

“A Fair Country – a Sermon on J.R. Saul’s Book”
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We are each born into a mythic world.

That’s a funny thing to say in this age of science and reason, but it’s true. We are each born into a mythic world.

Some of the myths that shape our lives are known and obvious, others are a little more hidden. There are myths about the culture in which we live. There are religious myths that shape our moral codes, language and to an extent our system of justice. There are myths that define our relation to the environment. There are family myths that define who we are and what we should or should not be able to do with our lives. I will talk more about these myths in two weeks. Today I will speak only about our national myths.

Here I am using myth defined as a “traditional narrative” or an “idealized version of the past”. These stories may or may not be true in a factual sense, but then their veracity is less important than their power to shape us.

In his 2008 book A Fair Country, John Ralston Saul challenged the traditionally held foundation myths about Canada and suggested that there is another, hidden mythic structure about how our country came to be. He implied that as a nation we more often follow this hidden myth, than with the one we studied in school.

This rediscovered myth is far better suited to us than the elitist colonial one foisted upon us a century and a half ago. And if ‘elitist’, ‘colonial’ and ‘foisted’ sound like loaded words, then good, for Saul’s book is anything but a distanced, balanced academic investigation. It is rather a controversial polemical book designed to make a point powerfully.

This Spring about 15 of us studied A Fair Country here at the church. Some loved it, some really hated it and found its structure and style frustrating. But if there was a widely shared view, it was that Saul challenged us to think differently about this country. Personally I know that every week some news story reminds me that Saul’s book has impacted the way I think about my country.

And so I read an item about proposed changes in health care or controversy in aboriginal higher education or about the impending exploitation of northern oil and gas resources and I pause. Our default attitudes towards all of those things and others, are shaped by mythic structures, be it the myth of the social safety net, the bigoted myths about First Nation people’s abilities, or the myth that the south somehow understands how our vast northern frontier works.

And all of this – what? ... uncertainty in my thinking, all of this “On the other hand” is coming because Saul challenged my understanding of how Canada came to be.

So what is his argument?

Simply, that Canadians describe themselves the wrong way. To quote from his opening lines:

“A dancer who describes himself as a singer will do neither well.

“To insist on describing ourselves as something we are not is to embrace existential illiteracy. We are not a civilization of British or French or European inspiration. We

never have been. Our society is not an expression of peace, order and good government. It never was.”

What follows in his book covers too wide a range of issues for me to take on in a sermon. I shall focus on one aspect as an example.

Well, let's look at the traditional historical arguments supporting this “peace, order and good government” myth that he attacks so harshly. It is the one we learned in school, and forgive me if my summary is overly simplistic, and even racist. Myths often are, and while we may downplay the unsavoury bits as a society gets more sophisticated, those parts are still there in the shadows. It's important to name them. Before the Europeans came, this land was populated by Aboriginal people who lived simple hunter gatherer tribal lives. They struggled against the elements, never built any lasting monuments nor developed significant institutions. Their religions were pagan and they were unaware of the Christ, therefore they lived in moral darkness.

That began to change when the Europeans came and created colonies. The clever fur traders developed friendly relations with the noble savages who did the hard work of trapping and cleaning the furs which were then bought for simple inexpensive tools, clothing, ironware and a few trinkets. The priests and ministers brought them the light of God, and royal representatives made treaties that purchased land. In spite of the occasional uprising, the governments formed alliances with natives that helped us fight off the Americans in 1776 and 1812. And then we began to assimilate the dying First Nation peoples for their own good.

Meanwhile the Europeans brought farming and herding to the country, developing orderly colonies supervised by a benevolent and loving King through the offices of the Governor General. The goal of this slow and careful colonization was the creation of ‘peace, order and good government’.

By the mid-19th century this colony of French Canadians and loyal British subjects had grown sufficiently large that it earned the right to self-govern and to form itself into a country of sorts as the Dominion of Canada. But Canadians would chafe under this limited freedom and would continue to press for a fuller independence from London. Landmarks would be the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917 when Canadian troops fought as a unit for the first time under Canadian command and showed the world how a battle could be won.

A next step would come after World War II when London's Privy Council gave up its final powers over Canadian laws and would culminate in the 1981 repatriation of the Constitution.

Now I may have just done that summary in a somewhat distasteful way, but it is mostly the history and therefore the mythic story I learned in school.

What's wrong with it? According to Saul, the first trappers and colonists were dependent on the natives who generously taught how to survive in this land. He points out that the canoe, the Aboriginal vehicle, was the defining icon of the fur trade. He points out that most fur traders ‘married up’, that is married native women in order to become part of the extended family and build business, and that far from being used and then abandoned, most of those so called ‘country wives’ continued to prosper after their husbands returned to Great Britain.

He points out that in the Revolutionary War the famed United Empire Loyalists were mostly non-British. They were African former slaves, German Mennonites and

people from other parts of Europe who fled a war that was essentially waged between English brothers, which is why Kitchener, Ontario was first called Berlin.

He also points out that in any number of pre-1867 documents the phrase was 'peace, welfare and good government', implying an aboriginal sense of care for the common good. That was yanked for no explained reason in the final draft of Confederation's BNA Act with 'welfare' replaced by 'order'.

In other words, the foundation myth that comes to us from the British elites who ran Upper Canada is not entirely accurate, nor does it serve us well.

Why?

Because today we self identify as being of European – and mostly British descent – formed to pursue peace, order and good government under a capitalist model based on the exploitation of natural resources. Though independent, we continue to cling to a colonial mind set that says that any really good idea, system or product comes from somewhere else. We are always looking over our shoulder for approval – once to Great Britain, but now it is the United States of whom we have become an economic and cultural colony. We may try to claim to be something approaching an independent equal – pointing to socialized health care, but in all honesty in most matters we are a colony that watches American movies and TV, sells our resources south and buys products north, that has sold many of our major companies to US and offshore corporations. In recent years our governments have steadily chipped away at things like health care and the social safety net to bring them more in line with their US model.

Saul attributes this rapidly increasing giving away of our heritage to a misunderstanding of our foundation myth – or more correctly, to our buying in to an incorrect mythic tradition.

So who are we if not a people of British, French or European inspiration? Again from the introduction:

"We are a people of Aboriginal inspiration organized around a concept of peace, fairness and good government. That is what lies at the heart of our story, at the heart of Canadian mythology, whether francophone or Anglophone. If we can embrace a language that expresses that story, we will feel a great release. We will discover a remarkable power to act and to do so in such a way that we will feel true to ourselves."

And a little later he begins to describe Canada as a metis (small 'm') nation, a mixed race country melding the best of all three cultures. We are a society that has three legs, British, French and Aboriginal, with the Aboriginal leg being the most significant in the early years of this nation, and yet the most ignored today. And since I am a Unitarian who affirms the inherent right and dignity of every person, this act of ignoring the contributions of one of our founding peoples rankles.

He points out that aboriginal people had sophisticated societies and complex inter-tribal relationships long before Europeans arrived. Their structures and relationships were just differently framed and were, therefore, unrecognizable or misunderstood by the Europeans. Their culture was based on being in relation to the land, not dominating it, something that still is very evident in Canada's north. This led to a similar philosophy governing their relationships within the tribes and between the nations. He points out a key cultural difference in negotiating styles. The First Peoples

understood treaties to be milestones marking an ongoing relationship, not end points. Treaties establish connections and are meant to be renegotiated, usually annually. Europeans originally understood this and participated in these annual gatherings. But as the 19th century dawned and Canada grew, governments shifted policy until treaties became final sale documents and ongoing relationships were abandoned. What had been a relationship between equals became a case of conqueror figuring out how to assimilate the remnants of a population believed to be dying off mostly from European diseases.

But then Saul notes that it is the aboriginal framework that remains. We do not talk of revolution in Canada as they do in the US. We talk...and talk...and talk... How long have we discussed constitutional reform? the structure of the social safety net? relations between Quebec and Canada? How long? Forever. How long will we continue? Probably forever. That's who we are. We have inherited the tradition of ongoing negotiations where nothing is ever final. That is NOT the European style. It is distinctly Canadian and grows from this metis, mixed race three-pronged culture.

And the moment you accept the possibility that there might be something to this metis myth, then every news story you read changes.

Though he argues in maddeningly broad strokes and with distinctly un-Canadian rudeness at times, Saul does make a case that many of our social ills come from misunderstandings of who we really are as a nation, come from ignoring the real foundation myth of our country. In Buddhist terms he calls us back to 'right thought' arguing that we are being dragged down by an unreal reality.

Of course, he goes too far, minimizes the import and impact of factors beyond our control and dismisses anyone who thinks differently from him as elitist or as colonial dupes.

But I think it would be a grave error to dismiss his premise solely because we don't like the way he wrote his book.

History is not a science. It is the art of describing the narrative of a people, and without a story, we are not a people. That our understanding of history has ignored Aboriginal involvement is true. It is also true that today there are more First Nations people than there were at first contact, and that at 4 per cent the size of the First Nations population is growing. More significantly there are exponential numbers of First Nations people who have or are getting higher education. Only a generation ago there were but a handful. If we haven't figured it out yet, the drive to assimilate the First Nations failed completely. Yet the various levels of government, in spite of a few truly bright spots, continue to treat this vital and growing community with 19th century paternalism.

The First Peoples were a founding culture of Canada. They have had far more impact on our approach to problems, negotiation and the common welfare than we have ever acknowledged, and in this environmentally charged time, they are the only members of the three founding communities that has consistently had a reverence for the land, air and water.

Of course, I have only scratched the surface of his various arguments. So let me leave you with Saul's conclusion where he muses about the greatest gifts inherited from our aboriginal founders:

"At the core of Canadian civilization there do exist ideas used and shaped over

four centuries. Our idea of citizenship as a circle that welcomes and adapts. Our conviction that fairness and inclusion are the keys to how we function. These also are simple ideas. But all successful civilizations are built upon simple realizations, usually dragged out of difficult circumstances. Our ideas are particular to our experience...Canada has no model for the world. But the long Canadian experiment with complexity and fairness have never appeared more modern.”