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RETURNING TO THE
TEACHINGS

Exploring Aboriginal Justice



Penguin Books

CHAPTER FIVE
Watch Your Language

Sorry, Just Nouning Around...

In *Dancing with a Ghost*, I wrote about an Ojibway woman who made a presentation at a workshop on sexual abuse. She explained that she would tell her own story of abuse in Ojibway, rather than English, because it was a "softer" language, one that tried to stay away from labels like "the accused" and "the offender." Those kinds of words, she said, had a tendency to stigmatize people, to "freeze" them within a particular classification, making it more difficult for healing to occur.

At the time, I made the guess that this choice of staying away from labels was connected to an understanding that all of life is a process, that every person is seen as a "thing-which-is-becoming," as opposed to a "thing-which-is." Whenever we use labels like "the offender," we tend to deny that understanding of constant change.

I confess that I had no idea how big an issue I was flirting with at that time. In fact, many Aboriginal people seem to have thought that I knew much more than I did! Fortunately, there were many others who understood that I was just gnawing at the edges and needed a great deal of help. As a result, they have put a lot of effort into explaining how significant the language differences really are and how they can cause us to respond very differently to events that are common in our lives.

If I had to summarize all the twists and turns I've been guided through with respect to language over the last four years, they would fit into two short sentences, both of which

feel a little "radical" as I write them. First, I never realized how "harsh" the English language is, or how judgmental and argumentative we become as we speak it. Second, I had no idea that people could—and do—live otherwise, without having to respond to everything around them in such combative and judgmental ways.

As I listened to Aboriginal people discussing their discomfort using English, I began to notice a number of things. For one thing, English has an extraordinary number of adjectives that are not so much descriptions of things, as they are conclusions about things. Think, for instance, of adjectives like "horrible," "uplifting," "disgusting," "inspiring," "delightful," "tedious" and so on. When you really look at them, you discover that they don't tell us much about things-in-themselves, but only about the judgments speakers have made about them—and want the rest of us to accept. The closer I looked, the more I saw that there was an important difference between these judgmental kinds of adjectives and the more neutral ones like "green," "fast," "painful," "thick" and so forth that try to describe, in value-free terms, what each of our five senses has perceived about aspects of the Creation.

But we don't just use judgmental adjectives. We have also created an almost endless supply of negative nouns and we regularly use them to describe each other: nouns like "thief," "coward," "offender," "weirdo," "deviant," "phoney," "malingerer," "pervert," "fat-head" and "moron," to name only a few. We also have a large number of positive nouns as well, like "saint," "hero," "saviour," "mentor" and "friend." We have, it seems, created a noun for all judgments. Few of them, however, tell us much about why they might (or might not) be deserved by the people we apply them to. Instead, all they really give us is the speaker's personal conclusion.

When I started to notice such things in speech, I became aware of something else as well: how seldom Aboriginal people expressed such judgments in their everyday conversations—

even when speaking English. In fact, the expression of judgments seemed to be avoided, rather than expected. At the same time, there did not seem to be any loss of communication. Let me try to illustrate what I mean.

Imagine, if you will, two English-speaking people coming out of a movie. The first says "Boy, that was a *depressing* movie!" The second, says "Boy, was that an *inspiring* movie!" It is almost as if they believe the movie "is" something all by itself. As a result, it seems perfectly reasonable to argue about who has characterized it "correctly" and who has missed the mark. Sometimes they are more careful, as when one of them says "Boy, that movie was depressing *to me*," following which the other can say "That movie was inspiring *to me*." While they appear to acknowledge that they might have different opinions and that it is okay to "agree to disagree," there still seems to be some notion that the opinion of one must be more accurate than the opinion of the other.

When I am with Aboriginal people, however, I keep hearing a different way of exchanging information. The first might say "Boy, I feel depressed after seeing that movie," following which the other laughs and says, "No kidding, I feel really *inspired* after seeing that movie!" After that they both chuckle about how differently they were touched. There is no suggestion of arguing over whose judgment is correct, for no judgments have been expressed. Instead, the reaction is couched in each person's emotional reaction, and the expectation is that they are *likely* to be very different from each other. It is a difference that becomes all-important when we come to look at healing, especially in cases of extreme victimization.

Speaking in that way, it seems to me, constantly declares an understanding that part of the richness of life rests in the fact that all human beings are likely to respond in unique and interesting ways to the same events, things and people. In fact, the greater the difference between our responses to something, the greater the *amusement* we should feel at being shown once again how unique we all are.

Once I started listening for that nonjudgmental and nonargumentative way of talking about things in the Aboriginal community, it seemed to be everywhere. People said, for instance: "Oh, I laughed so hard I hurt!" They did not say, "Oh, *he* was so funny!", which would invite someone else to say, "No, he wasn't!" They said, "I was so interested to hear those things," not "Oh, those *things* were so interesting!" I also often hear victims in healing circles say things like, "When he did those things, I felt so disgusted," instead of saying "What he did to me *was* disgusting" or, worse still, "*He* is disgusting."

In other words, as we have seen in other contexts, great care seems to be taken not to label things, people or events in terms of personal responses to them or to argue against anyone else's views about them. Instead, the emphasis is on continually stating the opposite, that your reaction is nothing more than a *personal* reaction, one which may or may not be shared by others.

Looking back, I should have been quicker to see how widespread this careful way of everyday speaking really is. As I mentioned, even when people are at meetings where their opinions are invited, it is commonplace for speakers to say something like "These are only the thoughts that have come to me so far" or "I can only speak of my own way of seeing this." If people guard so carefully against suggesting that their opinion, even when it is *sought*, might contain more "truth" or "validity" than someone else's, why should I have expected any less care in everyday speech, where they are not directly invited at all!

To Noun, Noun, Noun Me... Is to No, No, No Me...

In my experience thus far, it seems that traditional people see our reliance on judgmental words as a very *limiting* way to know the world around us, and to deal with the people in it. On an intellectual level, we all know that someone who has justly been called a "thief" in one context of his life might justly deserve to be called a "philanthropist" in another. Similarly, a man who is properly called "brave and open" in

one context can deserve to be called "secretive and cowardly" in another. Whether we are using judgmental adjectives ("foolhardy," "reckless," "methodical," "cautious," etc.) or judgmental nouns ("goon," "liar," "deadbeat," "coward" and so on), they are usually only accurate if they are applied to a few narrow *events* taken from a few select *moments* in an individual's total life. When we apply such labels to real people, however, they tend to stick. And when they stick, they cause us to start denying the complexity and wholeness of the human beings we are speaking of. At the same time, they cause us to minimize the possibility of change. I remember an Inuit man who complained that the worst thing the judge and Crown did when they came into his community was to call someone "bad." "You can't do that," he told us, "and expect them to be good!"

This limiting impact of judgmental words leapt out at me when I first read about the Family Group Conference involving the fourteen-year-old girl. When she came into that conference, she came as an "offender" in the eyes of everyone, especially the parents of the victim. Because of that simplistic, one-dimensional label, they approached her with only one feeling, anger. As the conference progressed, however, the barriers broke down between them, as did the usefulness and accuracy of that noun-label. By the end, as the article described it, she had become "a whole person" again, someone for whom anger was too simple a response. When they saw some of the other "sides" of her, their anger was joined by a wider range of feelings, including concern and care. I don't mean that the anger evaporated, just that it ceased to be the *only* response to complex issues surrounding a complex human being.

That FGC story really touched a nerve with me, as I suspect it will with most people involved in the criminal justice system on a daily basis. It made me recall the young man I called Carl and the horrendous abuse he suffered himself and imposed on others. If I think of Carl simply as an "offender," I want to do all kinds of nasty things to him. If I acknowledge

the other sides of his short life, however, and approach him as the victim he also is, I want to give him comfort and help instead. So it becomes impossible for me to find any real use for either label, because focusing on only one aspect of his present state and past life would be foolish—and likely dangerous as well. The Carls of this world have taught me something: our tendency to stick simplistic labels on the people we deal with only gets in the way of thinking realistically about how we should respond to them.

And that's one of the reasons I shudder when I see headlines screaming, "Get Tougher on Those Offenders!" I don't know how to lock up and torture only the ugly "offender-parts" of people, while comforting the hurt parts, teaching the curious parts, nourishing the starved parts, unearthing the hidden parts, emboldening the cautious parts and inspiring the dreaming parts. I worry that whatever I do to the offender-part will make it harder still to touch and encourage all the others, much less restore balances between them. In people where the dangerous offender-part has grown so severely disconnected from the others that it is dominant, then we have no choice but to do whatever we can to keep them out of circulation. I worry, however, that we are too quick to let our offender labels blind us to all the other parts of most of the people brought to court, especially young people. Put simply, I worry that our simplistic, punitive responses to simplistic, judgmental labels lead us into blind canyons where we actually *contribute* to the development of those one-dimensional and dangerous people we are sworn to prosecute.

Is this part of the reason the Ojibway woman at the sexual abuse workshop chose to tell the story of her own abuse—and her abusers—in Ojibway, because it let her recount everything in ways that did not cause all those limits to appear? Would the fourteen-year-old girl in that Family Group Conference have been greeted initially with such hostility if she had come into it known by some term that was "softer" than "the offender"? Suppose, for instance, she had been called some-

thing like "the young girl who did that thing." Would people have had an easier time seeing the whole person right from the start? In short, do our judgmental words create hurdles we have to *overcome* before we can begin to deal effectively with complex realities?

That seems to be the case when we try to approach all the complex and interwoven issues of environmental pollution. Nouns like "pest," "waste" and "weed," for instance, make it harder for us to remember that each thing we name that way is involved in complex relationships with a multitude of other things, and that their unique contributions are essential to maintaining the health of the ecosystem as a whole. Until we overcome our conviction that we can deal with them as unimportant, unlinked and "discardable" things, a conviction that is buried right inside the names we have assigned to them, we are unlikely to begin treating them with the respect they deserve and that our own survival requires. In short, what we call them seems to be getting in the way of our knowledge of them, and this limits our capacities to respond to them in sophisticated and realistic ways.

The avoidance of labels like "right" or "wrong" also seems to be a central part of Navajo teaching. Clyde Kluckhohn, for example, had this to say in his article "The Philosophy of the Navajo Indians": "The Navajo never appeals to abstract morality or to adherence to divine principles. He stresses mainly the practical considerations: 'If you don't tell the truth, your fellows won't trust you and you'll shame your relatives. You'll never get along in the world that way.' Truth is never praised merely on the ground that it is 'good' in a purely abstract sense.... The Navajos do most definitely believe that acts have consequences, but the nature of the consequences is not wrapped up in any intrinsic 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of the act itself."

English speakers, on the other hand, seem to feel an obligation to come to judgments about things and to express them at every available opportunity. With many Aboriginal people

there seems to be an opposite obligation—where coming to judgmental conclusions is seen as either wrong or, as I now suspect, largely a waste of time. Further, *announcing* such conclusions at every opportunity seems to be regarded as a display of immaturity, if not arrogance.

I want to say something here, something that people will probably have to experience to understand fully. When I am submerged for some time in a group of Aboriginal people, knowing that I am not *expected* to judge everything that everybody says or does (much less declare my judgments as quickly as I can come to them!), it's as if a huge weight lifts off my shoulders. It's a weight I didn't know I was carrying until recently, the weight of this obligation to form and express opinions at all times and about almost everything. I do know, however, that when I'm in places where the opposite obligation applies, I find myself relaxing, simply enjoying the wide range of thought and opinion expressed. I even love the opinions and suggestions that my English brain would judge "loony" if I allowed it to indulge its addiction to name calling. Perhaps it's because I know that other opinions or suggestions are not offered as challenges or threats to my own, but simply offered. Perhaps it's because there's no obligation even to respond to them, much less fight back.

I'm not sure I understand it yet, but I do know one thing: everything seems much less *personal* this way, much less arrogant, much less antagonistic. It's almost as if the strict rules prohibiting *personal* attacks in the course of proper academic debate have been carried over—or even expanded—into each person's private life as well. At the same time, the competitive aspects of academic debate also seem to be prohibited. I feel much freer to "think out loud" in such a group, to push my own speculations a little harder, to follow some tangents a little further. Because I know they will be received as contributions, not weighed for judgment, attack and possible rejection, I can actually be more *honest* about them as well. In a connected way, it becomes much easier to hear what others are trying to

say, because you are no longer preoccupied with trying to assess whether they are attacking or supporting you, and how you'll "have to" respond to them. The whole issue of attacks and counterattacks, judgments and defences, seems repugnant to the traditional Aboriginal ideal of civilized and respectful discussion.

These sorts of differences were underlined in an article by Susan Urmston Philips of the University of Arizona entitled "Some Sources of Cultural Variability in the Regulation of Talk." In it, she looks at how conversations are "structured" among Aboriginal people at the Warm Springs Reservation in central Oregon. A great deal of what she described seemed familiar to me. In one section, she wrote about public meetings where questions about certain issues are asked and about how those questions are handled:

For Anglos, answers to questions are almost obligatory, even if they take the form of "I can't answer right now," or a brief shake of the head.... With questions, the speaker assumes that he will get a reply. That this is not the case with Warm Springs Indians was pointed out to me by an Indian from another Reservation who had married into the Warm Springs Reservation. He observed wryly that it is often difficult to get an answer out of "these old people" (and I should add that the phrase "old people" has the connotation of respect). And he told me an anecdote about posing a question that got answered a week after it was asked.

In other words, answers to questions are not obligatory. Absence of answer merely means the floor is open, or continues to belong to the questioner. This does not mean, however, that the question will not be answered later. Nor does it mean that it ought not to be raised again, since the questioner might reasonably assume his audience has had time to think about it.

Ms. Philips goes on to mention a particular incident where a

woman raised four issues during a meeting, but no one responded to them immediately. Instead, over the course of the next hour (in what she refers to as “sequencing”), responses and partial responses emerged in bits and pieces, from a number of different speakers—often in the course of discussing other topics. Ms. Philips described it this way: “[I]n all of this, neither the first woman nor those who responded to her ever spoke *directly* to one another...; the first woman never *called for* a response to her statements; and the ‘responses’... were widely separated from the speeches to which they were a response.... It may be worth noting that with this approach to sequencing, *conflict between persons can be muted or obscured.*” (emphasis added)

And that’s exactly how I feel now that I have grown accustomed to (and aware of) some of the traditional “rules” of conversation amongst Aboriginal people—comparatively free of the potential for conflict and antagonism. By contrast, when I return to the non-Aboriginal world, I keep asking myself why everyone seems to be arguing about everything. The contrast makes me constantly wonder why we can’t seem to just enjoy life, with all its magical diversity, without arguing endlessly about what to call it.

Crossing over into the Verb Lane...

Now, as promised, I want to move away from my observations about Aboriginal people speaking English and turn to Aboriginal languages themselves. After all, it is here that all the differences must really begin.

And the biggest difference? I’ve given a clue with all my talk about staying away from judgmental nouns and the judgmental adjectives that modify them. Let me quote a friend and teacher, a man who has invested enormous time and spirit in my education. His name is Sákéj (pronounced “Saw-gage”) Henderson, a Chicksaw-Cherokee by birth and he said this about the Mi’kmaq language: “...when you’re speaking Mi’kmaq, you can go all day long *without saying a single noun.*”

My eyes can see nouns... That’s what my eyes are supposed to do, see nouns, and obstacles and tracks and trails. But that’s not what the function of the language is. It’s not to become another pair of eyes. It’s supposed to be speaking to the ear and to the heart...” (emphasis added)

Is this relative absence of nouns only a characteristic of Mi’kmaq? Apparently not. Another special friend and teacher, Danny Moonhawk Alford, a professor of linguistics from the University of California at Hayward and a fluent Cheyenne speaker, had this to say to an international religious symposium in Ottawa:

How many of you out there at first assumed that “Dances” in the film title “Dances with Wolves” was a plural noun, like “the dances with wolves”? And then you realized at some point that it was an agent-less verb phrase instead, talking about the dancing. It’s like He-Who-Dances-with-Wolves, except these languages don’t need the He-Who. It was the same with another character in the same movie, “Stands with Fist.” These phrases are complete sentences in their own language, but most often when we turn them into names we turn them also into nouns, leaving behind and ignoring the structural meaning it also had in the other language.

Now I don’t want to give the wrong impression: Native American languages generally CAN have nouns.... The major differences to be found are in their frequency and in the way nouns are constructed in Native America. They usually start from a root—neither a noun or a verb or anything else, just a root—and then you add things to it to make it into a verb, and then you have to add some *other* things to make it into a noun, maybe take some verb parts away. *But it seldom becomes a static noun, and its speakers are not cast adrift of its dynamic, verbal root.*” (emphasis added)

But how can you have a language that lets you go all day without speaking a single noun? What do you do when you want to talk about all those "things-out-there" that we deal with every day? What does it mean to say that the focus of the language is on the dancing, not the dancers? Does this relative absence of nouns in Aboriginal languages explain the reluctance to use *judgmental* nouns when English is spoken?

I must repeat my earlier confession: I speak no Aboriginal languages myself. For that reason, I will rely completely on the descriptions and explanations provided by my Aboriginal friends. I also confess that their explanations have stretched my imagination further than I ever thought possible. In fact, some would say that I have come back positively warped! In that regard, I am pleased to repeat something said by a leading American legal scholar, Oliver Wendell Holmes: "A mind that is stretched to a new idea never returns to its original dimensions."

So let's go for it.

Where Nouns are Verb-boten...

I would like to introduce some of the people I will be quoting from, people who have volunteered to be my teachers on these cross-language issues, and so much else as well. If anything I say makes sense, give them the credit; if anything I say is out to lunch, blame it on my inability to understand them!

I met most of them for the first time in the fall of 1991, when I was invited to be a presenter at a week-long series of workshops on Aboriginal justice at Banff, Alberta. The host was Leroy Little Bear, whom I mentioned earlier. A Blackfoot lawyer from southern Alberta, Leroy is now head of the Native Studies Department at the University of Lethbridge. He was also a member of the Alberta Task Force on Aboriginal People and the Criminal Justice System.

A second presenter was Leroy's close friend, Sákéj Henderson, whom I have just mentioned. Sákéj has law degrees from Stanford and Harvard and is now director of the Native Law Centre at the University of Saskatchewan. They

and their wives, Amethyst First Rider (Blackfoot from southern Alberta) and Marie Battiste (Mi'kmaq from Cape Breton Island), have opened their homes, hearts and histories to me on many occasions since then. Leroy's wife Amethyst has recently gained a Masters in Dramatic Arts, focusing on Aboriginal storytelling, and Sákéj's wife Marie is an associate professor in the Indian and Northern Education Program at the University of Saskatchewan, with a Ph.D. from Stanford University.

One evening after the workshop sessions, Leroy mentioned that he, Sákéj and some others had been having "conversations" about some things, and that I was free to join them over a cup of tea in the third-floor common room if I wished. I followed along, expecting nothing more than a pleasant evening of chatter.

Leroy began by introducing some other people. One was Dr. David Peat, a physicist from Ottawa. David was once a coworker with an English physicist, Dr. David Bohm (now deceased), who had in turn been a coworker with Albert Einstein. Bohm was also a significant force behind the original start-up of these "conversations." I learned as well that they were a little more formal than I had thought, for they were sponsored by the Fetzer Institute of Kalamazoo, Michigan. They even had a title: "Dialogues between Western and Aboriginal Scientists." The first had taken place in Kalamazoo in 1992, with David Bohm in attendance, and the second would follow at Banff as soon as the justice workshops were completed.

Some of the other participants included Danny Moonhawk Alford, whom I mentioned earlier; Sam Kounosu, a physicist from Alberta; Rose Sergeant, a physicist from Berkeley, California, and Stan Knowlton, a Blackfoot intent on restoring knowledge of his people's huge and mysterious medicine wheels which still dot the landscape of southern Alberta. Over the last several years, three more Dialogues have been held, where I have come to hear from such people as Tobasonikwut

Peter Kinew, an Ojibway of the Medewewin Lodge; Robert Yazzie, Chief Justice of the Navajo Nation; and Russel Barsh, also of the Native Studies Department of the University of Lethbridge. Each Dialogue is spread over three days and involves everyone taking their turns contributing to the issues presented by Leroy.

I will never forget how that first "informal" evening began. Leroy made the introductions, then said something like this (although I don't remember half the puns he included):

In our last Dialogue, you will recall that we started to examine the movement in Western physics away from Particle Theory towards an emerging new paradigm, one which some have called Wave Theory. At the same time, we started to speak about the two kinds of languages, English with all of its nouns, and many of the Aboriginal languages with their emphasis on verbs instead. You will recall that we were asking ourselves if those language differences could be related in some way to the differences between Particle Theory and Wave Theory. To prevent anyone taking ownership of those discussions, we all signed Wave-cr Agreements, Particular-ly the physicists. No doubt they were all Patent-ly unenforceable, but we signed them anyway. At the same time, we began to speak of other things as well. For instance, we spoke of the similarities between the "new" doctrine which physicists are calling Chaos Theory, and the figure of the Trickster, which has been important in many aboriginal traditions for, it seems like, ions. And we wondered what Albert Ion-stein would have thought about that.

I remember (apart from the laughter!) looking around that little common room at all the other faces, wondering if they had any better idea than I did what Leroy was talking about. As the evening progressed, I was left with one unforgettable impression: while I could make very little sense of what was

being said by either the physicists or the Aboriginal people, they seemed to have no difficulty at all communicating with each other! It was a humbling experience—but an exciting one at the same time. It was also the first time I was introduced to the sophistication of Aboriginal languages and the sense of universe that has shaped them.

While I have neither the space nor the skills to detail the lengthy conversations that took place at the Dialogues, there is one thing I can report: there seemed to be a startling correspondence between Einstein's famous $E=MC^2$ description of the universe and a great many teachings of Aboriginal peoples. I'll do what I can to summarize what I heard.

In both visions, all existence is seen as energy—or spirit—manifesting itself through matter by organizing and reorganizing that matter in ever-changing (but patterned) ways. It is, for instance, this energy or force that moves through molecules of water and shapes them all into waves. While the particular molecules of water go mostly up and down, the wave shapes travel hundreds of miles across vast oceans. According to Aboriginal perspectives, I gather that the particular shapes assumed by matter at any particular point in time are far less important than the energy patterns causing those shapes to change. As Sákéj Henderson describes it in his yet-to-be-published book *Algonquian Spirituality: Balancing the Opposites*: "Indigenous people view reality as eternal, but in a continuous state of transformation.... It is consistent with the scientific view that all matter can be seen as energy, shaping itself to particular patterns. The Mi'kmaq language affirms this view of the universe, building verb phrases with hundreds of prefixes and suffixes to choose from, to express the panorama. The use of verbs rather than nouny subjects and objects is important; *it means that there are very few fixed and rigid objects in the Mi'kmaq worldview*. What they see is the great flux, eternal transformation, and *an interconnected order of time, space and events*. With this fluidity of verb phrases, every speaker can create new vocabulary "on the fly," custom-tailored to meet the

experience of the moment, to express the very finest nuances of meaning." (emphasis added)

Languages that don't have fixed lists of nouns to capture all those "things-out-there"? Languages in which people are expected to develop the skills to create their own vocabulary "on the fly"? How many times have judges and lawyers watched an interpreter struggle to express an English word in an Aboriginal language and concluded that because they didn't "know" the Aboriginal equivalent, they were not good enough?

An example may help illustrate the way things are "named" in Aboriginal languages. At the 1993 Dialogues, Sákéj Henderson spoke of how the Mi'kmaq language deals with trees. They are "called" by the sounds that are made as the wind goes through their branches, in the autumn, during a special period just before dusk. In short, they are known and talked about in terms of how they interact with certain aspects of their surroundings—and in terms of how the individual observer perceives them. In a sense, it is a very "interactive" naming, with room for individual creation.

As we saw in connection with Aboriginal approaches to science, the focus seems to be less on the *characteristics* of things than on the *relationships* between things. One of the best examples of this different focus came when Sákéj Henderson dealt with the issue of referring to things by the characteristic of their gender: "No, we don't have any gender. It's a relationship.... The woman who cares for your heart—that's your wife. Your daughters are the ones who enrich your heart. Your sons are the ones that test your heart!"

The (relative!) absence of noun-like words, when put together with the absence of gender distinctions, leads to something that many non-Aboriginal people remain unaware of: the absence of personal *pro*-nouns based on gender (like "he," "she" or "it") in many Aboriginal languages. Because they don't exist there, searching for the correct ones often seems an artificial and unreasonable exercise. As a result, Aboriginal people are often as careless about getting them right as I am

when I'm speaking (garbled) French and trying to remember whether a noun has "le" or "la" in front of it.

Unfortunately for Aboriginal people, however, getting those pronouns right can often be critical. I remember, for instance, an Ojibway woman in a trial giving evidence about how she had been raped. She began by explaining that she and her assailant had been going down a deserted path alone. When I asked her what happened next, she answered, "*She* grabbed me from behind and threw me to the ground, and started ripping my clothes off." The judge stopped everything immediately. As best I recall, what he said went something like this: "Now just wait a minute, young lady! You told us there was only you and the accused, on that path. And now you're talking about some *woman* grabbing you! Where did *she* come from? How am I going to believe *anything* you say!"

On the more humorous side, my Aboriginal friends appear heartily amused by the frenzied Western debate over whether God is a "He" or a "She"!

It should be noted, however, that Algonkian languages contain a constant division that is *not* part of Western thought: the division between animate (or breathing) and inanimate (non-breathing) things. Just as the French articles "le" and "la" describe everything by gender, so Algonkian languages describe everything in animate or inanimate terms. Unlike our divisions, however, the same "thing," I gather, can be first one and then the other, then returned again. In my superficial understanding, it depends partly on how the speaker relates to it. A pipestone, for instance can move from inanimate to animate, depending on the degree to which the speaker is recognizing—and creating—its essential spirit at that moment of its existence.

The Language of the Heart

I'd like to go back to that earlier quotation from Sákéj Henderson, the one where he said that the function of language was not to become another pair of eyes, but was to "speak to the ear, and speak to the heart." What did he mean

by this? I have my own interpretation, although it is difficult to express. It involves thinking about music and what we find significant about music. It is not the individual notes or sounds that appeal to us, as much as it is the way they all blend together in their changing rhythms, patterns and (to borrow a musical term) "movements." What if we took that same focus and applied it to the rest of our experiences, looking for the shifts, patterns, movements and cadences exhibited by all the things that surround us every day? What if *that* is what we wanted to describe when we spoke of them to others? Is that what the Inuit woman's grandfather was teaching when he took her to the shores of Hudson Bay and had her look for the five waves? And if those were the dynamics her eyes were to examine, are they also the dynamics her language has been shaped to capture?

When in English we call someone, for instance, an "offender," we use a noun to represent an unchanging state. To what extent do we do similar things with all the rest of our nouns, creating a world that appears to be full of static objects without connection to each other?

In English, for instance, we can say, "The tree died," and it seems to make sense. But would it be possible to speak about that event in a way that acknowledges that what we really have is just a conversion of matter into a different form and to other uses, with its essential energy—or spirit—remaining undiminished? Further, what if all of Creation was understood to participate in this constant transformation, whether it was a mosquito turning into frog food two days into its four-day lifespan or a cliff becoming a sand beach over eons? Our way of speaking *disconnects* segments of the transformation process, freezes them with labels like "tree," admires them as long as they stay within that label, then laments their "death" as soon as they pass on to a different form. In reality, the only death has been of the noun-shape we created ourselves.

The differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal understandings can be expressed in terms of Einstein's famous

equation, $E=MC^2$. It appears that the English language, with all its nouns, focuses primarily on the *mass* side, on all the "things-out-there," on the collection of water molecules sitting in the shape of a wave. The spotlight of Aboriginal languages, on the other hand, shines primarily on the *energy* side of Einstein's equation, on all the "patterns-and-changes" that exist between and among things-out-there. These are the forces that have not only built the wave-shape we presently see, but are also already shaping different water molecules into new forms for the next moment, and the next after that.

During the Dialogues, it was this Aboriginal focus on the energy side that seemed to catch the physicists by surprise, because that was the very realm they were wrestling with. It was also the realm for which they had found English so poorly suited. While English was rich in words representing the temporary shapes and formations perceived by the senses at particular instants, Aboriginal languages were richer in words representing the energy, forces and spirit that created all those shapes and formations in the first place.

My Aboriginal friends talk a great deal about what it's like to have to use English all day, and they generally describe it as a strain. If we truly recognized that we occupy a universe of constantly transforming things, people and relationships, they suggest, then we would have no choice but to discard our heavy reliance on nouns to capture and describe it. Sákéj seemed to be expressing something like that when he told us: "[In] the Sun Dance, the one thing they always instruct is never, when you get into the Sun Dance the last day, never say a word in English, or think an English thought. People who speak English and enter this realm come back deranged. So when you enter this realm, whatever you do, don't speak nouns. *Don't start looking at the objects! Look for the forces that contain the Nakota part.*" (emphasis added) As Bay-be-mi-say-si, the whirlwind, said to Waynaboozhoo, the spirit of the Anishnaabe, "I am brother to the *Gee-zhee-ba-sun* (tornado), I am brother to the waterspout of the oceans and seas, their

power is my power and my power is theirs." The focus on power, and the statement that they all shared the *same* power was far more important than I had originally understood.

Whenever I came across passages like this, I found myself thinking of Aboriginal languages as poetic languages, languages that relied heavily on *metaphor*, where a description of one thing stands as a description of *many others*. The more I come to explore the language issue, however, the more I think the idea of metaphor fails to capture what's really going on. Instead, it is my present guess that those languages are really describing reality at another level altogether, an energy or spirit level, where many things can be understood to actually *be* the same. A whirlwind is not "like" a tornado at this level of description; it actually *is* one.

I encountered (I think!) an interesting illustration of this "looking for the forces" in a recent conversation with some Aboriginal people from northern Manitoba. We were talking about the plight of their younger generation, discussing possible reasons for the excessive rates of suicide, substance abuse and violent behaviour. One of them mentioned that an elder had volunteered his own explanation: in his view, the present problems could be traced to the fact that mothers were no longer breast feeding their babies. For that reason, the babies did not grow up with the sound of her heartbeat. I asked if this had been said in English or Cree, and he replied, "Cree." Taking a gamble on my own understanding of what might actually have been expressed in the Cree, I said, "So everybody knew he was talking about much more than breast feeding." The simple, almost off-hand, reply was "Of course."

I'll explain what I meant. It has to do with the way whirlwinds, tornados and dust devils can be understood as being, at their most basic levels, the same thing. I knew, for instance, that references to "heartbeat" refer to much more than the human heartbeat. Mother Earth too, because she lives, has a heartbeat—one that comes through the drum. And at the most basic level, such a heartbeat flows through all of us,

giving us all the same life. We are all connected by that heartbeat, pulsing along in a common life with it. Because of that we are never truly alone, but always connected, through Mother Earth. Unfortunately, too many people come to the conclusion that they are alone and unconnected, that they don't matter, that they have no role in anything larger than themselves, no significance beyond themselves. If they come to conclusions like this, they live desperate, lonely lives and often fall into self-abuse and the abuse of others.

It was my guess, then, that when the elder talked about children not growing up with the sound of the heartbeat, everyone understood him to be talking about what animates all heartbeats. It was not, strictly speaking, a metaphor, but a way to describe reality at a level of life, of animation, of spirit, where everything *is* the same, coming out of the same energies and manifesting identical patterns.

It was the same with the Inuit woman who told me about the five waves. I had just finished describing the young man I called Carl, and my growing realization that I could not deal with him effectively until I understood all the traumas that had affected him, his family, his community and his people. Without hesitation or introduction, she told me her grandfather's teachings about the waves. It was clear that she felt *all* of Creation, whether Carl's plight or the surface of Hudson Bay, had to be examined, understood and spoken of in terms that paid primary attention to their energies, forces and patterns, not particles, shapes or sizes. At that fundamental level, it is the similarities, rather than the differences, that are most striking—and that language should attempt to capture.

The more I explore these issues, the more I understand that the Ojibway woman's observation about her language having a "softer" way to describe people stood for much more than I was able to grasp at the time. It stood for a language that not only seems to have different *words* for things, but also seems to express a fundamentally different understanding of what is *important* about things: their constant reformation and change

as the energy and spirit side of life's equation ripples through them, every instant of every day. In that sense, she told me something similar to what that Inuit woman told me, that Hudson Bay is far more than its molecules of water.

Every time I go back to the things that Sákéj Henderson, Leroy Little Bear, Danny Moonhawk Alford and others have expressed, another layer opens up. For instance, Aboriginal languages seem uniquely able to offer almost limitless opportunities for, and enjoyment of, double meanings. After all, once the dynamics or patterns common to things have been expressed, modifications still need to be made to take the listener's attention to the particular thing being mentioned. If those particulars are not accurate enough, one thing can be "called" in almost the same way as another. Pun-like double meanings, intentional or otherwise, are thus both common and treasured. Double meanings also serve a more serious purpose, for they reinforce the conviction that everything is in the process of transformation.

It was after being exposed to such descriptions of the vitality of Aboriginal languages that I began to understand how traumatic it must have been for the children when they were forbidden to speak their languages at the residential schools. In that connection, let me pass along a comment made in 1995 by one Ojibway woman from northwestern Ontario during the course of community justice discussion when, as often happens, she turned her attention to language. "Boarding school was supposed to be a place where you forgot everything about being Anishinabe. And our language too. But I said, 'I'm going to talk to myself'—and that's what I did, under my covers—talked to myself in Anishinabe. If we were caught, the nuns would make us stand in a corner and repeat over and over, 'I won't speak my language.'"

Replacing the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

In earlier pages, I spent a great deal of time talking about Aboriginal people's reluctance to use judgmental English

words like "good" and bad." That does not mean, however, that there is no place for expressing preferences. In fact, the opposite is true, for preference is pronounced, and moral teaching of primary importance. As we have seen in so many other contexts, however, when those preferences are expressed, the focus is not on "things" but on processes; not on people but on relationships.

I obtained a glimpse of how this is done in the article by Bluehouse and Zion I mentioned back in Chapter 1—"The Navajo Justice and Harmony Ceremony." At one point Bluehouse and Zion speak of the Peacemaker as he or she looks at, and listens to, each party to a dispute, then turns from the parties as individuals to consider the kind of relationship that exists between them. The Peacemaker does not ask if it is "good" or "bad," given the absolute nature of those declarations. Instead, "The Peacemaker wonders, 'Is it *hashhkeeki* (moving towards disharmony) or is it *hozhooji* (moving towards harmony)?'" The emphasis, then, is still on the movement that all things demonstrate, on the energy side of Einstein's equation. In a sense, value judgments thus appear to be relative things, not absolutes, applied to the *direction* in which things appear to be moving—towards or away from harmony.

I began this book by quoting from a justice proposal prepared for the Ontario Government by the Oji-Cree Sandy Lake First Nation. It bears repeating in this context: "Probably one of the most serious gaps in the system is the different perception of wrongdoing and how to best treat it. In the non-Indian community, committing a crime seems to mean that the individual is a *bad person* and therefore must be punished.... The Indian communities view a wrongdoing as a misbehaviour which requires teaching or an illness which requires healing." (emphasis added) Once again we can see an emphasis on the belief that people are not forever one thing or another, but that they can and do change. It is not just a hopeful, liberal conviction, but a necessary reflection of a core conviction about life. Life is change. In the same way, people are change,

and to imagine the opposite is to deny life.

As luck would have it, I ran across a quotation in the February 17, 1995 issue of the *Globe and Mail* which expresses the opposite, static and limiting view of humanity better than anything I could have dreamed up myself. It is a quotation attributed to a British clergyman, Charles Caleb Colton, who lived between 1780 and 1832: "He that is good will infallibly become better, and he that is bad will certainly become worse; for vice, virtue and time are the three things that never stand still." While clergyman Colton does appear to acknowledge room for movement in his universe, there doesn't seem to be much room for changing the *direction* of that movement. Once he arrives at his judgment about what to call you, that's who you stay, forever!

I shake my head every time I remind myself that it was during the decades of clergyman Colton's ministry that a great many of his colleagues, some of whom must have shared similar convictions, came to Canada and began their work with Aboriginal people. In this particular respect, could two visions of the universe have been more opposed? I can't help but see him running about the countryside imposing all his nouns on everything in sight, dividing the world up into two static camps of absolute opposites—the good camp and the evil camp. How must he have been seen by all his Aboriginal contemporaries as they glided back and forth along the rivers, contemplating the infinite numbers of ways in which all the forces surrounding them were coming together beneath and around them, wondering how they could best fit in with and "ride" what they could not alter, even had they wished! I can see the billing now: "The Great Mystery Meets the Great Certainty!"

I also recall something Sákéj Henderson said—a statement Clergyman Colton would probably have taken as clear evidence of pagan depravity: "For some reason, English-speakers seem to have chosen to live under the rule of King Noun. We Aboriginal people, on the other hand, would rather think of ourselves as being in bed with Queen Verb."

And that brings up another difference that seems to be little known, though it is of critical importance. It has to do with whether we see ourselves as a living part of our surroundings, or distinct and separate from them. It has to do with the choice between what Danny Moonhawk Alford called "surfing the flux" or trying to live within the "illusion" of stability. It has to do with whether you acknowledge and learn to ride the waves converging around you at every moment of every day or whether you fight to try to keep them all at a safe distance.

Albert and the Fish Heads vs the Plate Glass Window

I mentioned the figure of the Trickster which is so important in the storytelling of many Aboriginal peoples. Here is how Sákéj described another of the Trickster's roles during the 1992 Dialogues in Kalamazoo, Michigan: "What people miss about Trickster stories is that they're talking about a process of flux. They're talking about how things change. They change quickly and dramatically. The Trickster may have outrageous behaviour and then change again. We're teaching our children to have tolerance for change; to understand it, not to fight it."

I've struggled for some time to find a way to express how I perceive the difference between my English-speaking world and the world my Aboriginal friends tell me is given to them by their languages. I have this sense that if you decide that the first reality is constant change, if you discard your belief in the usefulness of judgmental absolutes like "good" and "bad" and choose to speak in terms of relative movement like "towards harmony" instead, then a lot of other things change as well. You start to sit in a room differently, in a car differently, everywhere differently. To end this chapter, I'll try out the metaphor I've found most useful so far. It ties together Danny Moonhawk Alford's "surfing the flux" image, the five waves, the horror of Carl's life thus far—all those things. I have used portions of it before. Every time I go into it, however, I bring back more out of it.

It has to do with the difference between standing behind

the triple-pane window of your cliffside mansion and watching the sun go down over a quieting ocean—and watching instead the first beginnings of a sunrise over that same ocean, but from flat on your belly on a wet surfboard three hundred miles out from shore, as the ocean beneath you awakens.

In the cliffside mansion, there is a conviction of separation, stability and control. On the surfboard, there is the conviction of intimate and inescapable exposure to unfathomable powers which, while they might let you ride them, will never let you gain control over them. If you are alone on a surfboard as the ocean starts to stir, there is no way to know what it will bring you that day. The only true certainties are that you cannot change those waves—only the way you ride them—and that your riding will depend on how much you can accommodate yourself to *their* forces.

Curiously, each wave that comes at you—that will determine your future—comes at you from behind. In that sense, the limits of your future, of where you might come to travel over the course of the day, have been building out of your vision in the wide ocean *behind you*, and way back in time. You do not face your future. Instead, you face your past—the waves that have already passed you by. Your future is out behind you, where it's most difficult to see.

In fact, it's useless to speak of "seeing" your future at all. Instead, you have to feel it with all your other senses as it emerges beneath you. That being so, it is impossible to really predict, with any accuracy, how the new waves will show themselves under you. You can only try to open yourself to their dynamics as they emerge to your senses, to "feel" them as they appear, to make millions of minute and flowing adjustments to them, to constantly harmonize yourself with *their* forces to the greatest degree possible. Then, surprisingly, you can draw astounding speed from them. If you can find and maintain the precise intersection between all the forces, their combination is yours for the riding.

In the course of that riding, something changes: you seem

to stop paying attention to *separate* things like the surfboard, your toes and arms, the water, the wind and so on. Instead, your consciousness of all those things is a consciousness of their power, of how they are "shaping-all-together" and of how they are (or are not!) moving in accommodating and expanding ways. If that accommodation is lost, however, if suddenly a power shift is not anticipated accurately, then the whole balance of things comes suddenly undone and all those separate things come, quite literally, crashing back again—the surfboard, the water, your own limbs and lungs and skull—in an instant display of rampant *disharmony!*

There are other aspects to this wave image as well. The wave that is *about* to emerge beneath your feet is, in a very real sense, already there, because all the forces that will transform the molecules into that wave are already there, already going in that direction. You only need to train yourself to focus on emergence, rather than on what has already emerged. This anticipation, this "moving-towards" what is already there in its energy but has not yet appeared in its mass, becomes the essential skill!

The odd fact, then, is that the surfer does not live first and foremost in a physical realm, but in another one—a realm of anticipating whatever is "about-to-emerge." Only by dwelling primarily in that realm can he or she begin to move towards the postures that will successfully accommodate what has not yet revealed itself but is unquestionably forming all around him or her.

This focus on things-emerging and relationships-changing goes far beyond the events of one particular day, week or year. The search for patterns extends far into the future and also looks at patterns that have "emerged" or "manifested" way back in time. Within the traditional understanding, there are almost incomprehensibly large waves undulating beneath the tiny ones we surf on every day, and these too—or perhaps especially—demand our attention. Think of Carl, and his desperate loss of self, and look all the way back to the first fur

trader pressing for a decision on the spot and so beginning generations of insult and injury to every definition of a valuable Aboriginal self. Think too of the Ojibway obligation to look seven generations into the future before making major decisions involving change. And when you wonder about this attention to patterns, think as well of the following quotation from someone by the name of Rolling Thunder, who remains unknown to me. The words were given to me in North Bay by an Ojibway woman who never told me her name:

As long as ten years ago, I could not talk to you about any spiritual things regarding the American Indians, because after the conquest of this continent those things were hidden. We go by signs in the times, and they change as we go along. The pattern of life changes, and we were shown about six years ago that the time had come when we could travel and mix with white people, and we would find people in different places with good hearts, and we could talk with them.

The problem is that when we speak out of such different understandings of what is *important* about reality, it's so hard for us to really *hear* each other!

Just in case anyone thinks that by reading this book, they have achieved a significant level of understanding about traditional perspectives, I offer a warning: I have succeeded only in learning how little I know. As proof, let me return to the book by Ruth Beebe Hill I mentioned earlier—*Hanta Yo*. Hill suggests that neither the words nor the concepts of “waste,” “weed” or “pest” formed part of the traditional Lakota understanding of reality. Let me now give the full quotation, and the full list of words and concepts that she tells us were never a part of that traditional worldview: “Admit, assume, because, believe, could, doubt, end, expect, faith, forget, forgive, guilt, how, it, mercy, promise, should, sorry, storm, them, us, waste, we, weed—neither these words nor the conceptions for which they stand appear in this book; they are the whiteman's import

to the New World, the newcomer's contribution to the vocabulary of the man he called the Indian. Truly, the parent Indian families possessed neither these terms nor their equivalents.”

Understanding a universe in which those concepts do not play a role—much less the central role that Western society has given them—is likely an impossible task for English speakers like me. I am not helped by the fact that I spend so much of each year in cities, buildings and cars, disconnected from the patterns, changes and cycles of the natural order and so increasingly remote from all of their lessons.

And what is the fate of languages that depict so differently who and “how” we are? Will they disappear in favour of European languages that make us feel protected and in control, but at the same time seem to leave us with a sense of being alone and unconnected? Here is part of an essay written in 1993 by Sasheen Gould, aged seventeen, of the Eskasoni First Nation on Cape Breton Island:

As a Mi'kmaq, I was born into a network of relationships and responsibilities. I am taught that these are to be the utmost priorities in my life. These include my family, my friends, my community and my nation. The largest of my responsibilities rests in my language. It is through my language that my worldview is transmitted and brought to the attention of whomever I communicate with. If it was not for the survival of the Mi'kmaq language, all of our rich cultures and traditions would have been lost.

Courses in traditional Mi'kmaq spirituality are now standard in Eskasoni schools. The Mi'kmaq people are also hard at work devising ways in which the “normal” curriculum can be taught in the Mi'kmaq language. The same vision is spreading across the country, and I am glad this is so. I say that not only for the sake of reviving Aboriginal health and esteem. I am also glad for myself, and for the future of my own people and their thought. After Albert Ion-stein crawled right down through

the atom and came out the other side, he saw things about the universe that his (and my) language had never captured. They led him, and many others who travelled that astrophysical road after him, into a place where they too sensed the ultimate unknowability of a somehow-unified Creation—a place where the most appropriate English words sounded strange coming from their lips, because they were words like “awe” and “majesty.”

Perhaps it will be the Aboriginal people who will help the rest of us catch some of the glimpses that Albert and his colleagues have found. Perhaps it will be Aboriginal people who will lead us back out of some of the noun-sense (like that, Leroy?) that seems to have stolen so much of our hearts and spirits away. And perhaps then we too can share a portion of the understanding expressed in 1995 by another Ojibway woman from northwestern Ontario when she said, sounding so much like old Albert: “Everything the people used to do was with reverence. There was no waste. They never threw anything away—like today. The fish heads, bones, all of that gives us what we as Anishinabeg need. Everything of the Creator’s has a purpose. *When we throw part of the fish away, we are throwing part of ourselves away.*”