

**Beyond the Present Moment:
Seeking Wisdom from the Grandmothers**

Proverbs 3:13-26; Proverbs 4:1-13

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When I was about 12 years old, my grandmother offered to pay each of her grandchildren \$10 to read the whole book of Proverbs. I was the only grandchild that failed to do so! So, in honour of my grandmother, Mary Reimer, I have chosen scripture passages from the book of Proverbs this morning.

Proverbs is considered to be part of a group of biblical books collectively called “wisdom literature”. Other wisdom books are Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and The Song of Songs, although I would say The Song of Songs should get its own grouping as erotic literature. Listen to this: “your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn.” Steamy!

Back to Proverbs.

In Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as female. Chapter 3 says things like: “Wisdom is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.” And, “She is a tree of life to those who embrace her.” And later, in Proverbs 8, it says this about the role of Wisdom in creation:

27 When God established the heavens, I was there...
29 when God assigned to the sea its limit,
 so that the waters might not transgress God’s command,
when God marked out the foundations of the earth,
30 then I was beside God, like a master worker;
and I was daily God’s delight,
 rejoicing before God always,
31 rejoicing in God’s inhabited world.

Wisdom works alongside God as a partner in the creation of the world. What an image! What do you picture when you hear this? What does Woman Wisdom look like to you?

I picture Woman Wisdom as a grandmother lovingly surrounded by her many children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Rejoicing in all of the creatures in God’s inhabited world.

I also chose these passages from Proverbs because they honour the deep connection between wisdom and creation: a sacred connection long celebrated by our indigenous siblings.

Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) has asked Christian congregations across Turtle Island to mark Indigenous Solidarity Sunday today through prayer and through support for indigenous land and water protectors in places like Northern Minnesota, where they are fighting against Enbridge's plan to abandon their Line 3 pipeline, which is seriously compromised. Abandoning the pipeline instead of fixing it would result in catastrophic damage to the extensive ecosystems it crosses.

In our present moment, we are so focused on the singular issue of the Covid pandemic that it is easy to forget other pressing issues like the climate crisis and creation care. Our present moment has become so constricted, narrow and myopic that it is hard to think of anything else and to act in ways that will secure a more just future for our communities and for our earth.

We have much to learn from the wisdom of indigenous peoples about the importance of creation and our place as creatures *within* creation, not creatures *outside* of creation. To honour this wisdom, I've put together a slide show of the works of 4 Canadian indigenous women artists whose art brings to life the sacred connection between wisdom and creation. These women are Inuit artist Kenojuak Ashevak, Daphne Odjig who is of Odawa-Potawatomi heritage, Cree artist Jane Ash Poitras, and Métis artist Christi Belcourt.

A warning, some of their stories contain some painful experiences.

Kenojuak Ashevak was born in an igloo on the southern coast of Baffin Island in what is now the Canadian territory of Nunavut. Her father was a hunter, fur trader and highly revered shaman. He tragically came into conflict with some of the community members who were Christian converts and was murdered when Kenojuak was 6 only years old. Her mother remarried and, at a certain point, Kenojuak's step-father expressed a desire for her to marry Johniebbo Ashevak, a local hunter. At first, Kenojuak didn't want to get married and would even throw stones at Johniebbo to keep him away, but eventually they got married when she discovered his kindness and his interest in art.

Kenojuak had a very hard life. She contracted tuberculosis and was confined to a hospital against her will for 3 years. She had just given birth and her baby was

adopted out to another family and a few of her other children died during her forced confinement.

Kenojuak eventually moved to Kinngait, formerly known as Cape Dorset, the first Canadian arctic community to produce drawings and prints. And Kenojuak was the first woman printmaker in the area, although her artistic media ranged from sewing to sculpture, painting, drawing and even stained glass.

The lines of her work are bold and striking. She depicts the camp life of Inuit people as well as fantastical animals that appear in Inuit mythology – the Raven who was present at creation, the enchanted owl who brings wisdom and guidance, the loon and various fish. Her husband used to say that the spirits would whisper in her ear at night and tell her what to draw. Her art, like the art of the other Inuit artists from her cooperative in Kinngait, was her way of passing thousands of years of myth and wisdom on to the next generations.

Daphne Odjig was born on Manitoulin Island to an English mother and a Potawatomi father and her work reflects the dual nature of her religious upbringing – including elements of both Christianity and Native Spirituality. When she was 13, she developed rheumatic fever and had to leave school. As she slowly recuperated, her grandfather, who was a tombstone carver, encouraged her to explore her significant artistic gifts and she credits him as being her first mentor.

After WWII, Daphne moved to British Columbia and eventually to Manitoba where she co-founded the Professional Native Indian Artists Incorporation. At this time, she was concerned that the Cree in Northern Manitoba were losing their traditional ways of living and their connection to the land, so she tried to preserve this in her drawings of indigenous people and their daily lives, while also depicting the impact of colonialism on these communities. One particular concern of the Northern Cree of Manitoba was the loss of their livelihood of trapping and fishing because of their forced relocation due to the building of Manitoba's hydroelectric dam system.

As you can see from the slides, Daphne's work is incredibly diverse in style. She utilizes European styles ranging from expressionism to cubism while incorporating images reminiscent of indigenous rock pictographs. She has said that the rounded figures in some of her art are an homage to the "rounded edges of her grandfather's carved tombstones."

Jane Ash Poitras is a Cree artist who was born in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta. Her mother died of tuberculosis when she was 6 and she was then adopted by an elderly German woman. In an interview with the National Gallery of Canada, Jane called herself a “law-abiding Catholic” and a “troublemaker”. She is also deeply invested in her Cree heritage and has spent a lot of time traveling to different Cree communities to hear their stories, which she incorporates into her art.

Before Jane turned to painting, she finished a degree in microbiology and this is also reflected in her works that showcase the influence of plants and animals on indigenous cultures. For example, in her 2004 work “Buffalo Seed”, she represents how North American Native people learned about the medicinal qualities of the sunflower plant by watching the way the buffalo would use it for healing purposes.

Her work is deeply religious and political. In her piece, “Prayer Ties My People”, photos of important religious and political leaders and painted teepees are connected by a string of tobacco pouches. She says that these pouches represent prayers that can be offered to the Great Spirit of whatever religion you participate in.

This reminds me of my last in-person work event before the pandemic started. I am a facilitator who leads trainings on topics mostly related to conflict resolution and communication and I’ve done quite a few trainings in indigenous communities in Ontario and Quebec.

For the last year, all of my trainings have been moved to Zoom. My last in-person training was last March with the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. The participants asked if we could start the training with a ceremony that consisted of smudging and making tobacco pouches. I had participated in smudges before, but I’d never made a tobacco pouch. I took a square piece of cloth, filled it with tobacco and then tied it with a ribbon, as I was instructed to do. When we finished, I noticed that some of the participants were laughing at me. In my ignorance, I had made my pouch like 5 times larger than everyone else’s. An older woman leaned over and whispered to me that I must need a lot of prayers.

The three artists I’ve talked about so far are elders, two deceased, who have shared their extensive wisdom with indigenous and non-indigenous communities through their diverse visual media.

The fourth artist I’d like to tell you about is a younger Métis artist from Scarborough named Christi Belcourt, whose acrylic paintings mimic the beadwork

of her ancestors through her meticulous dotting method. Her work features an abundance of wild life – vibrant flowers, water, insects, birds and other animals. Even the humans that appear in her paintings are depicted as deeply enmeshed in the natural world. Humans are not pictured over and above nature, but are surrounded by it as an interconnected part of the same creation.

Christi's art cannot be separated from her activism. Her painting called "Offerings and Prayers for Genebek Ziibiing" shows two women offering tobacco pouches and prayers to the water. This piece is about the devastation of the many uranium tailing dumps that happened at Elliot Lake, Ontario between 1955 and 1978, dumps that killed the wildlife and continue to have a significant environmental impact to this day.

In addition to her environmental activism, Christi is the creator and lead coordinator of a commemorative art installation for the missing and murdered indigenous women of Canada and the United States called "Walking With Our Sisters". This travelling installation acknowledges the grief and torment that families of these women continue to suffer and aims to generate broad community-based dialogue on the issue.

Christi also founded "The Onaman Collective" with a few other indigenous artists. The objective of this project is to preserve traditional languages, knowledge and teachings. Part of their work is to connect elder knowledge keepers with indigenous youth.

All four of these artists, Kenojuak Ashevak, Daphne Odjig, Jane Ash Poitras and Christi Belcourt, connect the indigenous traditions and land-based knowledge of the past with the present, while also trying to preserve these traditions and this knowledge for future generations.

I'm not sure if they've popped up yet, or not, but I've included two paintings of my grandma Mary Reimer's in the slideshow. These two paintings hang on our dining room wall.

I am struck by the stark contrast between her art and the art of the indigenous grandmothers. While their styles differ greatly from one another's, hers is even more different. Both of her paintings depict a settler's experience of nature in Southern Manitoba at that time. In the 1870s, Mennonites had been given this land by the Canadian government. The new settlements appeared to be "empty space"

to the settlers, but in actuality this “space” had already been home to generations of First Nations people who were displaced by Mennonite farmers.

In my grandmother’s paintings, nature is represented as cultivated farm land that has been mowed and plowed and planted. One painting is of a cheese factory near Morris, Manitoba – my father’s first home that his family had to abandon during the great flood of 1950. The second one is of my great-grandparents’ farmhouse outside of Steinbach, Manitoba. This house was sold and torn down to make room for a mall.

I feel a keen sense of loss when I think about these ancestral family homes. I will never get to visit them because they simply aren’t there anymore. But I can visit them through my grandmother’s art, like a memory preserved for me and for generations to come.

In closing, the passing on of memories, of knowledge, and of traditions has been the life’s goal of the indigenous women artists that I’ve talked about today. They each, in their own way, embody the 7th Generation Principle, the ancient Haudenosaunee philosophy that tells us how we should conduct ourselves in the present moment. Whenever we act, we should consider the impact of our actions for the future. The things we decide to do today should result in a sustainable world 7 generations from now. This principle can be applied to how we care for creation – for our land and our water and all the creatures of land and water. And this principle can also apply to our human relationships. For example, how settlers relate to our indigenous siblings today should nurture positive future relationships for at least 7 generations to come.

I’ll end with a prayer:

Great Spirit, help us to remember the wisdom of our grandmothers.

And lead us on a righteous path, so that our actions today will bear good fruit tomorrow.

Amen.