Knowing from where I respond

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response
c. 1300, from Old French and Latin—“answer to, promise in return,” from re- “back” + spondere “to pledge”... root “spend—“to make an offering,” from the same root as Hittite shiptantahhi “I sacrifice” (“Response,” n.d.; “Spondee,” n.d.)

2018
I’m helping Janelle load her car with the Kanien’keh:ka artwork she used to replace the classical portraits at the university faculty club for the launch of Indigenous Awareness Week. Powwow music is vibrating from her car. I’m transported back to being seven years old: my dad is drumming on the dirbakeh, a song about waking, about the morning, and the tune is hauntingly sad. When the Elder spoke earlier that evening at the launch, I saw fidgeting in the audience. Creation myths are not for this place of science. Jessica’s five-year-old daughter was trying to do a handstand on my knees. A Mohawk leader smiled at us. A white woman frowned. Indigenizing academia is going to hurt. I have always preferred the periphery: where will I stand now?

Oppressor
“Something [op]pressed is something caught between or among forces or barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility” (Frye, 1983).

2003
The department I’m working in is mandated to treat acute psychiatric episodes for Inuit adolescents who are medevacked in from Nunavik. This boy is 16, from an Inuit village, population 1,600, brought in following an attempted suicide. I found out after from the ad hoc case worker that he was brought in from a foster home hundreds of miles south of where his family lives. In rounds, he is presented as a “foster kid who tried to kill himself by hanging—the aim is to stabilize and send him back.” Midmorning of his first day on the ward, he tries to go for a walk on Mount Royal right outside the institution’s doors. He is tackled to the ground by three orderlies and given an injection of Haldol®-Ativan®-Benadryl® when he struggles to get free. At first, I am proud to give him expressive space in occupational therapy. Much later, I begin to understand colonization and the kidnapping of Indigenous children from their families in the 1950s in Nunavik, with families leaving their homes to follow their children south and sit camp outside of residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). I learn about the Royal Canadian Mounted Police slaughtering the dogs integral to Inuit life in the Arctic (Qikiatani Truth Commission, 2013). I learn to see that young man not as trying to kill himself by hanging, but almost dying by suicide secondary to genocide. I accept that I actively participate in a system that continues to oppress; my own family has been split apart by postcolonial wars and genocide in another part of the world.

Settler
People who go to live in a new country. Synonyms: immigrant, pioneer, colonizer (Collins, 2019).

1998-2003
I immigrate for a Canadian passport. For five years, I live with my boyfriend above the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal. He doesn’t have Indian status due to the two-generation cut off enforced by the Indian Act. He takes me camping in Algonquin territory where descendants of the 1923 signatories of Williams Treaties continue to uphold their hunting and fishing rights. That first morning, when I wake at sunrise and see the river and trees, my heart opens wide. We argue a lot, about his not finishing high school. We break up, and he goes “camping” for 19 months.

13 years later, I walk by and see that the huge mural honouring murdered and missing Indigenous women on the side of our old apartment building has been revamped. Now I understand why he stopped every single day to look at it in silence for a moment. Now I feel the horrors of what school can represent to Indigenous peoples. The inequity of my multiple degrees and current position on land cared for by his people leaves me unsettled.

Bystander
“A bystander is someone who sees an unacceptable act and does nothing to stop it” (Johnston, 2013).

2012-2013
I am two years into navigating a part-time faculty position when Leah, the student representative, brings the importance of decolonization and cultural safety to the curriculum committee. I map out the existing Indigenous content in the curriculum. It is all in the mental health courses that I teach: suicide, trauma, addictions, and community resilience. We have multiple contentious conversations around whether we are practicing cultural competency or safety (Beagan, 2015). At that point, I do nothing to change the reinforcement of psychiatric stereotypes in my teaching.

Ally
An ally is a member of a privileged group who acknowledges historical and current power structures, feels a sense of collective responsibility and the need to learn, and works with oppressed groups (Bishop, 1994).
2018
He is Kanien'kehaka and has agreed to give a lecture in an occupational therapy course on chronic conditions. Coming from an oral tradition myself, I skip using email and ask if he'd like to meet. He invites me to Kahnawá:ke, a reserve barely 20 minutes from my house, to his mother's restaurant, but after moose hunting season is done. I already know he will offer me a full meal, the cost of which is half the amount he will receive for the lecture. We talk for two hours. He explains that he does not use a wheelchair because he has committed to relearning the healing ways of his people. He has caught a moose, it is a good year. He didn’t like the formal lecture format, so he invites the whole class to the Longhouse, with faith keepers present and lunch provided. I am transparent; the university has not approved payment of these “guest lecture” hours, and we will get more than we give. He shrugs—that isn’t the point. He wants to engage in his way of knowing. I find a time in the students’ schedule and discuss how we will reciprocate.

Accomplice
“The ally industrial complex has been established by activists whose careers depend on … the struggles they ostensibly support” (Indigenous Action Media, 2019). It is argued that an ally stands with a group, while an accomplice participates in the “crime” of decolonizing structures. Crimes have consequences.

2017–2018
I am engaged in a community consultation process on what graduating occupational therapists should know about Indigenous topics. I have not yet met an Indigenous occupational therapist in Quebec, so I reach out west and virtually meet Angie Phenix and Kaarina Valavaara. I want my colleagues and students to learn with them. I initially have no idea how to make this happen. If they were affiliated with a university, or if I was a research-track professor, then there would be funding…What if you didn’t need to have western academic credentials to be considered an expert? I advocate and the proposal is accepted: Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers, and practitioners will be considered for visiting scholar awards. When I complete my annual performance review, the relationship building will not count toward indicators of merit; the choice had been made to make the results of the consultation openly accessible will count less than a scientific publication.

Warrior
My parents.

2018
I’m standing in the basement of the Dean’s house in the Faculty of Medicine. This is where the new Indigenous Health Professions Program is located. Jessica is standing over my contract as a consulting member. It was an unexpected invitation, to be the program’s first non-founding member. It is a temporary position and should pave the way for a permanent position for an Indigenous scholar. When I inform my director of the news, she is supportive but also worried: “I don’t want you to have your heart broken if the contract isn’t renewed.” She is not wrong that this could happen; yet, I think of Jessica telling me a story that her Elder’s sister, Loretta Afraid of Bear Cook, has told her of the Lakota Tokala warrior society. With one hand they would plant their spears in the ground, and with the other they would fight, holding their line. This is how Loretta sees Jessica’s work.

I think of how my own parents have held their lineage, our family and values, in and after war. I think of all the lines I am, and will be, pressed to follow, and plant myself firm.

References

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