
Journey of Reciprocity: The First Eight Years of The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada

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Author: Wanda Brascoupé Peters, Stephen Couchman, Udloriak Hanson and Marilyn Struthers

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This article is the eighth in a [series](#) on Indigenous Communities and Philanthropy.

SUMMARY: The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada strives to promote dialogue amongst First Nations, Métis, Inuit communities; private, public and community foundations; corporate philanthropy programs, charitable organizations, and United Ways. This article describes the origins of The Circle and the need for philanthropic organizations to commit resources to reconciliation. There is opportunity to learn together about what it takes for Indigenous peoples to rekindle their traditions of social resilience; to understand when philanthropic investment helps and when it harms; and how respectful dialogue across differences and troubled history is an essential part of reconciliation.

RÉSUMÉ: The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada (le Cercle) s'efforce de promouvoir un dialogue entre les communautés autochtones (Premières Nations, Métis et Inuits); les fondations privées, publiques et communautaires; et les programmes de mécénat des entreprises, les organismes de bienfaisance et Centraide. Cet article décrit les origines du Cercle et la nécessité pour les organisations philanthropiques de consacrer des ressources à la réconciliation. C'est une occasion d'apprendre ensemble ce qu'il faudrait faire pour que les peuples autochtones ravivent leurs traditions sociales résilientes; de comprendre à quel moment les investissements philanthropiques sont utiles et à quel moment ils sont plutôt nuisibles; et de reconnaître qu'un dialogue respectueux, malgré les différences et une histoire tumultueuse, est un élément essentiel de la réconciliation.

Origin stories are important. They remind us where we were and who we were with and, in birth

stories, what the weather was like and where we came from. Although the Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada was formally incorporated in 2011, its story begins some time earlier. Those involved at the beginning would likely pick a moment in June of 2008. The Circle had no name then, but the gathering was called All My Relations.^[1] It was a fitting title: this phrase is often used by First Nations peoples at an end of a prayer or public statement to indicate their inclusion of ancestors, people in the room, and those yet unborn. It is spoken with humility.

June 2008. Spring in Manitoba. It had been raining all week and the Red River was cresting. Individuals from the philanthropic, First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities gathered to spend two days together exploring the most intractable issue of what we know as Canada: the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who share this land.

The first day took place on the land at a place called the Grandmother Lodge, an hour north of Winnipeg. Most of the forty participants arrived not knowing more than two or three others and were afraid of being devoured by mosquitos or, worse, washed downstream into Lake Winnipeg. But it was a perfect day – sunny and not a bug in sight. Organizers had bought every pair of rubber boots they could find and laid plywood over the muddy ground.

The day began with the group sitting around a fire making introductions. It ended pretty much the same way. By the time we had finished saying who we were and why we were there, it was almost time to go. For those focused on process and agenda, this was the first lesson of this newly forming group: the bedrock of any solution to the challenges we face consists of relationships and trust. To build these, you must start with listening and understanding. There is no short cut.

The next day, June 11, 2008, was a profound coincidence . Organizers had no idea that the meeting would correspond with an important moment in Canadian history and several of the non-Indigenous participants were taken completely by surprise. After lunch, with still much of the formal agenda to cover, the Indigenous participants in the group called for an early end to the gathering. It was the day of “The Apology,” and the hotel, owned at the time by the Tribal Councils Investment Group of Manitoba, was to be opened to the public. People packed every ballroom, meeting room, and gathering place in the building. Volunteers distributed Kleenex and together we watched on big monitors then Prime Minister Stephen Harper apologize on behalf of the Canadian people for the atrocities of the residential school system. It was an emotional, cathartic experience for everyone present, and, as we have experienced in the subsequent eight years, a critical junction in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.

The first All My Relations gathering didn't go at all as planned in terms of “desired outcomes and goals.” Or, by inviting our ancestors into this circle and allowing interaction in a good way, perhaps it played out exactly as it should have. Regardless, it was clearly a good thing, and the result was that an unlikely group achieved alignment around a common vision.

In the 480 years since the first written account of a philanthropic act in what would become Canada – the gift of medicine that allowed members of the Cartier expedition of 1535-36 to survive – the history is now painfully clear. “Cultural Genocide” was the term used by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to describe systematic attempts to contain, destroy, and absorb Indigenous peoples into “Canadian” culture. Some would argue that what has taken place is

much worse. These attempts have not only failed but have led to interlinked social, political, cultural and environmental degradation with a significant human toll. This land and our relationships have been left much the worse for the effort and investment.

Why was The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada created? Put simply, Canada is at a moment in history when we have an opportunity to get this right. The Circle strives to build a community of good dialogue amongst First Nations, Métis, Inuit communities; private, public and community foundations; corporate philanthropy programs, charitable organizations, and United Ways. In the same way a canoeists seeks a clear path down a set of rapids, we have focused on opportunities that present a clear opening for relationship-building, education, policy development, and philanthropic capacity within values of reciprocity. We must take a different approach than has been tried in the past. It is a moment when acting for reconciliation is not only the right thing to do, but is also essential for the well-being of all who call this land home.

The challenge is to understand the painful experiences from our shared history, assess the obstacle, and agree on the path ahead. The opportunity is to engage fully in reciprocity – practices of mutuality and exchange – to work together to paddle the clear channel.

First, the challenge of the past. Philanthropic organizations played a part in the dark side of our history. Along with the Canadian government and churches, Canadian philanthropists contributed to residential schools, to museums which gathered culturally significant “artifacts,” and to social services involved in activities like the “Sixties Scoop,”^[2] which saw thousands of Indigenous children removed from their families and communities. In many cases, these contributions were made with good intentions. Such is the paradox of hindsight. Both Canadian charities and philanthropic investment were used as an instrument of the wrong thinking of their time and thus failed an important philanthropic principle: do no harm.

At a recent Circle gathering, a foundation representative explained that the organization he represented had a significant endowment that had been well invested, and that now the foundation was hoping to donate in order to assist Indigenous people in Canada. The response by one of the Indigenous participants was simple and poignant: “You’re welcome.”

The comment was not said with malice but to share with the group the underlying experience of living in but not being part of the larger dominant society, and a recognition that this land once provided for all the needs of many Nations.

Most endowments in philanthropic organizations in Canada were created through the economic boom in resource extraction, agricultural production, settlement and transportation both on what we now know as disputed land in Canada and internationally. (To this day, you hear Ottawa and the land around it referred to as “unceded Algonquin territory.”) Almost all of Canada is, in fact, underlaid by Treaties entered into by Indigenous Nations and the British and subsequent Canadian governments with the intention of mutual benefit. Land and resources were exchanged for the practical needs of communities no longer able to be self-sufficient. These needs include federally funded access to education, housing, healthcare, economic development and protection. The agreements allowed railroads to be built, forests to be logged, and non-Indigenous Canadians to prosper.

Many agreements have been broken. and dispute settlements have dragged on for generations.

And, as the recent ruling by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal in favor of the case brought forward by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society and the Assembly of First Nations clearly outlines, First Nations, Inuit and, Métis children continue to be systematically provided with poorer education, housing, food, and other community supports. For many, there is a clear correlation between wealth in Canada and poverty in Indigenous communities. The clock cannot be turned back, and any solutions must be based on an appreciation that the issues are deeply complex. There is no room for paternalism. Establishing trust will take time and good will. We are all Treaty People.

What is the path ahead? The task of building a new relationship is daunting. As Justice Murray Sinclair suggested on many occasions, the exercise will no doubt take generations to achieve.

Since 2008, members of the Circle have been working on solutions through philanthropy. Though the origin of the word is Greek, the concept of philanthropy is by no means unique to Western culture. Attempts through Canadian history to “address the Indian problem” have included systematic efforts to dismantle long-standing Indigenous structures of community caring, sharing, and philanthropy. These traditions made it possible for people to flourish in extreme climates and to take care of others, including saving the lives of those in the Cartier expedition. Systems of social and cultural resilience continue to gain ground and reclaim their important role in Indigenous communities. For the Circle, reciprocity means learning together what it takes for Indigenous peoples to rekindle traditions of social resilience, when philanthropic investment helps and when it harms, and how holding the tension of respectful dialogue across difference and harsh history is an essential part of reconciliation.

It is also an opportunity for Canadians to learn from Indigenous traditions, to listen to the cumulative knowledge of elders, ponder the future not in terms of the next election but seven generations from now, and find innovation in old practices to build more resilient and inclusive social networks throughout Canada. There is much that can be learned about community resilience and good grant-making in all sectors from this experience.

Activities of the Circle include three subsequent All My Relations gatherings, which continue to bring together a broad spectrum of individuals and organizations involved in Indigenous philanthropy. Participants in AMR events have referred to the experience as “transformative.” Just like the first, each one has been unique, personal, eclectic, uncomfortable, and vital in building a sense of community across five time zones.

The Circle has also led or helped to create of several funding collaboratives, including efforts in the area of education reform, land, and leadership: Ashoka Changemakers, the Ontario Indigenous Youth Partnership (OIYPP), and {Re}conciliation. [The Philanthropic Community's: Declaration of Action](#), which brought together public and private funders to articulate their support for projects based on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As was outlined in the [recent article on the OIYPP process](#), these relationships make it possible for grant-makers to take unique risks while supporting opportunities for Indigenous grass-roots innovation. This and other collaborative funding models such as the Northern Manitoba Food Funders show great promise of an alternative model deeply connected to community.

It's hard to know where you are going if you don't know where you are or where you have been. The Circle and its members have engaged in several research projects intended to map the existing landscape of Indigenous philanthropy and the scope and activities of charitable

organizations in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. To date the research has shown, among other things, the blossoming of numerous small, creative, efficient community-based initiatives and the expansion of community trusts and foundations. At the same time, investment is unevenly distributed across the country, and granting is restricted by the limited number of organizations with charitable status. Over the coming years, the Circle will continue to track indicators of philanthropic activity in Indigenous communities.

The Circle identified several policy issues that discourage collaboration. Not the least of these are the application process for qualified donee status, which is not a requirement for Canadian municipalities that can use their status to accept donations for community projects, but which is an added barrier for First Nations governments. Assisting communities with the registration process and working with government to simplify the process and increase opportunities for communities are unglamorous but important exercises in supporting community capacity.

Finally, members of the Circle recognize the importance of shared learning. To build relationships and avoid past mistakes, we must all learn about our shared history and the extraordinary resilience and tradition of giving and sharing that have enabled Indigenous peoples to survive and thrive. At the same time, social innovators in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities are learning from philanthropic organizations about the mechanics of fundraising and building sustainable charitable organizations.

Make no mistake. There are still rocks in the river ahead. However, despite some significant obstacles, it is a time for optimism and a new approaches. The impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be felt for generations to come. The dramatic change in the position of the Federal Government in principle, just over the past few months shows great promise. And the new generation of creative, passionate Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders appear to be committed to reconciliation. Our environment is full of possibility. We at The Circle feel privileged to have been a small part of this transition. Creating opportunities for new relationships of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada based on reciprocity can only be achieved through philanthropy, the “love of humanness.” We would welcome you to join us on this journey.

[1] Convening of the first AMR was shared by a number of dedicated volunteers with support from the Winnipeg Foundation, Tribal Council Investment Group, the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation.

[2] The term Sixties Scoop was coined by Patrick Johnston, author of the 1983 report *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*. It refers to the mass removal of Aboriginal children from their families into the child welfare system, in most cases without the consent of their families or bands.

