
The Sweetness of Summer Berries: My Personal Journey to Learn About Decolonizing Philanthropy and True Reconciliation

This article is the third in a [renewed collaboration](#) between The Philanthropist and The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. The goal is to highlight Indigenous philanthropy and share Indigenous perspective and wisdom on reciprocity as well as Indigenous-focused work happening in the philanthropic community.

There is no workbook on how to decolonize philanthropy. There is no checklist, no series of steps, no showcase of programs that can easily be transported from one context to another. Over the past several months this topic has come alive for me as I've participated in three extraordinary learning experiences hosted by [The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada](#) ("The Circle"). In April 2019, I attended a program titled Active Reconciliation: Participatory Leadership to Make Reconciliation Real, on Manitoulin Island. In May, I heard Edgar Villanueva, the author of [Decolonizing Wealth](#) speak in Vancouver, and in June, I participated and presented at The Circle's biannual gathering, All My Relations.

I headed for Manitoulin Island energized from having read Villanueva's book and eager to learn more about redesigning policies and practices to be more inclusive, shifting boards of directors to look more like the communities in which we live, centring voices that have been excluded for far too long, and directing more philanthropic dollars to support racialized and Indigenous people. I was also nervous, and my response to the unknown is always to read, prepare, and try and learn as much as possible. As I left Vancouver, my flight was delayed and, as a result, getting to Manitoulin Island involved rescheduling two flights and taking a 5am bus ride the next morning into Little Current. I arrived tired and unable to remember anything I had read to prepare. My altered state meant I showed up to the learning experience differently. I listened more, I was more vulnerable, and I was more able to notice when it was hard for me to lean into the unexpected.

It was the best way to start my learning, because it taught me that decolonization, first and foremost, begins with me. It requires openness, desire, effort, and presence. For the rest of the summer, each experience taught me that the way to transform the philanthropic sector is not in simply implementing specific approaches or programs. Instead, transforming philanthropy requires us to build relationships, fully listen, relate, and show up in new ways. It is only through doing our own internal work and building relationships with others that we can transform ourselves and shift the sector as a whole.

On Manitoulin Island we learned about four aspects of hosting – hosting oneself, participating, hosting others, and co-creation – and learned that being able to host oneself is key to the other three. It involves reflection, listening deeply, being courageous, and addressing one's fears, assumptions, and discomfort. It involves recognizing when you are taking up more space than you should, when you rush to share your own perspectives over others, and when you prioritize yourself to the detriment of others. It involves being present to what is needed, and considering our own wellness, because we are an expression of life and, in the teachings of adrienne maree

brown, “as we are, so too our movements shall be.” Being able to host oneself means asking yourself before speaking: is this a question for my own curiosity or for wisdom? This question helps us avoid asking others to do unnecessary labour and helps check our intentions before we speak.

Hosting oneself also involves examining beliefs and challenging oneself to think through what holds us back. In a powerful session titled “The Work,” we had an opportunity to question our beliefs by generating new possibilities and truths for ourselves. Some beliefs hold our sector back. Seeking out and listening to the histories of the settler-created philanthropic sector in Canada is part of creating a more expansive future. In his book, Villanueva uses the metaphor of a slave plantation to describe how money can be an ill, and reading *Decolonizing Wealth* made me realize the limits of my knowledge of settler-created philanthropy in Canada. Knowing this history is important because it helps us critique existing systems and recognize that what seems natural today is the product of only one set of choices that were taken to build our existing systems. It is easier to change the systems that impede our progress if we can see the decisions that got us to where we are. Knowing this history does not give us a tidy roadmap of how to get to a better future, but it helps us recognize that today’s accepted practices and norms are simply the product of very specific histories.

In particular, the origins of settler-created philanthropy in Canada strongly align to the history of colonial wealth creation in Canada. In her paper *The Incorporation of Philanthropy: Negotiating Tensions between Capitalism and Altruism in the Twentieth century*, Bettina Liverant traces how norms of professionalization, rationality, fiscal responsibility, management, and the scientific method were superimposed on the charitable sector as the connection between business and philanthropy deepened in the 20th century. She describes how, in the pre-industrial age, settler-created philanthropy was largely unstructured, impromptu, and part of one’s role as a settler in church and community. It was largely men who gave, and they gave not as businesspeople, but as members of their communities. In the early decades of the 1900s, however, the first Canadian millionaires, whose fortunes came from their involvement in raw goods, natural resources, or banking (rather than title) emerged, and these merchants interpreted their success as a result of their business acumen. They believed these skills were transferable to the charitable sector. Rather than gifts, they began to increasingly see their giving akin to investments and expected that the impact of their investments would be moral betterment. In the major urban centres of Canada, groups of entrepreneurs led coalitions for charity reform in their respective cities, rewarding agencies that they deemed worthy. This led to increased monitoring of charities by merchants, and new norms of professionalization and rationalization within the charitable sector.

Learning more about hosting myself was an opportunity to undo my own connection to rational, scientific ways of being and de-centre my desire for control. These tendencies are facets of white supremacy culture that many of us must unlearn. In his book, Villanueva references the work of Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun in their workbook, *Dismantling Racism*, which highlights the characteristics of white supremacy culture that exist in organizations and in ourselves. Among others, these include perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, worship of unlimited growth, objectivity, and avoidance of discomfort. Until we dismantle these practices within ourselves and our organizations, we will limit our ability to create change because racism will continue to show up.

One of the characteristics of white supremacy culture is worship of the written word, and I

identify deeply with this. During one of the first days of our week on Manitoulin Island, we had the opportunity to visit a sugar bush on Wiiwemkoong Unceded Territory. We were invited to gather together, drink cedar tea, and listen to teachings about the petroglyphs there. We were asked to refrain from taking notes as we listened, which produced feelings of anxiety within me. What if I forgot the lessons being shared? I felt fear about not being able to capture what was being said, and it took time to trust that I would remember those learnings that were meant to stay with me. It took time for me to adjust to another way of being and showing up.

The *Decolonizing Wealth* event in Vancouver in May 2019 emphasized these lessons of being attuned to ourselves and learning how to process our emerging feelings. Kris Archie, our host and The Circle's executive director, invited us to notice the feelings and sensations we were experiencing in our bodies as we listened to Villanueva and the other panelists share their experiences. Our bodies are truth-tellers and being attentive to them is a way to learn how new ideas and ways of being are landing with us, even if we are used to processing everything on an intellectual level. Villanueva stressed that the first three steps of decolonizing wealth are to grieve, apologize, and listen, and that these are not always a one-way, linear journey; steps can be repeated, or returned to, or we may stay at one step for awhile. The process of decolonizing the philanthropic sector is firstly an internal process of reckoning with our histories and our egos and noticing when we are resisting what we hear through defensiveness or anger. After individual reflection and group discussion, we were invited to make our commitments visible to one another on post-it notes.

Through my participation with The Circle in events this year, I learned that the philanthropic sector cannot discover new ways of working by following a series of steps or by learning about projects at particular organizations independent of developing relationships. Change can only come about relationally, through forming connections with Indigenous organizations and people, striving to take down barriers of access in the philanthropic sector, and creating better, more just, systems. On Manitoulin Island, we experimented with different conversational structures and hosting tools that create space for learning. Throughout the week, as I participated in different conversation structures, from story harvests to open space conversations, I was struck by how our learning was held in a loving and intentional structure. We stayed at an Indigenous-owned hotel, our retreat began with smudging, we had discussions of spirituality, we shared bannock, and the structure of the program was based in reciprocal learning teams.

When I first started writing this article, I thought perhaps that I would share examples of projects and organizations across the country that present models to be emulated. But rather than steps, I met people. On Manitoulin Island, I met Thea Belanger, the project director of the Ontario Indigenous Youth Partnership Project, and learned more about how OIYPP works with, and alongside, youth to support them in designing and delivering projects that benefit their communities. OIYPP not only supports youth with dollars, but with leadership, mentorship, training, and resources. I also met Tim Fox, the vice president of Indigenous relations at the Calgary Foundation, who taught me that doing a land acknowledgement is a privilege and, to create change in the philanthropic sector, it is not enough to download information onto people: one must have experiences at the "heart level" to shift understanding. I discovered that, at the Calgary Foundation, community groups looking to access community grant can submit oral and multimedia applications instead of written submissions to describe their initiatives, their need for funds, intended activities, desired impact of their work, and their project readiness. I also met youth from the 4Rs Youth Movement, a national youth initiative that is changing the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people. The 4Rs of the movement stand for

respect, reciprocity, reconciliation, and relevance.

In June, at The Circle's All My Relations gathering, Archie described summertime as special because it is a time for the sweetness of summer berries, and a time when you invite those you care about to your favourite, most secret berry patch. These three events and our relational work in our own communities are like secret berry patches, places of learning and connection with others, trust, and reciprocal, beneficial relationships. There is no map to find these spots, but meaningful and real relationships, and genuine personal work, are signs you are close to stumbling onto the most delightful sweetness.

Sources

Liverant, B. (2009). The Incorporation of Philanthropy: Negotiating Tensions Between Capitalism and Altruism in Twentieth Century Canada. *Journal of The Canadian Historical Association*, 20(1), 191-220.

maree brown, a. 2017. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Chico: AK Press.

Okun, T., & Jones, K. (2001). *Dismantling racism: A workbook for social change groups*. Change Work. http://www.csworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html

Villanueva, E. (2018). *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous wisdom to heal divides and restore balance*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.