

***For Settlers Who Say That They Support Decolonization ... But Wish It Weren't So Hard***  
Sheri M McConnell

There has been much discussion as of late about the relationship between **Indigenous** (Aboriginal) peoples and **settlers** (non-Aboriginal peoples) on Turtle Island (North America) - with a particular focus on **colonization, decolonization, and reconciliation**. Over the past 500 or so years, under British and French then Canadian rule, and through a process of colonization, the settlers who immigrated to (what is now known as) Canada have directly and indirectly participated in the elimination and assimilation of Indigenous peoples through physical, biological, and cultural genocide. The time for decolonizing (reversing the policies, practices, and impacts of colonization) and for reconciling is long overdue. *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2015) counsels that:

- "reconciliation must inspire Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to transform Canadian society so that our children and grandchildren can live together in dignity, peace, and prosperity on these lands we now share";
- "in order for [reconciliation] to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour";
- "without truth, justice, and healing, there can be no genuine reconciliation"; and
- "by establishing a new and respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, we will restore what must be restored, repair what must be repaired, and return what must be returned."

The following piece, *For Settlers Who Say That They Support Decolonization ... But Wish It Weren't So Hard*, is modelled after Pat Parker's 1970s poem, *For The Straight Folks Who Don't Mind Gays, But Wish They Weren't So Blatant*. A work in progress, this piece is intended to challenge settlers' beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, and, most importantly, privilege. It was written for settlers by a settler - because we, as settlers, need to take responsibility for cleaning up our messes and doing things differently.

To contextualize this piece and where it is rooted, allow me to introduce myself. I am a genderqueer lesbian feminist white settler. I have lived and worked on Treaty 4 (Regina, SK) and Treaty 6 (Saskatoon, SK) lands, and on traditional unceded Algonquin (Ottawa, ON) and Beothuk (St John's, NL) lands. My parents gifted me with a passion for books and learning. From my maternal grandfather, I inherited a deep and enduring love of the land and a fondness for history, especially stories of prairie First Nations and Metis people.

I currently am a social work educator, with a primary focus on field education, at Memorial University. Over the years, I have worked and volunteered as a social worker, primarily with women, Indigenous people, and queer folk around their experiences with child sexual abuse, the criminal justice system, substance use, and other forms of personal and systemic oppression. I have been welcomed into and invited to sit in circles with and work in urban communities with Indigenous people. I have been blessed by the sharing of spiritual and cultural teachings by colleagues, friends, and respected teachers. Over time, I have learned lessons in listening, seeing the world through different eyes, and being more present with myself and others. I still have much to learn.

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You know, some people have got a lot of nerve. Sometimes, I don't believe the things I see and hear.

Have you met the settler who wants things to be better for "our Natives" but isn't sure what to do, so does nothing - or asks Indigenous people to tell them what to do to "fix it" ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the settler who knows little or nothing of the impact or the history of colonization or of its current manifestations ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the settler who thinks that they know everything about Indigenous people, their culture, their history, and their "issues" - and is convinced that they have nothing more to learn about colonization or reconciliation ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the settler who thinks that colonization "happened long, long ago and is over now" - and that Indigenous people are "dwelling on the past" and should "get over it" and "move past it" ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the settler who thinks that all of the work of truth-telling and reconciliation lies with Indigenous peoples ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the settler who gets hurt/upset/offended when Indigenous people do not instantly forgive them or welcome them or want to be friends with them or even want to engage with them ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the non-white settler who, because of their (or their ancestors') experiences with oppression/colonization, feels justified in disclaiming their role in the colonization of Turtle Island - despite the fact that no matter where we came from or how we got here or the colour of our skin, all of us who have come to Turtle Island in the last 500 or so years have done so as uninvited guests ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the settler who, ignoring the fact that we all are treaty people, lives on unceded or treaty land and has no idea about the history of or the promises/agreements in any of the numerous pre- and post-confederation treaties between our colonial governments and Aboriginal peoples ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the settler who attends a presentation/class/workshop on reconciliation/decolonization - and diverts the discussion by apologizing profusely because they feel guilty/ashamed/complicit - then wants to be reassured/comforted by the presenter and any other Indigenous people in the room ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or another settler at the same or a different presentation/class/workshop who takes over the agenda by talking about their experiences of oppression/colonization (or that of their ancestors) - and thinks that it is "all the same" ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the settler who, after living a life of white privilege, finds an Indigenous person way back in their family tree and applies for Indian status so that they "don't have to pay taxes" and so that they and their children "can go to university for free" - despite the fact that Indian status and Indigenous identity (which are separate yet interconnected) are so much more profound and complex and political than "getting a free ride" ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the settler who complains about immigrants and refugees stealing their jobs and taking away their way of life and the future of their children - and ignores the fact that, as settlers, each of us lives on stolen land and has contributed to the destruction of Indigenous culture and spirituality and the lives of generations of Indigenous peoples - and has played a role in the devastation of the land, the water, the air, and all living beings ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

Or the settler who just wants things to get better without doing the work or giving up any of their privilege or unearned power ... yet we say that we support decolonization.

The fact is that we, as settlers, need to take responsibility for doing our own work around reconciliation and decolonization - in consultation with Indigenous peoples (so that we don't mess up decolonizing and reconciling like we have so many other things).

We need to make a commitment to learn about our history, the history of the people whose land we occupy, and our role (and the role of our ancestors) in colonization.

We need to change our own attitudes and behaviour – and we need to address our own privilege – which means relinquishing our unearned power.

We need to name and rise up against oppressive and hurtful words and statements and behaviours and policies and practices. And we need to work collaboratively to change the systems and structures and institutions that continue to perpetuate colonization and oppress Indigenous peoples.

We need to stand up and speak out for the rights of Indigenous peoples - including but not limited to the promises and obligations outlined in the treaties; rights to self-determination and self-government; rights to land and clean water and resources; rights to well-funded, accessible, culturally relevant education and health care; rights to raise their children in their communities; rights to determine who is Indigenous and who belongs to their family/ community/nation;

We need to be humble - by acknowledging and embracing our mistakes, which, in essence, means becoming teachable. We need to be honest, be respectful, and take responsibility for ourselves, our history, and our role in the present moment.

We need to get over our settler guilt and complacency - and get on with doing what needs doing to "restore what must be restored, repair what must be repaired, and return what must be returned."

And we need to actively protect, care for, and honour the land, the water, the skies, and all living beings.

As settlers, actively participating in the process of reconciling and decolonizing means working with and walking beside, not in front or behind. It necessitates understanding "that we are all related" - which involves recognizing and honouring our similarities and our differences, and building relationships grounded in honesty, integrity, trust, and respect.

It means not hijacking the agenda or the process - and not shirking our commitment to social justice and equity nor our responsibility to take action and make change in the world.

It means finding opportunities to sit in circles with Indigenous peoples – when invited and when welcomed. And, sometimes, it means recognizing that not being welcomed or invited is sign that we have not done our own work or behaved respectfully or taken the time to build trusting and authentic relationships. It also means supporting Indigenous-only spaces and events (in whatever way that is asked of us – spiritually/intrinsically/concretely).

Succinctly, actively participating in this process means opening our hearts and our eyes and our ears - and listening. Truly listening - which often means keeping our mouths closed more than is comfortable or familiar. It entails bringing our humility, our courage, our respect, our integrity, our authenticity, our generosity, our kindness, and our sense of humour. All of these things will help us to build stronger and more harmonious relationships and, thus, safer and healthier communities - so that we "can live together in dignity, peace, and prosperity on these lands we now share."

All of this (and more) will support each of us in fully participating in the ongoing work of reconciliation and decolonization.