

I was 28 when I moved to the city from the bush. We had moved to the city to go to college in search of a new identity. Moving from a lumber mill to a college setting, I would walk in the morning to the college. And my steps took me through this stand of pine and spruce trees. It was hardly a forest, although I think the tourist companies refer to it as part of the Regina Urban Forest (urban forest, sort of an oxymoron isn't it?). Anyway, I would stand in the middle of those 6 trees and close my eyes and hear the wind moving through the needles. I would stand there and reach out and take some of those needles in my fingers and break them and hold them to my nose. I could hear my home and I could smell it. I could hear birds singing and for a moment I was home. For if a seashell can hold the sound of an ocean, those trees held the great northern forest, home to me and my mother's people. Then I would cry sometimes, look out the window of our rented townhouse, to the northwest, and I would cry on my bed. Twenty eight, alone, and homesick.

I had moved. Who am I in the middle of this city? My world has changed but the things that anchor my identity are sometimes the small and mundane things, almost throw away things that hardly even make it into the anthropology books. They are the ornaments, the throw away items, the things that can be changed but these do not change the essence of who I am, do they? I am a living, thinking, organizing, socializing, emotional human being. I am located in one of various sociological groups that make up a culture that helps ensure my physical survival. These can shift and be rearranged and I will still be in my essence a man. Who decides what is thrown away? Who decides what I am or who I am? Identity, hard to grasp-

The grandiose social experiments with my people were based upon the idea that you could kill the savage and save the man. Is it really possible to do that? After you have thrown away all the unnecessary trappings of culture do you have anything left? It seems to me this is occurring in the midst of our societies and churches. Slowly for the sake of some higher calling more and more things are thrown away. Perhaps for efficiency sake we throw away the necessity of greeting one another or maybe even throw away the many smaller language groups and customs. One by one the dominant group throws away the unnecessary items, thinking, "These are not the essence of who we are." Pollution, poverty, war, racism and all the other social problems all around us are a result of things being thrown away. Augustine would say that the good has been corrupted. The good has been pushed out and evil fills the hole. The good is distorted. There is a twisting that seems irreparable – except, somehow, if one could recreate a new heaven and a new earth.

I am from a group of those throw away people. Many in the new country's government believed that all the aboriginal people would soon be gone; they would cease to exist, throw away things. When they proved more resilient it was thought that certain aspects of their culture and way of life could be altered or thrown away. A plan was launched to make them more suitable to fit into modern culture.

“They would not be harmed in their essence. They will have the same rights as us. They will need to get rid of certain backward habits. Those unnecessary trappings of days gone by will have to move and establish a new identity.”

The residential school sought to rip the cultural identity out of the children. “Throw it out before they got too attached to these unnecessary uncultured ways. You know the things: language and songs, and the way they look at you.”

“We will teach them new language and new songs, and a better way to look right at people.”

But, it ended up producing drunkenness, AIDS, drug addiction, suicide – all corruptions and the result of too many things thrown away.

The residential schools did not work. Society itself cried out because of the brutality of the system. It was abandoned but now children throw themselves away. But the same twisting remains: drunkenness, suicide, drug addiction, STDs. Now children throw themselves away. They have forgotten who they are. No value, thrown away.

So, the church tries to respond. Tries to affirm the identity of people. They haul out the grand themes of the faith. They talk about justification, redemption, reconciliation and salvation, but they still try and judge the essence and the throw away things for my native people. They try to be the ones who make a new heaven and a new earth by talking about a new identity in Christ, but what does that mean? It is sort of like the phrase “God loves you.” It has become a meaningless phrase. Love means sex, or new cars, or the new car smell, the depth and breadth are gone in our current society. But, if I say “God likes you,” the force of the statement causes you to draw back and wonder “could this be true?”

The statement, “my identity is in Christ,” what does it mean? Does it recognize that the sound of the wind and the smell of pine are a part of who I am, or are those throw away things, not important to the essence of who I am? When I feel the beat of the drum resonate right to the middle of my soul is that a part of who I am or just another throw away part, not important for this new earth and new heaven the Church is busy constructing? Can I be an Indian anymore or is that something I can throw away?

Ray Aldred

There are reasons why the situations exist in Canada between the First Peoples and new Euro-Canadians. We need to tell the truth to one another; listen to one another and together come up with a way to repair the damage. This is the way of reconciliation. God bless you all.

Mequich, Merci, Thank-you.