

Truth & Wisdom

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“The Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us...Every part of this earth is sacred to my people... We are part of the earth and it is part of us...So we will consider your offer to buy our land. But it will not be easy. For this land is sacred to us.”(Chief Seattle, 1854)

The oft-cited quotation, attributed to Chief Seattle, a Duwamish Chief, is frequently used as an exemplar of Native American ecological wisdom. I use it here as an example of what curriculum development in the present (postmodern) era must be attentive to, namely the multiple knowledges and ways of knowing that diverse communities have to offer, and also the ways we must attend carefully to and honour these wisdom traditions.

Peter Knudtson and David Suzuki in *Wisdom of the Elders* offer a re-constructive history of this quotation’s genealogy and the speech from which it is thought to derive. They note first of all that the name of the Chief is probably Seeathl and that the speech was probably written down and translated by an English-speaking physician (Dr. Henry Smith) and published from his notes some 30 years later. From here it was republished several times with new phrases and alterations over the next century. In the late 1960s and 1970s the speech gained popularity and came to symbolise “the essence of the environmental movement” even as it underwent further revisions. The oft-quoted version above (probably) derives from a fictionalised narrative used in a documentary film on pollution during this period.

While the text more likely represents “the mind of a sensitive Euro-American, worried about our ecological situation and the general dualism in [Western] culture” rather than that of Chief Seeathl, Knudtson and Suzuki note that the challenge to the authenticity of this (popular) text is not a challenge to the value and validity of the Native traditions from which it derives, which are repeatedly confirmed in and from many other positions. Rather, they use the occasion to remind readers of a need to call into question and problematise the authenticity of *all* received Native narratives whose history is not carefully and meticulously documented, as a first step in recognising the need to “look beyond the comfortable shallows of poetic, greeting-card-like formulations of Native ecological knowledge...into deeper, more intellectually and spiritually challenging waters.”

I remember encountering and being inspired by Seeathl’s speech during my final years of secondary school in readings for GP and re-discovering it in different places over the years in ecologically themed literature, often used as an invocation of the value and wisdom of/in (Indigenous) Otherness. Knudtson and Suzuki’s careful exposition of the text’s history and deference for its (symbolic) value to peoples of many places and times is for me a good example of what is called “postmodern curriculum making.”

Through a recursive engagement, the familiar text is re-visioned and re-oriented towards re-generative and hope-full possibilities. The text is revealed as a palimpsest, written on, erased and written over, but in which some traces are never erased and requiring that some types of erasures always be re-remembered. The text is also revealed as a simulacra, a copy that has become a thing in its own right without a clear anchor to an actual/original referent. These do not make it less

valuable, only less secure as Truth. The quotation is not an occasion to “correct” or revise an “incomplete” history, but offers an opportunity to re-cognise that all histories share this feature and provides an occasion for appreciating the complex ways in which we, as teachers/scholars across all traditions, knowingly and unknowingly continue to transmit and participate in systems of colonisation, identity theft, and erasure.

When I choose to use this text now, I am unable to ignore its complex history and how it ties into and is enfolded in difficult and painful colonial histories and postcolonial presents, including my/our own. I prepare myself to engage in the complicated and uncomfortable conversations that must follow. The text has become nuanced in new, exciting, and unpredictable ways that do not leave one in despair, but challenged and *enawed* by the responsibilities with which one is now entrusted. Accepting these responsibilities in the lived moment-to-moment reality is the challenge for teachers and institutions who attempt to work within the living postmodern frame by attending to the ever-present dangers and who seek not Truth but wisdom and understanding.

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