

Professor challenges ideas of land acknowledgements



It's time to re-imagine the relationships between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous settlers, rather than simply walking towards ?reconciliation.?

That is the view of Dr. Ruth Green, an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at York University.

In her presentation ?It Is More than a Land Acknowledgement?, which was hosted by the Aurora Public Library as part of their Indigenous Teachings program, Dr. Green said she didn't believe there was ?anything to reconcile? and, instead, it's more important to focus on work to build relationships.

?We're not going back to any previous good relationship,? she said.

Near the start of her presentation, Dr. Green asked participants to think about the Town of Aurora's Land Acknowledgement, a document which can be found etched on wood near the entrance of many public buildings, including arenas.

?The Town of Aurora acknowledges that the Anishinaabe lands on which we live and work are the traditional and treaty territory of the Chippewas of Georgina Island, as well as many other Nations whose presence here continues to this day. As the closest First Nation community to Aurora, we recognize the special relationship the Chippewas have with the lands and waters of this territory. They are the water protectors and environmental stewards of these lands, and as a municipality we join them in these responsibilities.

?We further acknowledge that Aurora is part of the treaty lands of the Mississaugas and Chippewas, recognized through Treaty #13 as well as the Williams Treaties of 1923.

?A shared understanding of the rich cultural heritage that has existed for centuries, and how our collective past brought us to where we are today, will help us walk together into a better future.?

?What do you actually hear? Do you hear the layers of history? Do you hear the distinction between the Chippewas of Georgina Island and the other Mississaugas?? Dr. Green asked. ?Do you understand Treaty 13? Can you sit with this land acknowledgement and take it apart? That is what it is to be really learning a land acknowledgement.?

Green said in many instances Indigenous people are asked by organizations to pen land acknowledgements, which are often very personal exercises involving significant "emotional labour" and this can hinder true understanding by others.

"If you sit with this and do some research - we're in a library, after all - pull it apart and learn," she continued. "Who are the Chippewas of Georgina Island? How did they get there? Did you know about Snake Island and how that was their original space and then they were moved? These are important things to know so when you say, 'We acknowledge the special relationships that the Chippewas have with the lands and waters of this territory.' 'Special relationships' does not explain the depth of being removed from your territory, forced into another space but knowing where your home actually is. That's a special relationship, but that sounds really nice compared to what happened."

Addressing the line of gratitude towards Indigenous people "sharing their lands with us," Green added, "The last time I checked, colonization was not asked, it was just done. It was not our sharing."

Going forward in delivering land acknowledgements, or Dr. Green's preferred "Solidary Statements," it's important for people to acknowledge they are learning and have a continued commitment to learning.

"We're always going to be a learner and there are so many things we don't know. Ignorance is not our stumbling block, intolerance is. Ignorance you can all work towards removing it, but when you do, acknowledge who taught you something," she said, asking people to name those teachers, particularly elders. "Speak with sincerity. The first time you do a land acknowledgement that is personal, it might be emotional. That's okay. My Anishinaabe siblings, we have four quadrants in ourselves - the physical, the spiritual, our mental and emotional. If we do not take care of all of them, we're not going to be safe or healthy."

By Brock Weir
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