

The Intersection of Racism, Inequality and the Environment

Larry Johnson--March 2, 2021

From the time we left our childhood homes, my wife and I led a somewhat nomadic type of existence--living a few years in one place and then moving on to another. When I retired we wanted to put down roots--to find a place of belonging. After a long search we found some land near St. Croix State Park--192 acres. I was about to live my childhood dream of being a subsistence farmer.

We purchased the property even though our theology says that that can't be done because the land belongs to the Creator and not to us. But while the land does not belong to us we do occupy it and are entrusted with the responsibility to care for it. We have tried our best to honor the Creator in our care for the land. Previously, the farmers who worked the land used pesticides and herbicides. We ended that practice. We have raised most of our own food supply organically, installed solar panels, and have heated with wood.

In many ways we acted as if we owned the land. As we settled in, you might say we became settlers. It was important to me that in order to feel rooted to the land I needed to know its history. I learned the land was once part of Ojibwe territory. Their camp was just a few miles from our house near where the Kettle River flows into the St. Croix. The land was taken from them in 1837--coveted by the timber barons for all the white pine that was on the land. The lumber camp was located less than a half mile from our house.

It has been a shock to me to realize that I live on what I consider to be stolen land. We planted over 5,000 trees--white pine and red, red oak and spruce but our efforts to honor the land do not rectify the wrongs of the past. I feel a need to seek out the descendents of those who once cared for the land with respect--to build relationships with my indigenous relatives--to learn what kind of future we can build together. I do not know where this journey will lead me, I do know that it requires the settler in me to die.

It is hard to give up the privilege I have known but my tight grip on it is beginning to loosen. I live in the hope that when my indigenous brothers and sisters and I are in a healthy relationship with one another--that we can work together in living the life our Creator intends for us and that we can experience the RESURRECTION of ourselves, our community and our world--TOGETHER.

But before that can happen--the past I have known, the settler in me must die. The prerequisite for RESURRECTION is DEATH. I think I am ready. This is my story. This has been and continues to be my struggle. It is where Racism, Inequality and the Environment intersect my life. I do not know if you can relate to it or not but I thank you for listening. Miigwech. Miigwech.