An Okanogan Worldview of Society
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I grew up in a very remote part of the Okanogan on the Penticton Indian reservation in British Columbia, Canada. I was born on the reservation at home and I was fortunate to be born into a family that was considered by many people in our area as a traditionalist family. I grew up in a family where the first language was Okanogan. We spoke Okanogan and I grew up in a family that practiced hunting/gathering traditions on the land. I’m still immersed in that family. I’ve lived that life and I continue that practice in my family and so growing up in a small community and growing up in a community that was also fractionalized by colonization, fractionalized in many ways in terms of the community itself, gave me some insights and observations that could be valuable. So I have these observations, two perspectives, in terms of looking at society -- the society that I come from in my small extended, traditional family support system and the community that has been fractionalized by colonization.

One of the observations I have is in regards to human relationship and the relationship that we have with each other and how that relationship we have with each other impacts what we do to the land. In other words, what we do to each other and how we look at each other, how we interact with each other, is one of the reasons some things are happening to the land. Some things continuously perplex us in terms of our relationship with the land and that is because of the relationship that we have with each other. I grew up in a community, in an extended family, and our people organized themselves in a very different way then what I see happening outside of that. I want to describe some of my perspective to you.

The land that I come from is something very similar to California. It’s very dry and semiarid. It’s considered the northern tip of the Great Basin desert and so the ecosystem there is very, very fragile. At this time the Okanogan is one of the most
damaged areas and ecosystems in Canada because of its fragility. We live in an area where there are many conservationists and environmentalists who are very concerned about the species that are endangered and disappearing in the Okanogan. So we live in an area where there’s been extirpations that have been happening in the last 100 years and last 50 years. I’ve seen some of those extirpations myself.

This has been difficult because we grew up loving the land. We grew up loving each other on the land and loving each plant and each species the way we love our brothers and sisters and that’s the point I want to get across. That doesn’t just happen as an intellectual process. That doesn’t just happen as a process of needing to gather food and needing to sustain your bodies for health, that happens as a result of how we interact with each other in our families, in our family units and in our extended family units and in our communities; the networks that we make outward from that to other people that surround us on the land. That those networks are extremely important parts of what happens to the land and how we interact with the land. In terms of the work that I have to do, it is to find a way to interpret some of that and to bring reconciliation to members of my community on my land in order to bring health back to the land. I cannot do that responsibly if I cannot create that kind of understanding. In the Okanogan, our understanding of the land is that it’s not just that we’re part of the land, it’s not just that we’re part of the vast system that operates on the land, but that the land is us. That in our language the word for our bodies contains the word for land, so when I say (Okanogan word?), it means that not only is my ability to think and to dream present always in the word but the last part of the word means the land. So that in my mind every time I say that word and I refer to myself, I realize that I am from the land. I’m saying that I’m from the land and that my body is the land. We love to go out to the land to gather, which I have done every year of my life and continue to do and look forward to every year. I go out to the land to gather the foods that have given me life and given my grandmothers life, and my great great grandmothers life for many many generations. Our people have perfected a way of interacting with each other when we go out to the land that is respectful to the land and respectful to each other but also fulfills some needs that we have that are human in terms of interaction and relationship to each other. What our
grandparents have said is that the land feeds you but we feed the land as well. What she meant by that was saying to us that in our language, we give our bodies back to the land in a very physical way but we also do other things to the land. We live on the land and we use the land and we can impact the land, we can destroy the land. Or we can love the land and it can love us back.

So one of the things that I was looking at in the development of our education program is to find a way to teach about how we, as a society, interacted. To explore how our community interacted with each other and to find a way to distill that, describe that, and to teach and to reconstruct that in our communities.

One of the things I started to observe and understand was that how we make decisions and how we choose to look at each other as people, as equals, as human beings and how we approach each other is fundamental to how we interact with the land. In the most basic sense, our use of the land relates to our need for food, for shelter, for clothing and beyond. When we look at society, we need to look at how society is constructed. Those are the things that we need. Those are the things that we need in order to live and breathe every day. But besides that we need pleasure. We need to be loved, we need to have the support of our community and the love and the care that our people that surround us give us. If we can think about how those two things are combined together and work together, if those two ideas and ideals can work together, then we can see how either you can impact the land in a negative way or in a positive way. If you look around at how the land has been impacted by what I call the western culture, one of the things that I see is that there’s an over use of the resources and there’s a lack of access for some of the people. In other words, there are some people with a right to have more and some people with no right. There are also some people that cannot access the things that they need even for their basic lives. When you look at the idea of democracy from my perspective, there’s something profoundly wrong with the idea of a hierarchical system in which some people can exist within the idea that its okay to have people sitting next to you or next door to you and not have the access and not have the ability to the same things that you have. That seems to me a profoundly basic principle in our community.
that everyone in a community needs to have the same access to the basics and the same access to the enjoyment and pleasure of life.

So one of the things I was looking at was the idea of the construct of how we make decisions. I looked at the Okanogan decision-making process in its traditional sense, I’m not saying that it’s there today, that it works today, but elements of it are always present and have been carried forward because we’re only two generations from colonizations. One of the things that I came to understand is that in our decision-making we have a word called (Okanogan word…) which demands from us a number of things. There are four things that it demands from us in that process and we use that process continuously in an informal way in our community. And we can engage it in a formal way and it’s something like a construct, Robert’s Rules of Order for instance is a construct. The construct is what I think of as a democratic construct or your understanding of democracy that the majority have the decision and the right to make the decision over the minority. From my perspective, imbedded in that construct is an adversarial approach. It sets up the oppression of the minority, it sets up a construct in which there’s always going to be conflict, there’s always going to be those people who are in the minority and those people who are in the majority. It sets up a dissention. I understand that is probably the easiest way to do things. But in terms of looking at what the outcome is, in terms of a decision making process in this country and on the land and globally, it seems to me that systemically we might have to rethink how that works.

From our point of view the minority voice is the most important voice to consider. It is the minority voice that expresses the things that are going wrong, the things that we’re not looking after, the things that we’re not doing, the things that we’re not being responsible toward, the things that we’re being aggressive about or trying to overlook and sweep them under the carpet or shove them out the door. One of the things our leaders said in the Four Societies process is that if you ignore this minority voice then it will create conflict in your community and this conflict is going to create a breakdown that’s going to endanger all of us. This conflict will endanger how we cooperate, how we use community as a process, how we think of ourselves as a cooperative unit, a harmonious
unit, a unit that knows how to work together and enjoys working together and enjoys being together and loves one another. If that happens then the things that we need to do on an everyday basis for meeting all of our needs start to break apart. I can see how that’s working today. I understand that if we think about looking at the minority, if we use the process to think about why there is a minority, why there is poverty, then we should be able to find creative ways to meet the needs of the minorities. Is it about economics? Is it about societal access? What are those minorities about? If we think about ourselves as human beings with minds, the creativity that we have should be able to take into consideration how we meet the needs of those minorities. How we find every possible mechanism that we can to bring that minority group into balance with the rest of the majority. And so that process that we call (Okanogan word…) asks us to do that and tells us that if we can’t do that in our community that our humanity is at stake, that our intelligence is at stake, that we can’t call ourselves Okanogan if we can’t do that, if we can’t provide for the weak and the sick and the hungry and the old and the people who do not have the skills.

In the same way when we approach the decision-making process, one component of it is reserved for the land. We have one component in which we have people who are called land speakers. We call them (Okanogan word…) in our language. I’ve been fortunate to be trained and brought up as a land speaker in my community. We have, different than other communities, people who are trained as part of a family system to be a speaker for the children, to be a speaker for the mothers, to be a speaker for the elders, to be a speaker for the medicine people, to be a speaker for the land, to be a speaker for the water, to be a speaker for all of these different components that make up our existence. My part has been to be trained by some elders to think about the land, to speak about the land. What that means is I don’t represent their view, I don’t think of myself as an expert but I continuously need to be responsible to my community, every time, no matter what the decision is, the smallest decision, and it’s my responsibility to stand up and say how is it going to impact the land. How is it going to impact our food? How is it going to impact our water? How is it going to impact my children, my grandchildren, my great grandchildren, what’s the land going to look like at that time? So in that four
societies process, what we call (Okanogan word..) there’s a built in principle in terms of how we interact.

Another part of the process requires people to look at relationships. There are people who stand up and say it is my responsibility to see how a decision is going to impact people. How is it going to impact the children, what are the children’s needs? What are the elders needs? What are the mother’s needs? What are the working people’s needs? Some one needs to ask those questions. That’s their responsibility. When they stand up to ask those questions they also give their views in the same way part of our community is asked to think about the actions that need to be taken. Part of our community stands up and says, what are the things that need to be built? What are the things that need to be implemented and how much is it going to cost? And all of those important details need to be asked about and discussed.

Those people in that part who are speakers and doers are given the responsibility of continuously reminding our people that there are actions that are going to have an impact. There are actions that are going to cause a number of different effects later on down the road. If we over use some thing or if we take too much of a resource there are those people who are continuously asked to stand up to provide that information. There’s another group of people that we call the visionaries in our community, the creative people. The artists, the writers, the performers whose responsibility is to bring in that perspective into the community that tells everyone that there are innovations, that there are creative approaches, that there are new ways we can look at things and that we should always make room for newness because we need to be creative when we come up against something that we can’t resolve and that we haven’t come up against before. So those people are always brought forward to look for new ways to discuss and bring forward creative ideas. So all four of those components together then can participate in a decision making process. And the process then becomes a different process in terms of Robert’s rules or in terms of democracy. The process becomes something that is participatory, that is inclusive and that gives people in their relationship a deeper understanding of the variety of components that are required to create a harmony of a community. When we
include that perspective of land, we include the perspective of human relationship, one of the things that happens is that community changes. People in the community change. Something happens inside where the material things don’t have a lot of meaning, where material wealth and securing that and being fearful and being frightened about not having those things to sustain you. They start to lose their power. They start to lose their impact. When you start realizing that it’s people and community that are there to sustain you and that is the most secure thing in the world. When you feel that and you’re immersed in that and the fear is gone, the fear starts to leave when that happens and you’re imbued with the hope, with the hope that others that surround you in your community can provide that.

This is the kind of work that I’m involved in at the En’owkin Centre. I’m talking about all of the community. I’m talking about all of the people who live in the Okanogan and people that we reach outside of that. Not just the indigenous people, because at this time in our lives, what our elders have said is that unless we can Okanoganize those people in their thinking, we’re all in danger in the Okanogan. It sounds very simple and yet it seems to be an overwhelming task, a huge task, and some days it feels like that. Some days it seems to be something that one person has no power against. But when I think about my aunt who was talking to me the other day, she said, “Where are you headed off to now?” And I said, “Oh, I’m going to this conference, the Bioneers conference.” And she said, “Oh, what is that about?” So I did my best in my language to explain it to her. And she said that’s a really good thing. She said, “How did you manage to do that?” And I said, “I’m not really sure, but I think I managed to do that by talking about some of the things that seem everyday and simple to us. That seem to make sense to us, that seem to make complete strangers, loved ones of ours that we’ve brought into our community that are now part of my family and part of my extended community.” People like Fritjof Capra and people like Zenobia Barlow and other people who are friends, who are part of this movement. For me, inside of me, they feel the same as my aunt, to me. I think that’s how we need to relate to each other. I think that’s how we need to be with each other in order for us to be the way we need to be on the land so that those things that are material that seem to overwhelm us in their demand, in terms of saying I’m your security. I’m your security blanket. You need a new car, you need lots of
money, you need to do this and do that in terms of the power. That starts to dissipate when we understand that the power is us. That we are our security on the land. And that that’s what’s going to sustain us.

The last thing that I want to share is that one of the things that made a lot of sense to me is my father’s words that he used for insanity, which for us has a meaning that says that too many people are talking about different things rather than people talking about the same thing. There does seem to be insanity in the world because of what’s missing inside in terms of our humanity with each other. When we start to take care of that, the land has an affect on us.

One of the things that I learned is the power of when we take our young people out to the land in the work that we do to gather seeds or to gather our indigenous foods. We started a program to replant habitat of indigenous foods for some of the endangered species. We’ve got about 10,000 plants going now to replant indigenous plants. Both for ourselves and our sustainment and for the endangered species. What we find is that when we take the people out we have all kinds of community members coming out from the non-native community, from the multicultural societies, from the senior people’s communities and they just love going out there to gather the seeds and pot them and replant habitat. One of the things that we found is that our young people, the young people who are having such a difficult time (all young people are having a difficult time) that it heals them. That the process of being with people, out there on the land has a healing impact. It’s not just the work of collecting the seeds, people who are in farming know this. That it’s not just the work of collecting but it’s being with people, the community, and communing with each other. It is how the land communes its spirit to you, heals people, and does this in an incredibly profound way. We need to think about how we can do more of that.