Address - Mi'kmaq Women and Our Political Voice

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I grew up in Bangor, Maine and my mother is Mi'kmaq, from the Chapel Island First Nation in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. My father was Irish. That is where my mother says I get the gift of the gab, but I think I really get it from my mother. The stereotype of Mi'kmaq woman being quiet and passive is not true.

We always spent every summer in Cape Breton with my mother's family. My father died when I was quite young. I was seven and my mother asked to move back to the Reserve. In those times, if you were a Mi'kmaq woman and you married outside of your community, you lost your connection to that community legally from the *Indian Act*. The band said that she could come back and live there if she would say that she was never married. She did not want to do that. She felt, I guess, that our Irish side was as important.

Growing up in the Mi'kmaq community and the Mi'kmaq culture, I never realised when I was younger the impact that it had upon me. It was not really until I got to law school in 1990 that I came to see the cultural clashes that I had been living with. They became very clearly focused and I am going to talk a little bit about that.

Two things have grounded me. Trish Monture-Angus is my sister, my teacher, my mentor, somebody who was there at Dalhousie Law School when I first got there and ended up becoming a very good friend of mine. She was the first Aboriginal woman that I have ever met that was a lawyer, the one who convinced me to think about law. She is a prolific writer, a woman of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. She talks about truth and in a paper called "Reclaiming Justice: Aboriginal Women and Justice Initiatives in the 1990's" she says:

> Truth, in non-aboriginal terms, is located outside the self. It is absolute and may be discovered only through years of study in institutions that are formally sanctioned as sources of learning. In the Aboriginal way, truth is internal to the self. The Creator put each and everyone here in a complete state of being with our set of instructions to follow. Truth is discovered through personal examination, not through systemic study in formally sanctioned institutions. (1992a, 106)

Our truth is located within ourselves. That means that some of the things I need to share with you are my truth, my internal truth and my experience.

However, the flip side of that, not that I like thinking in these split terms, is in another paper called "The Violence We Women Do: A First Nations View," where Trish goes on to say:

> The continued denial of our experience at every corner, at every turn, from education at residential schools through to university, is violence. The denial of my experience batters me from all directions. Because others have the power to define my existence, experience and even my feelings, I am left with no place to stand and validly construct my reality. That is the violence of silence.
> (1992b, 197-8; also Doyle, 1990)

Both of those statements are central to what I am talking about, because when we are talking about gaining voice in the Mi'kmaq community, we are talking about the way in which we construct our reality from a personal perspective - our experience, what we have been taught by our elders, our culture, our language, our history. The other thing is that people do not understand where we are coming from; it is banging our heads against a proverbial wall. Every time I feel that I have to explain something, I know it is something that people are not going to understand.

I don't know how much I have to contribute in an academic sense, but I do want to

talk about my perception of the Mi'kmaq experience and the experience of the Mi'kmaq women. We are different. In the Mi'kmaq world, our treaties define our relationship to the State. I never learned any of this in school, but from my elders, and the knowledge that they passed down to me is equally valid if not more valid in this context. They have told me in no uncertain terms that treaties are important, the treaties construct our relationship with the Canadian State and with the British Crown. There is nobody else that has that treaty relationship within this constitutional framework, except maybe the French. In accounts of the creation of Canada through the French and the English, the Aboriginal people are hardly ever mentioned, until in 1982 when our rights were recognised in the Constitution.

I have thought about the mainstream political system and I found it quite fascinating, but how relevant is it? Our perception, my perception as a Mi'kmaq woman of what leadership is may be quite different from yours. I believe that in order to gain our voices, tremendous healing has to occur. It means that in order for us to have the strength to face the political process, we must be strong in ourselves.

About a year and a half ago I was on the Governor-General's Canadian Study Tour, one of the Nova Scotia delegates. The focus of that tour was on developing leadership. One of the things that I thought about quite a bit was "What are leaders?" I want to talk about what I see as leadership in my community. I have thought long and hard about the status quo. I have thought long and hard about the impact of law on Aboriginal women's lives. I have thought long and hard about the violence and the racism and the sexism that we encounter every day. When I think about gaining voice, to put our voices out there, in my experience there is tremendous healing that has to occur in our communities. In order for us to have the strength to face this political process we must be strong within ourselves. We have to take care of our communities and our families. That is the priority. I am even scared to death to speak of my own experience tonight, knowing that my internal truth has taken a very big kicking in the last fifteen months.

The notion of leadership revolves around the fundamental values in Mi'kmaq society, around sharing and caring. Simply that; to be good Mi'kmaq people. Prior to contact with the Europeans, Mi'kmaq women in our communities had very powerful positions. There was no question about it. You can still see that today. I am not talking about power over others, I am talking about power in strength and courage. It is putting yourself out there, it is doing what you need to keep the Nation going. Since before contact and through all the assimilation policies and the *Indian Act* and all the residential schools, Mi'kmaq women have always had this vision of keeping our Nation alive. We are always thinking about the future generations of our people.

Just to give you an example, when the whole Sable gas [offshore exploration project] started happening with Aboriginal title at issue, some mainstream white Canadian male lawyers were talking about what they were going to do. They said, "Well, we are really going to push for employment equity. We want to get jobs." I said "It is much more than that." I could not put my finger on what it was, I knew it had to do with the land issue. My friend Khrista Brooks hit the nail on the head, she said "What am I going to tell my grandchildren, we had the chance to stand up for this and we did not. How will I explain that to them?" And I thought that is exactly it: how am I going to justify what I am doing in terms of the future generations of my community? We have the chance right now to do something.

Women are the glue that holds the community together, there is no question about that. Canadian law has tried to take over that role. They saw how powerful Mi'kmaq women's roles were, all Aboriginal women across Canada, in a matriarchal society. They always say you know who your mother is. There was always that feeling that women were the backbone, the heart and soul of the nation - even in terms of picking leaders. There is still the traditional Mi'kmaq Grand Council and only men serve on it now but in traditional times it was the women who chose the men to sit on that. They watched the men from the time they were born. They would say, "Now, when I was carrying him, he was really jumpy." Everything from pre-natal experience, this child's reactions, what they do, how to install good values, that was the women's responsibilities. And the men listened to the women.

The Canadian government saw clearly the power that we had. Which is why in 1876 they put the *Indian Act* into place, that was specifically targeted at disconnecting aboriginal women from

their community. In the late 1800s, women did not have much political power or political voice. They could not own property; they could not do very much. So, why would a legislature focus so much attention on the women? I believe it was because we were powerful. They knew that if they were going to assimilate Aboriginal people the only way to do that was through the women, by disconnecting us from our community.

The changes that occurred in 1985 did not fix this totally. There are still Mi'kmaq women who do not have access to treaty rights and responsibilities. Also there are still non-Mi'kmaq women who married Indian men and kept their status and still have rights and responsibilities under the *Indian Act*. I am not saying that those women are not part of the community, I am saying that some of them are not Mi'kmaq, but the law recognises them as that. I think that is wrong.

The *Indian Act* did not allow Mi'kmaq women to vote until 1960, but voting has to be relevant and when you don't have a voice, and you don't have a process to put your voice forward, casting a vote for some party somewhere is not relevant. I always knew that when you have a democracy based on majority rule, we would always lose. I always vote in our community, because I like feeling that power, but sometimes I think it is a false power.

So I look at our political system right now, and I wonder what would happen if a Mi'kmaq woman ever runs for office, in the mainstream political system. There is no-one that has ever done that yet. I only know of one Aboriginal woman that holds a federal seat, Ethel Blondin-Andrew from NWT [North West Territories]. I must admit I thought of it myself, but it is kind of hard to run for office when you have no political party affiliation (contrary to what Brook Taylor, an MLA in Nova Scotia, said a couple of years ago, when he called me a "Liberal hack." I was called worse!) For somebody who is so non-political, it comes back to this idea, the simple concept of voice. I had to ask myself some questions: am I strong enough in my Mi'kmaq values? Do I believe in doing things "the right way"? How will I get my voice heard? How will I bring forward my vision?

I don't believe that I have ever been in politics, anybody who has ever been can disagree with me. What I think, and this is just what I think, you have to have some sort of vision to put up with what you are going to have to put up with. I think that there has to be something that drives you, that you have a passion for change, for the future, for our children. We always care about the health of our kids, we always care about the health of our families, always care about the health of our communities, education, and all those things.

Of course one of the things that I ask myself continuously is why would I even think about putting myself in such a place. I don't have to list all the barriers. But two of them for me are certainly money and political affiliation. If you are trying to include Aboriginal women, it is important that you find a party that, if you have a vision and a passion and a need for change, it would be able to help you effect that change. One of the most important things to me personally is Aboriginal and treaty rights. It is one of the fundamental building blocks of this country and why it continually gets put off I don't know.

What does it mean to be a Canadian in this society? As a Mi'kmaq woman that has been somewhat out of reach. I always wonder, if I ran for office, would I do the right thing? Or would I let some lobbyist pay me off?

Getting people involved politically goes back to getting a voice. Voice is standing up for what you believe and voice is being able to say what you need to say and stick up for it. Believing in that vision and implementing that vision and being able to stand up for what you believe in, I think about the current and historical oppression of Mi'kmaq women. The government has actively tried to disempower us through the *Indian Act*, through the residential schools, through the law and the oppression created by Canadian law has created a situation where as a Mi'kmaq woman I no longer believed my own voice. I did not believe in my own tradition and values, or culture.

There are only three Aboriginal professors at Dalhousie; not a lot of us. I am unique in that situation so I am not totally representative as a Mi'kmaq woman. There are a lot of women behind me and beside me who don't have the privilege that I have. I do have privilege; I have to acknowledge that. To stand in this place means being attacked. I have had some people call me White when they know that I am a lawyer. I have had some people call me a dumb Indian when they don't realise that I am a lawyer. Those stereotypes, we have to be one or the other. I can't be a lawyer and a Mi'kmaq woman; somehow I have opted out, copped out,

sold out. I don't think it is true, because the only thing that has sustained me is my voice and my values and my culture and my language and my family.

When I became a lawyer I did not leave my Mi'kmaq voice or myself behind. This has certainly been a struggle and these are the cultural conflicts that we have to negotiate all the time. I have to know your culture; you don't have to know mine. I can dress up in my nice little business-like outfit; you don't have to know mine but I have to know yours. That is really what oppression is about, because when you don't know me and you don't understand me and we can't talk, it is difficult.

To speak of my own experience is sometimes very scary, but I did it in a book called *And I Will Paint the Sky* (2001). There are all kinds of great women in there, who took the pen and the word processor and put their truth down on paper. It is very scary to do that but to go into any political process and advocacy process you have to know were you stand. You have to know the bedrock of what you are standing on. My bedrock is my Mi'kmaq culture, language and traditions and my family.

In the Mi'kmaq community, before we can find our voice, we have to have tremendous healing because, as I said to you, we were disconnected from our communities. We had residential schools actively tell us that we were no good. My mother spoke "gibberish," that is what the nuns told her. But still today we always talk about that history. It still happens. So many of my Mi'kmaq friends and relatives and family live in poverty and violence. We have a long history of trauma and abuse. Our children are dying. Last night a woman died in my community. Another one died. We are trying to survive. When you are talking about political process, I am thinking about that. I think about leadership, and I think, our women are working hard to keep our people alive. I know that is true. There are different ways of advocating and creating change, so when I think of running for office, I think that may be only one way of doing it. Because one of the main responsibilities that we have as Mi'kmaq women is to take care of our children, to take care of our Nation.

But I heard my mother calling me last night with bad news. This is the reality of the worlds that I live in and what I think about. I think about my students in the Transition Year Program, some of them who are from that community. I think, oh my God, we need healing. We need strength. Not everybody, I should just talk for myself. I am one of the walking wounded. I don't want to talk about the struggles in our communities because I am afraid that you are going to think that is all we are. But I am going to tell you what made a difference. I went to a book launch one day, for a book of Mi'kmaq women writers entitled *Kelusultiek* (Institute for the Study of Women 1994). I cried. I cried because we had people telling us the truth of their lives. That is what we need to start doing whether we are an NDPer or Tory or Liberal or Reform, whatever.

We have women in our community who are now Chiefs. We have women in our community who, despite all the trauma and horror that we have experienced, especially in the last six months or so, are persevering and surviving. When I was at the law school a few years ago I was beset by racist students. They came after me with a vengeance. So I said, am I going to lie down and die? No, I am not. I found the strength when I thought about all the Mi'kmaq women in my family who had gone before me, who had been radicals in their own way. People in my family who saved our community from centralisation in the 1940s.

My mother went to residential school and she has very rarely talked about her experiences. Somebody said to her one time, "Why is it that you are still a Catholic and you went to residential school?" She said, "Because I would never let them take that away from me, my belief in God." Now I don't know who is Catholic and who is not, it is not really that. It is the fact that she was determined to hold on to who she is and that is what taught me a lesson. I think that any woman who goes into politics - at least if they are Mi'kmaq and I am not speaking for anybody else - we have to have a strong vision and we have to be strong within ourselves. It doesn't mean that when Brook Taylor slammed me in the press, I didn't go home and cry about it. Because I did. But it means that I had people around me that supported me and I remembered where I came from and the strength that was flowing in my veins.

I think that part of the healing process that has to occur for us to gain our voice is to recognise how wonderfully valid our traditions and beliefs are. And that nothing, nothing is going to change that. So as we go on, the silent work that is being done in our communities right now, my sister

going over to Alex Marshall's to clean the house after his wife died, will be recognised for the life-affirming work that it is. So that we will be able to create change in our own communities and that maybe someday, somewhere, somehow, one of us, maybe ten of us, maybe all of us will end up in our own little caucus maybe, or we will be able create change within our own communities. Because really it is a matter of life and death.

I have given you a little taste of my reality, of what some of the issues are that I think about. Standing up for what you believe and finding the strength in other women and men, family members, is the most important thing. Whether you are Mi'kmaq or not, we all live in communities and families, and we all have to support them and work for them. If those politicians don't listen to those simple ideas, then I guess I am going to have to try some day. Because I am very tired of people getting disempowered by government policy.

I really believe that my healing has created the strength in me to speak out. I think that our healing has to happen and I think people need to be aware of the realities that we live with. Someday, when you go to a Mi'kmaq community, we will be ready to take over the world.

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