what we university professors can aspire to in our classrooms, yet we have a duty, I believe, to seek out a diversity of voices and experiences about the role of humans in relation to the more-than-human world.

Let’s look around the class or meeting room, and look at our books: who’s missing? What voices are we not able to hear? Why are they not present, despite efforts to bring together a diverse group? How can those others be included? One way is by bringing in ideas transmitted in writing, or through videos or art, that would otherwise be unrepresented. This is, of course, a partial and one-way communication; obviously not as good as figuring out why diverse others aren’t actually there in person, and working to address the reasons.

As a climate justice researcher / activist / teacher, and as a critical feminist ecological economist who is a settler in North America, committed to progressive socio-economic reform, I offer some thoughts about directions and opportunities.

Resurgence

It seems to me that we must think in terms of regeneration and resurgence, as Simpson says, not mere sustainability. Following centuries of colonization and imperialism, industrial “development”, toxic pollution, and carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels, the status quo is not to be sustained, but rather remediated. The impacts on the most vulnerable are crucially important for us all as a species. It is a myth that the rich will always be able to buy their way

out of crises, and in any case, building an attractive future for humans requires regenerating the Earth for all life.

One good place to start is by recognizing the heinous impacts of capitalist growth-driven economic systems. As someone who was trained as a neoclassical economist, I can state that the more you learn about economics, the more pernicious you realize it is. We need to admit the impossibility of privatizing all that is valuable, and the need to instead equitably govern the life-support systems (water, soil, air, forests, culture) that sustain humans and all life. This requires building education processes and systems that will be capable of transmitting skills for personal and collective responsibility, conflict resolution, “two-eyed seeing,⁵” awareness of nature and others, and discerning appropriate behaviours. It also requires continually articulating for ourselves, and publicly, that individual greed is not deserving of respect or adulation; linking personal wealth with political power is not the only or the best way to run human systems; it always eventually leads to downfall. Humans can do better. An example of a sustainable way to culturally embed the redistribution of wealth, and balance material wealth against respect for long-term leadership (rather than allowing wealth and political/economic leadership to reinforce each other) is the potlatch ceremony traditional to several First Nations on the Pacific Coast (Native American Netroots 2010).

Lived Experience and Diversity

In terms of educational transformation, as many others have noted, important elements include experiential education, team building, spending time outdoors, basic science and systems literacy, practice with arts and multiple ways of knowing, transdisciplinarity, removing the

⁵ As discussed at the Banff Sustainability Forum, this means seeing with both a Western eye and an indigenous eye; engaging with diverse “ways of knowing,” including ethical and cultural traditions, and seeing the appropriateness of knowledge grounded in diverse ways.

perverse silos in academia that inhibit our working across artificial boundaries and divisions, and ongoing efforts to decolonize and de-Westernize our communication and thought.

Systems literacy is important, just as mathematical literacy is. We need to try to develop in students a kind of systems-literate common sense, the ability to distinguish between things that make no sense at all, those that seem sensible but are also problematic on other levels, and those that really lead “in a good direction”⁶.

The caring and common sense that I believe most people have is being attacked on all sides by political maneuvers and purposeful non-truth-telling, and by the way that our attention is frittered away with constant demands to multi-task. An example is that even in class, many students are likely to be on Facebook rather than paying attention to the topic at hand. Somehow, as teachers, we have to be able to name this, turn it around, and refocus the debate. We can point out that people have many interests; they have their feet in lots of different places, so how can we bring everyone together and build on that diversity? How can we use the knowledge and the connections that all in the classroom have, to think together about what needs to happen?

Watersheds and Interdependence

One of the metaphorical frames that I find useful for thinking and teaching about systems is the idea of watersheds. A watershed is a system in which the energy that comes into the system is virtually limitless, while in a material sense the flows are more constrained. Fuelled by solar energy, water rains down at the top of the system and washes soil, nutrients and pollutants downhill, affecting the lives and interactions of the people and other living things within the watershed. The relationships between people who live on the heights and the lowlands are

⁶ The Nishnaabemowin term “mino bimaadiziwin” means “in a good way” or “continuous rebirth.” See Simpson 2011:26.

interconnected, ecologically and economically. Thinking about where we are in the watershed and how what we're doing affects others and interacts with all else that happens is a way of linking our thoughts to the land and to other people, thus helping to build a collective politics.

The crisis we are now living is related to not knowing how to replace the current, globalized economic system that is driving the world towards environmental disaster with another kind of aware, collective politics that can lead to regeneration of our home, the Earth. This is related to the crisis of making the energy transition beyond fossil fuels. These crises overlap but they are not exactly the same. They share aspects of fear, denial, guilt, shame, all negative emotions on the part of those of us who know we consume too much (as did our ancestors), and are responsible for the worst aspects of the crises, and must therefore try to “turn the canoe around,” or take action to change the situation for the better (Klein 2013).

Commons

As teachers, we have a responsibility to show some glimmers of hope and possible ways of moving forward to resolve these crises, since we are all in this situation together. One of those glimmers for me was when Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Nobel prize in economics, in 2009, for her academic empirical work on the conditions under which people can develop sustainable governance systems that prevent open access to the common-pool resources used by many, thus preventing the “tragedy of the commons”.

The community attributes for successful commons governance that Ostrom identified in her research include things like mutual knowledge and respect, a bounded system so that people recognize what the limits of the resource are, a history of regulations developed in a participatory way with enforcement so that people know that you can't violate the norms with impunity, and

non-interference by higher orders of government in the local community's own governance system (Ostrom 1990).

Ostrom also developed the concept of "polycentricity", which explains how different levels of authority and different kinds of skills can interact with each other to make the governance system work better, with more resilience. She showed that a polycentric system is not inefficient even though it has overlapping functions; instead it is stronger and more sustainable (Ostrom 2009, 2010, 2014).

These are ideas that fly in the face of, and actually contradict, many of the basic tenets of economics. But in my view and in the view of a growing number of scholars who are working on climate change and climate justice, among other topics, this commons-type approach is very hopeful. It revives and underscores the importance of participatory democracy and local responsibility for standing up to capital and preventing the commodification of water, mineral resources, forests, fisheries, etc. Commons governance is fundamentally different from allowing markets to run things. It is also different from centralized state control and planning. It is different from the kind of hybrid system we now have in most places, with government intervention into market-based economic systems to nudge them in various directions, usually designed to help the interests of the powerful. "Free markets" have never been a realistic description of how political economy really operates anyway, as feminist ecological economists are well aware; unpaid work and "free" inputs from "nature", made possible by control over women and marginalized peoples, have always undergirded capitalist economies (Mies 1986; Mellor 1992). The market economy is just the tip of the iceberg; it's supported by unpaid work, natural systems, ecosystem services; all much larger than the economy that we are trained to "see".

Co-operatives and commons, too, are more prevalent and more important in assuring people's livelihoods globally than many may realize. The United Nations has estimated that the livelihood of half the world's population is made secure by co-operative enterprises (COPAC 1999:1). Mutual aid, utopian communities, grassroots collaborative economic initiatives and co-ops allowed Black Americans to persevere in "finding alternative economic strategies to promote economic stability and economic independence in the face of fierce competition, racial discrimination, and White supremacist violence and sabotage" while building leadership and community stability (Gordon Nembhard 2014:28). Access to community-managed resources and services still undergirds resilience by helping people all over the world weather personal, economic and ecological shocks (Brown et al. 2015:156).

Finding Hope

So I believe there are cracks in current unsustainable, crisis-ridden political and economic systems; through those cracks is growing people's awareness of the importance of alternative livelihood systems like commons, and how people can build and transmit the collective skills to regenerate and preserve them.

Dene activist Glen Coulthard, in his book Red Skin White Masks, speaks about this hope and the promise of commons.

"What must be recognized by those inclined to advocate a blanket 'return to the commons' as a redistributive counterstrategy to the neoliberal state's new round of enclosures, is that, in liberal settler states such as Canada, the 'commons' not only belong to somebody – *the First Peoples of this land* – they also deeply inform and sustain Indigenous modes of thought and behaviour that harbour profound insights into the maintenance of relationships within and between human beings and the natural world

built on principles of reciprocity, non-exploitation and respectful coexistence. By ignoring or downplaying the injustice of colonial dispossession, critical theory and left political strategy not only risks becoming complicit in the very structures and processes of domination that it ought to oppose, but it also risks overlooking what could prove to be invaluable glimpses into the ethical practices and preconditions required for the construction of a more just and sustainable world order” (Coulthard 2014:12).

He is pointing out that you don’t just take indigenous ideas and apply them to what’s basically a colonial system. What is required is to uproot settler understandings, and educate ourselves about what that colonial past has meant. And by “colonial,” I mean industrial, fossil-fuel based economies; I mean water-based sanitation, and the idea that everyone has a right to a personal transportation pod that burns fossil fuels and spews carbon into the air. I mean a lot of things that have become normalized for many over the past 100 years or so, and whose absence may be scary to those of us who’ve enjoyed these things for a long time and whose parents may have too, but whose grandparents probably didn’t; they are aberrations in human history. Humans can create better, healthy, durable and equitable ways of living on the Earth. We do need to help each other, in order to see how change is positive, not only fear-inducing, and in order to make sure that the change processes don’t hurt the most vulnerable. Here some ideas regarding how to do that.

We have to get students out of the classroom both literally and epistemically, so that they are engaged with the natural life-world and with people beyond academia, and so that they are involved with the kind of sensitive, equity-enhancing problem-solving that is vital.

We should take advantage of students’ interests and strengths with social media, networking and online communication across difference and across the globe.

The biggest problem that I see in young people now is boredom, anomie, the sense that it doesn't matter what any one person does because power structures are entrenched and things won't really change. This lack of hope is a difficult problem. I see young peoples' networking skills as a way to address it.

Conflict resolution, diversity sensitivity, colonial history and decolonization need to be part of basic education, not just in sustainability programs but throughout universities and the broader society.

We have to model fearless activist lifestyles, and not be afraid of change while making sure to buffer its impacts on the vulnerable. We need to recognize and acknowledge commons where they are existing and emerging, and remove barriers to commons, through research, pedagogy and practice. The connections between pedagogy, activism and research are fundamental; they all reinforce each other.

Conclusion

I gain so much energy and inspiration from witnessing the accomplishments of students and former students I've been fortunate to know. When things need to be done, young people create NGOs and community organizations to do what's needed; they build community; they make videos and art; their social entrepreneurship knows no bounds.

For example, the Idle No More movement in Canada was started by four women (Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah McLean, Nina Wilson -- three young, three indigenous), and young people were the mainstays of both Idle No More and Occupy -- campaigns fuelled by social networking whose legacy is their educational record with those whose lived experience motivates their will to build participatory social change.

Commons-building organizations started by students and other young people are everywhere. In Toronto, they include Not Far From the Tree (<http://notfarfromthetree.org/>), Yes In My Backyard (<http://thestop.org/find-your-garden-match/>), the Centre for Social Innovation (<https://socialinnovation.org/culture/>), Great Lakes Commons (<http://www.greatlakescommons.org/>), Jane Finch Action Against Poverty (<https://jfaap.wordpress.com/>), The Mining Injustice Solidarity Network (<https://mininginjustice.org/>), and many more.

I recommend taking time to reflect on the creative contributions of young people we all have known, as a way of facing the future with hope and conviction that diverse communities of human beings can collectively regenerate the Earth – indeed, they are already doing so.



The Idle No More movement began as a thread of emails between four women from Saskatchewan: Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Nina Wilson, and Sheelah McLean, who

decided to make a “sincere effort to make some change.”

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