

Walking the Sweetgrass Road: Family Day

By Kim Wheatley Anishinaabe Traditional Grandmother & Cultural Consultant

The Town of Aurora is proud to be taking steps like to renew and strengthen its relationship with Indigenous communities and residents. As part of this commitment, in partnership with The Town, The Auroran is providing this space to Anishinaabe Traditional Grandmother and Cultural Consultant Kim Wheatley to share insights, storytelling and teachings with the Aurora community.

In the season of winter, we have begun the celebration that acknowledges the importance of families and relationships that support inclusion, both at home and in the workplace. Family Day historic research reveals this day is supposed to reflect the values of family and home that were important to the pioneers who founded Alberta, and to give workers the opportunity to spend more time with their families.

It was introduced in Saskatchewan in 2007 and in Ontario in 2008.

This Google search leaves me, and I am sure many families wondering about the intention of this now-adopted holiday right here in Ontario. If its original and seemingly unchanged intention was for pioneers then where do all the other folks in this province fit in?

As an Indigenous person of Anishinaabe ancestry I am not a pioneer, nor are my ancestors? or are they? After all, what is a pioneer? Well according to the dictionary, it is "a person who is among the first to explore or settle a new country or area."

I think we can all agree that First Nations were the first people to explore and settle the continent of North America. In fact, we even named it Turtle Island and honoured every square inch of the land, above, below and around it, in lots of profound ways that had nothing to do with personal lineage names or from place names imported across the oceans. The names Indigenous People used to name the lands reflected an understanding of the topography, geography, seasonality and sacredness of the lands around us. The names allowed others to understand how to interact in any given area with deep respect and reverence always.

We taught our children and they taught theirs what these names were and why they were significant. The names we used told one about the land itself such as significant features or usage. We taught those that eventually arrived on our various shores what we called our Great Island and the many places therein including how to interact with the land, our Earth Mother in a good way.

Many cautions were also shared especially about ONLY taking what you needed and leaving enough for others. We assumed that everyone understood the Earth to be sacred and we are all responsible for a good relationship with her. This was demonstrated through the practice of ensuring that the lands, waters and air were in perfect condition for those that would come long after us, in fact, at least for the next seven generations. Our long vision of responsibility was founded on the principle of ensuring that any decision we make today would not cause harm for seven generations from now.

Indigenous communities kept detailed accounts of everything?in every region amongst all Nations. These shared details directed and informed how settler folk were encouraged to live on Turtle Island ensuring there was enough for all. Settlers were shown where to harvest and when, how much should be gathered and how much should remain untouched.

By introducing a two-eyed way of seeing the world around us we still encourage Canadians to embrace these values and powerfully significant practices?after all, it is home to us all!

Indigenous Nations across North America shared and continue to share the values of stewardship, ceremonies, teachings, and resource management demonstrating how to live in a good way that was founded on love, respect, humility, bravery, honesty, truth

and wisdom as commonly referred to today as the 7 Sacred Teachings. This practice served centuries of inhabitation on Turtle Island successfully without depleting anything that sustained us.

All Indigenous Nations taught their children to 'never take more than you need' and 'honour your relatives', which includes the mineral world, the plant world, the animal world, the elements, the sky world and our ancestors always, in ALL ways.

Not only did our ancestors teach us this 'they lived it all the time. These Nations understood that the Earth was living and lifegiving, hence the respectful term 'Mother Earth' who was, and is, capable of supporting our life in every way. There was food to eat, building materials for homes, medicine for healing, sacred spaces for celebrations, clean drinking water everywhere, clean air and healthy landscapes for a really good life.

A deep understanding of the cyclical nature of relationships and honouring the transitions so that nothing was depleted, destroyed or harmed was basic life training for all ages. The firm belief held by all was that there was enough for everyone. No commodification practices could ever replace the integral value of the life support systems that surrounded us.

These values, these practices are now something of historic recollection but certainly not of supported value or practice for the most part today. How much green space is there in comparison to concrete, asphalt and landfill just in this province alone not even addressing the whole continent?

Climate change is a direct response to the disengagement of humans to the planet herself.

There is a giant dollar sign applied to every square inch of land and water on this planet. There is OWNERSHIP by someone or something. There is no space held for respect of our Earth Mother. How can we celebrate Family Day without going back to the 1st Mother, the Earth herself? She has continuously birthed all that we have always needed without judgement. NO sick days, lazy days or absenteeism from her.

It makes me wonder who still remembers HER and who gives thanks, and honour for all that the Earth does for each one of us every single day. Are we still teaching children this important lesson and do they understand its lifetime significance?

Why would we hurt our Earth Mother in any way? Is money more important than air and water?

We must ask ourselves if 800-year-old trees are better turned into lumber for a home when their ancient genetics will not repeat themselves for centuries. Should the ocean, lakes and streams be a suitable dumping ground for human garbage? Is this how we honour our children who will require all of these resources in a healthy format for the rest of their lives just as all of our future generations will need these too?

It's time to put into context the deeper meaning of recognized and celebrated holidays that are inclusive of many things. True Pioneers... of change, of historic contribution? history did not begin with the arrival of European farmers, tradesmen and voyageurs. It is older than that? always has been.

On this Family Day take time to disrupt the historic amnesia that still exists and encourage your families to include all 'family members' such as the mineral, plant and animal world. Be kind, introduce yourselves and build really good relationships!