

*To my Wet'suwet'en people*

The greatest honour of my life has been to be adopted into the Wet'suwet'en nation and be given my name, Zil'hal'ay. I have had the chance to learn from Old Wihaliy'te, and to take a place as a member of the Laksil'yu clan.

I write as a person born white and with British ancestry. I have spent the last twenty five years working on 'unlearning oppression': figuring out how oppression works, how it affects us when we are the victim of oppression, how it affects us when we are part of the group doing the oppression, and what strategies there are to change the dynamics of oppression.

I have three purposes: to explain what 'internalized dominance' of white people looks to white people; to say as a white person what Wet'suwet'en people are entitled to expect from non-native people; and to talk about the work I think that non native people have to do in order to work respectfully towards a reconciliation with We'tsuwet'en people.

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I was born and raised in Regina, Saskatchewan. My grandparents immigrated to Canada from England and Scotland. My parents were working class. I was the first one in my family to go to university. I am a lesbian. I am a lawyer. I am a survivor of abuse. I am 61 years old.

I have spent many years learning about how oppression works. I was locked up in a mental hospital because I was a lesbian, and in those days (the late 60s) the medical profession believed that if you were a not

heterosexual, you were psychotic. And it was also a crime to be gay. I have learned most about what it is like to be oppressed from my life's experience as a lesbian. I have learned how internalized oppression work, how I learned to think of myself as sick or evil because that is how society thought about lesbians and gay men and that's what society taught me.

As a white person, I have learned about the other side of oppression, what it means to be white and to have a British heritage in a country where the British have oppressed and colonized first nations people. I have learned a lot about internalized dominance works: how I was taught to think of myself as a white British-heritage person as normal, as the standard against which the lives of other people in Canada were judged.

And I have learned about how it is possible to interrupt the patterns of oppression and internalized oppression, oppressiveness and internalized dominance. We can resist the oppression that society imposes on us. And we can learn to work as allies to people who suffer oppression.

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If reconciliation between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people is ever to happen, we white people must unlearn our internalized dominance, and learn how to be allies to aboriginal people.

I want to tell you a bit about what it is like to live in the skin of a white person, a British white person, at this time in Canada's history. Then I will talk about the work that we as white people need to do to unlearn the

dominance we have been taught. And I will talk about some principles of being an ally.

In doing that, I will flip back and forth between my experience as a white person, and my experience as a lesbian. Because it is through my experience of being oppressed that I have been able to grope toward an understanding of what it means to be part of the oppressor. For those of you who are heterosexual, you may find that you recoil from what I say about myself as a lesbian. That is because society has taught all of us that it is the norm – normal – to be heterosexual. I would ask you to pay attention to those feelings, because those are the feelings that come from being part of the dominant group in society, (in this case, heterosexual people.) It is part of what *internalized dominance* feels like.

None of us was born to be oppressors, or to be oppressed. We were born into a movie where the script was written before we were born. But we were *taught* the rules of oppression – how some people ‘deserve’ to be respected and valued – because they are white, or heterosexual, or male, or educated, or rich, or raised Christian, or able-bodied, or...; while others ‘deserve’ to be mistreated, because they are aboriginal, or female, or uneducated, or poor, or disabled, or have the wrong religion, or have skin that is not white...

*Growing up White in Regina*

My mother taught me to be afraid of Indians. When we went to Fort Qu'Appelle in the summer, she would take my hand if there were native people nearby. When we passed by the reserve she would shake her head and say, in a tone of mournful disgust, 'They don't even cut their lawns'. From that I was meant to learn that native people had no self-respect.

It took me years and years and years to hear her words in my memory and realize that it is white people, with our concept of 'lawns', little squares of land that we 'own', who have completely misunderstood things. Such a perfect example of how we white people are mis-taught. The idea that we can 'own' land, that the earth can be carved up into little squares. The idea that we should put burning fertilizer on the little squares of grass to make it look green – when the fertilizer, on the lawns and the golf courses, is creating huge problems of pollution.

My mother was teaching me what she had learned herself. She was teaching me what she thought I needed to learn in order to live in the world and to be safe. She did not set out to teach me to be racist. She would not have understood herself to be racist, and certainly would not have intended to teach me to be racist. But that is what she was doing. And that is what I learned.

There must have been many native people in Regina. Saskatchewan has one of the highest populations of aboriginal and Metis people in the country. But apart from one man, Albert Amyotte, I didn't know any native people at all. Albert worked for the rich people who lived next door to us. He came

from the reserve every day and he was their handyman. He knew everything. He could fix anything. He was very kind to us poor kids from next door. I don't know if he had a family of his own, his own kids or wife or parents. Because no one ever talked to Albert about his life, the way you would talk to anyone else. He only existed as the handyman in the world of the rich people. His own life was so effectively erased it was as if it never existed.

Maybe there were some native kids at my school. I don't know, because the assumption was that we were all the same. And "the same" meant white, and British-heritage. If there were native kids, they would have been treated as if they were white. Another erasure.

There was one kid of colour in my school, Danny Yee. He worked in his dad's corner store and was not part of things at school. The kids who stood out were the kids from the orphanage across the street, and the girl who came to the class from Germany and the only word we had in common was 'gesundhiet' when she sneezed.

We were never taught that people have different heritages, or any differences, really. We weren't taught how to respect each other across differences among us. We were taught that there were no differences among us. There were the Catholics of course, they went to Catholic school. They were Other. No one talked about them much but in the ways that people did not talk about them I learned that they were suspect. Less than. Through the silences at school and at the church my parents took me to I learned to look down on them. I knew without even knowing how to

ask the question that it would not be ok to be friends with the Catholic girl who lived across the street. And when my mother talked about Jews, she said the word 'Jew' as if it was a swear word.

In school we learned about the explorers, the English and French people who 'heroically' came and 'explored' the country and 'settled' it. In the history I was taught, there were no native people except as fearful people that the explorers encountered. They were uncivilized. In the stories, only the explorers had names. The native people did not.

Except we learned about Louis Riel. We were taught he was a traitor. In the police station in Regina they have a piece of the rope that they hung him with.

### *An unconscious racism*

(White) people mostly think that 'racism' is the behaviour of the Ku Klux Klan: burning crosses on lawns while wearing white hoods, lynching black people...

We white people believe that kind of racism is, of course, bad. But it is also far away, in the United States. Nothing to do with us Canadians, because we are not racist.

We Canadian white people have been taught to believe that racism is bad – but the only thing that 'counts' as racism is behaviour like burning crosses on lawns.

We don't recognize that the ways we have been schooled in ignorance of First Nations people is also racism, a racism which is descended from the genocide and colonialism of our people, who came to this continent with the mistaken idea that our 'civilization' was better than yours, and tried (and still try) to make First Nations people over into images of white people.

We white people don't understand that we are immigrants. Maybe not in this generation, but in the last, or the one before that. In our immigrant culture we do not have and cannot understand the connection of First Nations people to the land, to the Creator. Our culture has taught us that we human beings have dominion over land and its creatures, not that we should live in harmony with the earth and its creatures of which we are one.

We don't acknowledge that Contact meant the genocide of millions of first nations across North America – that our policies and our actions, from our 'exploring' to our disease-infected trading blankets – were responsible for decimating your peoples.

Unlike – for example – Germany, where there is a serious effort by the children of perpetrators of the Holocaust to come to terms with the immorality of their parents' actions, there is no real sense of responsibility among us white people for what our parents, grandparents, greatgrandparents did to your people.

We don't understand that by setting up the Indian Act, our forebears created a prison for First Nations people. Not just the physical prisons of

reserves, but the constraints of white-imposed “band” governance that simultaneously erased traditional governance and imposed a foreign, white-based system on top of and instead of the traditional ways of governance.

Some of my people have recognized wrongs done to First Nations people, or been appalled by the circumstances we have created and supported First Nations people to live in: poverty, inadequate homes, lack of water. And then some of my people have wanted to Help.

As they felt motivated to Help, of course they have felt that they are doing the Right Thing. They are therefore doing something Good. This can be one of the most pernicious forms of racism, because it is dressed up like help. I call it Presbyterian racism, because one of the things my childhood church did every year (and still does) was to pack up shoeboxes of things to end to the “poor children in Africa” every Christmas. No one thought it was important for us to learn about who the people in Africa were, or what they needed, or whether they wanted our Canadian shoebox gifts.

Wrapping those shoeboxes in christmas paper made everyone glow with a feeling of righteousness and charity.

That church also had a program to deliver lunches to aboriginal families in Vancouver. My father was one of the people who delivered the food, once a week. But when he came home, he would shake his head and say that “they” should just get a job. So the help that was delivered was wrapped in disapproval.



Not to be overlooked is the kind of racism where a well-intentioned white person thinks about racism, studies the situation of First Nations people, becomes an *expert*. And then that white person behaves as if she knows more about racism, and colonialism, than the people who are affected by it. That is a kind of Know It All racism.

All of these kinds of racism operate alongside the out-loud, direct hatred and discrimination that First Nations people experience every day: the kind that means that there have been hardly any Wet'suwet'en people employed in the stores of Smithers, that calls Native people by horrible derogatory names. The vicious prejudice that results in uncounted deaths of young Native women on the Highway of Tears.

Racism is one of the many kinds of oppression in Canada today. It shares many features with sexism, homophobia, disablism, anti-religious oppression, though it also has its own particular features. And in relation to First Nations people, racism has a specific form different than other forms of racism against people of colour: colonization.

### *Internalized dominance*

Internalized dominance is the experience of a white person in relation to racism, of an able-bodied person in relation to a person with a disability, of a heterosexual person in relation to gay or lesbian people, of someone raised Christian to someone raised Muslim...

It feels like this.

It feels NORMAL. It feels like the people who are Different are the ones who have a problem (First Nations people or other people of colour; disabled people, women, gay lesbian or bisexual people, people not raised christian)

As a white Canadian with British ancestry, I have grown up without ever questioning whether doors would be shut in my face because of my ancestry or the colour of my skin. I grew up knowing that my teachers all looked like me. The people in the church my parents took me to all looked like me. The government that they taught me about, with elections and so on, was filled with people like me, and everyone I knew assumed the government made good decisions on behalf of all the Canadian people.

I was *normal*. I fit in. No one looked twice at me in that what-are-you-doing-here way.

When I was in university I took a course called Race Relations. In that entire course no one mentioned First Nations people in Canada at all. Instead we studied South Africa. Literally, no one taught me, ever, in my education that racism existed in this country, or what it looked like. And because I am white, I didn't 'run up against it' in my everyday life.

One of the features of internalized dominance is that we literally never have to think about our own situation. Because – we are not the problem.

Another feature of internalized dominance is that we think that the people with the problem (First Nations people, for example) really want to be like us. That since our way is the best way, obviously any sensible person would want that for themselves and their children (Think about Trudeau's White Paper in this context, to get an idea of what I mean).

Cursed with internalized dominance, we cannot see that "our way" (whether it is the way of white people, or of men vs women, or of heterosexual vs gay and lesbian people, or whatever) is only one way. That what we have learned about history and our place in it is only a very partial story of the Truth that takes account of all of the experiences of human existence, and respects all of the histories of our many peoples.

### *Colonization*

The situation of Euro-white people and Canada's First Nations is a particular example of racism.

Colonization is the process by which the early settlers, and their later descendants, tried to eliminate First Nations people and their culture.

It has taken so many forms, from active genocide to the creation of the *Indian Act* and reserve system, to the residential school system, to the outlawing of the potlatch governance among First Nations on the West Coast.

And it continues even today, even after aboriginal rights have been enshrined in the Constitution of Canada, even though the Supreme Court of

Canada has recognized the limits of white colonialism, and made a requirement that Canadian governments consult with and respect the rights of First Nations people.

Because even when the BC and federal governments set up a Treaty Commission to come to terms with First Nations in B.C., once again it replicated how colonialism worked.

It is important to understand that it is not a question of whether the governments involved had good intentions, or bad intentions. That is a question for another day. What is important to understand is that the *process* of the Treaty Commission has been, once again, the process of importing white expectations onto First Nations. This time, they invited First Nations people to send their chiefs to the table. This felt like respect, because before that time, there had been no recognition of our traditional systems of governance.

But the Treaty Commission expected that our chiefs were like elected representatives in the white system: they could make agreements on behalf of our peoples that would be binding forever.

In setting up that system, the Treaty Commission did not take into account how the Wet'suwet'en traditional systems worked, through the feasts, through our families and clans. In taking the chiefs to sit at the table, without nourishing the feast system and the governance of our families and clans, it was as if the governments said to our Wet'suwet'en nation: just cut off the heads, and take them to the table.

The European culture of the BC and Canadian governments is very much a 'head' culture: it believes that truth comes only through the head, and that the heart and the rest of the body are not involved.

Our chiefs were very wise, because they said, finally, 'no' to the Treaty Commission process. They recognized that the Treaty process as it is currently structured would never result in a proper result for the Wet'suwet'en people.

### *Internalized oppression*

One of the worst effects of any oppression is that we who are oppressed begin to believe what our oppressors say about us, and to teach it to our children. Through the vicious residential school system, through the endless DIA government agents, through the day-to-day racism of going into Smithers – Wet'suwet'en people have taken inside themselves the ideas that white people have taught them.

The effects of internalized oppression, of never feeling good enough, never feeling like the world welcomes you in all of your goodness and intelligence and humanity, is pain that is so much a part of daily life that it seems as if it is the way it must always be. It comes out in drug and alcohol addiction, in abuse, in self-harm and self-disrespect. It comes out in mothers estranged from their children whom they did not know how to raise because they were taken from their own mothers. It comes out in the suicide of the children.

It is a deep river of grief and pain. The very worst part of internalized oppression is that when we are victimized by oppression, it feels like we deserve what we got.

Working against internalized oppression, to reclaim the human dignity that is our birthright, involves first of all recognizing that the headwaters of the river of grief and pain is the mistreatment that we have received. It means identifying the ways that we have been *taught* to hate ourselves, to believe that we are less than other people, that our lives are worthless, that our ways and our wisdom don't count.

It involves learning how to be gentle with ourselves as survivors of the oppression, and to be gentle with each other, recognizing how much harm has been done to the community by the oppression.

It is incredibly liberating to see ourselves clearly in the mirror of our own history, our own culture, our own values, instead of seeing our image distorted by the ideas that the dominant group has of us. It is exhilarating to learn the things we were never taught because we were taught only what They thought we needed to know. And it is profoundly empowering to speak *our* truth.

### *What to Expect from White People*

In this process of working out how non-native and Wet'suwet'en people are going to work out a way to live on these lands and to reconcile their pasts, if

there is to be a way forward, Wet'suwet'en people are entitled to expect from white people that we, the white people, work to unlearn the dominance that we have been taught.

Because unless non-native people do that work, they will never be able to come to the table and to meet with Wet'suwet'en people from a position of equality and respect.

What does this mean in practice?

It means that each of the non-native people at the table has to learn about, think about, understand their own personal history and their family's history in the world of aboriginal-nonaboriginal relations. How do they come to be there – in this time, in this government, at this table. Who were their parents, and where did they come from? Until non-native people understand and locate themselves and their ancestors in the history of colonialism in this country, they cannot know how to speak across the chasm that exists between the nations.

Non aboriginal people have to acknowledge that the blood of our ancestors is on our hands. We cannot delude ourselves that “that was ancient history” or “that has nothing to do with us”. Like the children of German perpetrators we have to figure out how that genocide happened, learn how colonialism gets repeated over and over.

Non native people have to take concrete steps to make amends for the deep and profound harm that our peoples have wreaked on your peoples.

In doing that work, non-aboriginal people must take leadership from First Nations people. That is different from a model of two “equal” parties sitting across a table. That means that the BC and Canadian governments must acknowledge that the processes they have developed – all of the processes, from the Indian Act to the Treaty Commission – have not worked. They have not worked because over and over and over again, the non native ‘side’ has imposed its own ideas of decision making and process on the relationship between Wet’suwet’en and non Wet’suwet’en people.

It means that the Treaty Commission must step back and recognize and respect the *internal* processes that Wet’suwet’en people need to engage in to breathe life into its traditional feast, family and clan systems of governance. The Treaty Commission must recognize the depth of harm that colonialism and racism have created. The commission must fund the process of decolonization. Because it is the process of decolonization, of repairing the damage done but non native people and our ancestors. And it must respect that the process is one that it can have no control over.

The Treaty Commission must recognize that in asking the Wet’suwet’en people to send our chiefs to the table, without making provision for the nourishment and respect of Wet’suwet’en traditional, family and clan based systems, they significantly contributed to the destruction of Wet’suwet’en nation. And that is true even though they believed they were offering respect, and even though our chiefs went to the table in good faith.



It is only now, after a generation of hard work and earnest effort, that it is apparent why the Treaty Commission process cannot succeed in the way it has been set up.

Non native people must learn about, and understand, and respect the traditional forms of governance of Wet'suwe'ten people. There is no more reason why decision making should be made 'across a table', - the non native decision making model - than there is that decision making be made in a Wet'suwet'en form, a form determined by the feast process. Non native people must come, if they are invited, to the feast hall: and keep silence while they learn.

Non native people will certainly object that this will take too long, that it will be too expensive. The truth is that non native people cannot afford *not* to recognize the need for decolonization and their responsibility to fund it.

The Treaty Commission has been active for 17 years, almost an entire generation. The decolonization process may take another generation.

### *The Wet'suwet'en Process*

As an adopted Wet'suwet'en person, it is not for me to say what the steps to decolonization in our nation will be.

But the steps will include recognizing the effects of colonization and internalized oppression in our lives, and work to reclaim the pride and confidence of Wet'suwet'en ancestor. With the wisdom of the chiefs and

the strength of the families and clans of the Wet'suwet'en nation, there will be a day of reconciliation when the Wet'suwet'en nation can move forward with the non-Wet'suwet'en people in this land.

*Thank you*

It is with great humility that I offer the perspective of a woman who is both born white and has British ancestry, and is a proud Wet'suweten woman.

Zil'hal'ay

barbara findlay

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