

APPROACHING MI'KMAQ TEACHINGS ON THE CONNECTIVENESS OF HUMANS AND NATURE

Albert Marshall,¹ Murdena Marshall,² and Marilyn Iwama³

¹ Elder, Eskasoni First Nation, Manager, Knowledge: Education and Cultural Consultant Associates (KECCA), Eskasoni, Nova Scotia, Canada; E-mail: albertamarshall@ns.sympatico.ca

² Mi'kmaq Elder and Spiritual Leader, Eskasoni First Nation, Associate Professor of Mi'kmaq Studies (retired), Cape Breton University

³ E-mail: marilyn.iwama@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

Over time, mainstream discourse about the natural world has come to favour metaphors of architecture, government, business, and religion. We protect wildlife *corridors*, *regulate* the environment, *manage* land. Such metaphors represent a language of containment and separation, much of which originates in human abuse of nature. From an Indigenous perspective, humans are inseparable from the rest of creation. We are part and parcel of it. Mother Earth blesses humans with gifts to sustain ourselves. We, in turn, accept these gifts with a practical appreciation that honours their existence.

Human action has so eroded this interdependency that the language of separation can seem apt, or even wise. One way of relearning what it means for humans and nature to be inseparable is to travel the road back—and forward—to the light of what Elder Murdena Marshall calls “connectiveness.” To recognize and live in that light by acting according to the principles of what Elder Albert Marshall calls “Two-Eyed Seeing.”

For the Mi'kmaq peoples in Canada, language flows from, and determines our treatment of, the natural world. If language reflects and maintains the boundary of disconnection, then language can help us exchange that boundary for the flow of connectiveness. Revitalization of language forms such as the healing tense is one step Mi'kmaq in the traditional territory of Unama'ki, Cape Breton, are taking on the journey to reconnection. There, Elders, university researchers, and community members are reaching across boundaries to restore relationships with each other and with the land. This paper explores what happens to the language we use when we—Mi'kmaq and non-Mi'kmaq alike—accept the interdependency of one with the other and with all of creation.

We have found that conversations of interdependency alter the language humans use about nature. Such conversations also change the way we speak with each other. When Mi'kmaq and non-Mi'kmaq work together, exclusionary, jargon-laden academic language yields to various kinds of ‘plain talk’, simple words equal to any lines history has drawn. We are grateful to the organizers of SAMPA 2007 for providing us the opportunity to share some of what we have been learning together. Here are some traces of our talk on the way to connectiveness.

Thank you for coming today. I'm Marilyn Iwama, a poet and researcher member of the team at Cape Breton University's Institute of Integrative Science and Health.

From time to time, we hear speakers acknowledge that they are guests of the land's Indigenous peoples. They may express gratitude for safe passage. To the Mi'kmaq peoples of this territory I say: megwetch, thank you. I'd like to start by reading a poem.

And passing these rocks around.

While I'm speaking, please pass these rocks on to the person beside you.

[To someone in the front row, Marilyn hands two rocks marked with naturally occurring eye-shaped rings.]

Here is the poem.

[Marilyn reads from her book, *Skin Whispers Down*.]

The Earth It Carries

This rock comes from the North Saskatchewan.
One summer. Home for no sad reason. I'm free
on my walks along the river to look.

I don't use the walk to escape planning a funeral,
getting someone into hospital or out of it.
Waiting for them to wake up.

Birds on the sandbar at the foot of 15th Avenue.
The river is so wide I can't see
to name them. White birds and dark.
Maybe gulls or ducks. Geese,
if it's not too early. And plovers?

When I was young I never asked the name
of this bird or that rock. At least I don't remember asking.
You'd think I'd remember.

If my son asked I would say *this is sandstone,*
smooth and round from tumbling over rocks.
Brown like the earth it carries. I'd say
the shiny white bits are Columbian quartz.

And the tiny circles, like someone strong
poked it with a straw? he'd ask. *What are they?*

Expressing gratitude to the peoples of this territory is a matter of protocol that varies from place to place and people to people. A statement like “thank you for safe passage” recognizes the boundary between ‘me’ and ‘you’ or ‘us’ and ‘them’. It suggests the limit to ‘ours’. And, like the sign on a fence, “thank you for safe passage” reminds us that respect for limits can depreciate to a way (in the words of The Five Man Electrical Band) “to keep me out or to keep Mother Nature in.”

That line between humans and nature is what we in Integrative Science have been talking about and working on down in Unama'ki, Cape Breton. Lately, the Mi'kmaq Elders there, in particular Albert and Murdena Marshall, have been teaching us that the fence is all in our minds. Murdena and Albert have been sharing with us the idea of “connectiveness”—the interdependency of humans and nature. They've been teaching that the environmental mess we've made will only be healed by speaking the language of connectiveness. And by living as if we really were ‘all related’.

Real fences that separate humans and nature can be a good, protective thing. I'd like to tell you about some of the conversations I've been having with Murdena and Albert about this matter of separation. I'd like to consider the idea of the fence—of any boundary—that thrives alongside other metaphors of architecture and business and religion in mainstream discourse about nature.

You've heard similar discussions already today. There's been talk about engagement, collaboration, reconciliation, linking, incorporating, and not always getting what you want. Working across fences. There's even been talk about healing. Of moving beyond boundaries toward “Ecosystem Based Management.”

“Ecosystem” is a helpful word. It says that organisms live in the context of a community. “Management,” the English version of the Latin “*manus*” or “hand,” suggests some thing, like money or a chainsaw that we can hold, manipulate. Even when we speak of managing in the sense of achieving or coping, we posit an aim of controlling something. Like our urges at the dessert buffet. A bank account swollen by the deposit of a student loan. What wants considering, I think, is the imperative implicit in the phrase, “ecosystem management,” that it’s possible and wise to manage nature. What does the language of management, like our language of boundaries, say about our relationship with nature?

One thing it says is that nature is an object. We’ve already heard Albert remind us today that nature is not an object, but a subject. In Albert’s words, to consider nature an object “neutralizes human feelings and awareness of who we are and of our environment.”

Not only is nature a subject, nature is the one with rights. I remember puffing up in pride a little the first time I heard Albert say that he would sacrifice his life to save mine if I were in danger. Until Albert added that if he had to defend that tree out the kitchen window, he’d do the same for the tree.

I’ve come to appreciate that Albert’s regard for the life of that tree in no way devalues mine. His regard for that tree reflects his respect for the intimacy of nature, a respect passed on through generations in stories, language, and attitude.

Like Aesop’s fables, Mi’kmaq legends feature animals as characters. But Mi’kmaq stories collapse the distance between human and animal: crow is not only a legendary figure or representation of morality. Crow is a being with a spirit. This means that crow—or tree—when spoken of in gendered English, is ‘he’ or ‘she’, not ‘it’. In this kind of ecosystem, it’s easy to understand that humans and nature are “so interdependent and interconnected with each other that [a healthy] environment translates to healthy beings. Whether they’re human beings or other beings” (Albert Marshall).

One of the first things a Mi’kmaq child learns is that there is a creative Higher Power. Everything in nature is created and the spirit is in all of that creation. It isn’t my place or intention to argue this. However, I will say that a history of misperception is one reason it may seem difficult to make the conceptual leap from “humans and nature are interdependent” to “the spirit is in humans and nature.” To recognize the spirit in nature is not to ‘worship’ nature. Neither is understanding animacy a simple matter of separating the alive from the not alive.

“What about rocks?” we asked Murdena. “Are rocks animate?”

“Yes and no. Mountains are animate. Individual rocks are inanimate. Except when they’re used for spiritual purposes, like in the sweat lodge. Then individual rocks are animate.”

Murdena’s a Harvard-educated linguist, so I don’t spend much time quibbling that “connectiveness” doesn’t show up in many dictionaries. Given its suffix, the more usual “connectedness” refers to the state of being connected. To say “we are all connected” is much the same as the more familiar, “we are all related.” What works differently in “connectiveness” are its last two syllables.

The three letters, “-ive,” introduce the idea of action. When something “-ives,” it acts, it tends toward a state, especially in a regular or lasting way—the way an accusative look leans toward accusation. “Connective,” then, speaks of the action essential to being connected. Or of some thing that participates in that action. Like connective tissue.

The next four letters in “connectiveness,” “-ness,” take us further along, to the state or degree of the action. So, instead of just describing the state of *being* connected, “connectiveness” beautifully details the action of *becoming* connected. The difference between being and becoming is crucial for a language, like Mi’kmaq, that is verb-based. And for a planet whose citizens have spent the last many generations becoming *disconnected*, focused, Albert observes, more on rights than responsibilities.

Because connectiveness links humans with all creatures—and with the Creator—it is a matter of spirituality. This makes cultural and linguistic fluency essential. In our conversations, Albert and Murdena keep returning to several truths. One is the certainty that spirituality is at the centre of all interactions with creation. Another is that language is relevant to the process of gaining experiential knowledge of those interactions. That is to say, “language keeps you aware of where you are, of what your responsibilities are.” And, “the voice of our language is in the land” (Albert Marshall).

If an integral component of connectiveness—of becoming connected—is acting and speaking as if nature

and humans really are interdependent, then choosing our words is as critical as where we toss our cans and bottles or how we monitor wildlife activity. As we in Integrative Science are learning this process of acknowledging our shared subjectivity with nature, we're also learning to be prudent about the language we use. Albert has given us the metaphor of "Two-Eyed Seeing" as a guiding principle.

Two-Eyed Seeing means to see with the strengths of both Indigenous and Western knowledges. At times, certain problems or situations require us to privilege one or the other world view. At other times, the two work together in harmony. The two perspectives are not inherently compatible. For most of us, at least for now, Two-Eyed Seeing requires a great deal of conscious effort in order to respect the differences between the two perspectives and to focus on, and work from, a position of share strengths.

*Anything you need to know is in the language.
The voice of the language is in the land.*

This means that reconnecting with the land is part of reconnecting with Mi'kmaq language. Becoming aware that what we do—and what we have done—to nature, we do to ourselves. This means that the language of connectiveness, of interdependence, is a language of intimacy, healing and survival.

There is in Mi'kmaq a verb tense, a kind of past tense, called the healing tense. It's a language form that helps you heal and says to others that you are in the process of healing. Perhaps most often, the healing tense is used for actions that require forgiveness, how you treat your family, your community, your nation. The healing tense is a verb of relationship. You use it only in dialogue, where some confrontation over your behaviour has occurred. It's a linguistic structure learned through experience and observation, not direct instruction. A language form that is, like the knowledge of one's interdependence with nature, deeply embedded in one's consciousness.

The healing tense makes possible complete healing. Now, says Albert, "we have to sit down somehow and try to come up with ways and means as to how we can connect or use the healing tense, not so much to invoke guilt but rather to reconnect people."

"To heal our intimate connection with the natural world."

Here's a final word from Albert:

"[I]n essence, that's what it's really all about. We need nature to be soothed and to be healed. And to be brought back to our senses. As we have been swayed by other things like money. Individualism. So connectiveness and the healing tense have to become our one objective now."

Wela'lioq, thank you.