Human Teachings

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
August 25, 2024
by Leila Barsanti-May and Daniela Grottoli

My name is Layla, and my name is Daniela. We're both 16 years old in grade 11 at Lo-Ellen Park Secondary School. Before we begin, we would like to tell everybody that the following information in these teachings does not belong to us, nor to our own culture. They were obtained during an interview we conducted with Elder Jim Eshkawkogan from Better Beginnings, Better Futures here on the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek territory.

Before you, we have our diorama that we worked on in October. It was part of a school project that we did, and we found that we learned a lot about it. So, the name of this project is Human Teachings. It's kind of hard to tell but we have scratched off indigenous teachings because Elder Jim told us that it is Human Teachings and everybody is involved in this, not just one culture.

Because greening and the regreening in Sudbury is part of the curriculum in grade 10 history, our project is mainly centered on the regreening project that happened here in 1978.

I'd like to take you back several years ago to when Sudbury was black and barren. It's very similar to the moon landscape. As well there was actually a time when in areas such as Copper Cliff, you couldn't see a few feet in front of you. So, to get from house-to-house, people would have to have poles with ropes and they would have to follow the rope in order to go visit their neighbor or to walk around.

The way that Elder Jim explained this to us was that our connection with Mother Earth was entirely lost. We were not valuing what She had given us. We were continuing to take. Elder Jim explained to us that he really didn't understand the mining industry from the beginning, because why would you ever want to rip something away from Mother Earth? Everything has a purpose. Everything has a reason, and for us to take it is entirely selfish. Since then, of course, we've obviously adopted more sustainable mining and sustainable mining traditions, and that is certainly a step in the right direction.

Here we can see the transition period between how Sudbury used to look and how it looks now. Obviously, we have made tons of headway. It's been recognized worldwide, even by incredible anthropologists such as Jane Goodall. We've done some incredible work, however it's important to recognize that the indigenous people, those who taught us about the land in the first place, were not recognized, were not asked their opinions, were not valued. It's entirely unacceptable.

Here we can see the border, as well, between central Sudbury in town and the outskirts. indigenous people were often pushed to the outskirts because, at the time, we had an incredible lack of diversity in Sudbury.

Here we can see that the indigenous people were actually able to continue caring for their land. They were still connected, and they were fulfilling their role as followers of the Creator. So, as you can see, they're standing in the circle because circles in the indigenous culture are a very big thing. It shows unity and everyone is on the same level because everybody is equal. That is definitely a very big thing to take away from this because as humans, we are all equal and we should share land together.

I would also like to direct your attention to this real ceremonial tobacco or *sema* in Ojibwe and in the Anishinaabe language. The tobacco is a spiritual offering. There is an elder, as well, on the rock. The rock is a real piece of slag from my great-grandfather, so this actually does date back to when the mining industry was causing lots of pollution and lots of toxins in the air.

I know it's hard to imagine, especially for those two girls over there who now see Sudbury as this beautiful area with lots of trees, lots of vegetation, lots of biodiversity, which is all represented here. This is much more similar to modern-day Sudbury. But before that, girls, Sudbury looked like this rock. I'm not sure if you can see it. It's black and that's all it is. But you can still look right there. You can touch it if you want.

We also have an Elder. He is very much inspired by Elder Jim. If you've ever met him, I hope you can see the resemblance. He is leading a special type of ceremony called a smudge. Now smudges are traditionally healing ceremonies, meaning that they are healing something, healing a person, healing the connection. So, for us, this ceremony represents how we can use smudges, how we can use traditional indigenous knowledge to show not only that we are ready to heal mother earth, but the that we are willing to put the past behind us.

Obviously, Indigenous peoples in northern Ontario and all over Canada have quite a checkered history. They were not treated fairly but we are willing to move forward, open our eyes, open our hearts, open our minds. We are willing to listen to what they are trying to tell us. Elder Jim was very adamant that people of all cultures should be participating in ceremonies, not just Indigenous peoples, and that is again because these are human teachings, not just Indigenous teachings.

Indigenous peoples just tend to be more connected with Mother Earth and more connected with these ideas because that is one of their principal roles on the medicine wheel. It is also a huge role for them to share knowledge like what elder Jim has done for us, and for that we are so grateful. So, the ceremony is essentially in the middle of the project really, because it is one of the most important parts. You can also see here as the birds are flying. You can't really see them. They're on the side, but they're flying towards the green land. They're flying towards a Mother Earth who is healed.

When we start to bring back our connection, we start to bring back biodiversity, we start to bring back variety and different species of plants and animals, we start to bring back that really gorgeous, vivacious environment that we see now.

So, as you can see in our project, the back is like greenery, which is Sudbury now. It's full of biodiversity animals, and it's really amazing to see truly how far we've come. You

would say that this is definitely a very good representation of this. It's very unique to see how we went from pure black rock, hard-to-see to vegetation, animals, and the flying in the sky with birds, and squirrels on the ground running across the street with their dogs chasing them. It's just amazing to see such an amazing accomplishment that we've done together as a city. It is sad to say that we did not include the Indigenous people in this process, but it is truly amazing to see how far we've come.

Speaking of amazing accomplishments, I would like to direct your attention to the top of the project. For those of you who are not familiar, this is a traditional medicine wheel. Now you'll notice four different colors, red, black, white, and yellow. These are all representative of different cultures. The white is representative of people who identify as Caucasian, the black people who identify as African, the yellow people who identify as Asian, and finally the red people who identify as Indigenous.

Now our medicine wheel is written in Ojibwe. We have several different roles as different cultures. The Indigenous people are typically known as knowledge sharers, are people who pass down traditional indigenous teachings. Again, everyone is involved. These are human teachings. The medicine wheel includes everyone. Just because indigenous people are kind of known as more connected does not mean that everyone can't have a connection. We should all try to work on our connection to mother earth.

The medicine wheel is also in a circle to represent unity. The traditional medicine wheel obviously is a circle, but we found that the concept of circles, the concept of unity, equity, equality, connection, are all very important themes in our project, which is why the medicine wheel is centered.

Previously, our titles were in circles to represent unity because we really wanted that to be a very big part of our project, but unfortunately throughout the school year there were some parts that were lost, so our titles are now not in circles. But previously as you can see up there they were just to finish off the project, and this was something that we did throughout the school year whenever we were asked to present this.

We would like to share with you a very important, very powerful quote from Elder Jim. “Every morning, I wake up, I thank Mother Earth for creating me and for creating the things that allow me to live. I thank Her for the water, for the air, for the grass.” I invite you just to think about that for a moment. When was the last time you thanked mother earth? When was the last time you felt grateful for the simplest of things? And with that, I think we would like to just do some reflection on how this project has impacted us in hopes that maybe you are willing to take on something similar or to take on a similar mindset to really help with your connection.

It's definitely very difficult and hard to put this into words how much I've learned from this project. It brings a lot of emotions to my mind. Actually, I just feel a very deep connection to Mother Earth. I find that I took for granted some of the things in nature, such as the grass that grows on your lawn, the birds that fly in the sky, those sounds of nature when you go for a walk or a hike. I think it's very important that we take a step back and we kind of just look, and we see the nature, and the greenery, and we appreciate it and feel a deep connection with Mother Earth. And I think it's very

important to do that because it really opens up your eyes to the world around us, and it's just very important to do so and it's definitely brought out in me a lot of emotions.

In this project, and I think Daniella can agree, we spent a lot of time working on this, and without doing this project, I feel like we wouldn't be as smart as we are today, and in a way, I guess you could say it's brought a lot of knowledge to our mind. I think this project was probably the most important thing we did all year. I think for me, reflection is a huge aspect of this project.

I know you can't see the pictures on the sides, but I think that it's also really important to acknowledge that the perseverance of the Indigenous peoples, and that's something that I've had a lot of time to reflect on as well.

Elder Jim was explaining to me that yes, absolutely, it is important to acknowledge our history, acknowledge our past, and acknowledge the hardships that Indigenous people have had to face. However, there's also been lots of success and lots of successful elements as well.

On the side, there's actually illustrations from Phyllis Webstad's book *Every Child Matters*. She is an incredibly successful Indigenous author, and she is actually the creator of Orange Shirt Day. So for those of you who celebrate Orange Shirt Day, if there's any educators in the room, I'm sure you know that is a big deal in all of our school systems. She was able to create a national, and perhaps even international movement, and I think that it's also really important that we celebrate the success that Indigenous peoples and Indigenous cultures have brought to us.

I think I've really been able to grow from this project. I think I feel more connected. I feel more united, and I am also able to recognize that I do have a role, and I do have an impact in the way I act, the way I think, and what I say.

It's absolutely an honor and a privilege to be sharing Elder Jim's knowledge with you today, and I really hope that this has a very similar impact on you. I would also just like this time to thank my partner as well, Leila, for this project. It was incredible working with you, and I hope that we can do something similar in the future.

Just before I pass the microphone back off, I would just like to invite everyone just to close your eyes just for a moment. Just take a deep breath, feel your feet on the floor, if your feet are on the floor, feel the chair holding you up, try and imagine yourself as a tree. I know that may be difficult, the roots pushing you up, giving you life. Just take a moment to reflect, feel grateful for what is sustaining you. When you're ready, you can open your eyes.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to our Human Teachings. Merci. Miigwetch.

Transcription of script from worship video by James Warner-Smith