



Fair Dealing (Short Excerpt)

Reading: Ch. 9. Heartless Teachers (*I am woman: a native perspective on sociology and feminism*)

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9. *Heartless Teachers*

I KNOW THERE ARE teachers who have been good for my children. I remember one such teacher's words: "Don't you think it would be better if everyone simply looked at one another as people?" I do not remember my impromptu mutterings, but I will write my answer here.

You taught my child that, here, on the West Coast, we were cannibals. I had to tell my daughters that their great-great-granny, who was almost a hundred years old when I was a child, had never eaten a single soul. When I asked her about cannibalism, she said, "My granny never ate anyone. If she had she would have taught me how human flesh is best prepared, for it was her obligation to teach me how best to cook all that our men-folk would eat. The Black Robe I met before this century said his people had been here for a hundred years, but we only knew of them through the great fire that burned all the wood we needed to weave blankets, construct weirs and sew nets. The fire brought hunger; still we ate no one. We died instead, bloated bellies full of air. Of a thousand of us then, we are but a hundred now."

You have always been seen as people in our eyes, but we are still cannibals in yours. What need do you have to insist that we are at best descendants of a distorted people? Until we are also seen as people, we are not equal and there can be no unity between us. Until our separate history is recognized and our need for self-determination satisfied, we are not equal.

You give my children Europe to emulate, respect and learn from, and at the same time, debase Native peoples' national roots. Who is going to insist that Europe's descendants in my homeland learn from and emulate the heroes and bright moments in our history? Which European child in your classroom knows of Khatsalano, Coquitlam, Capilano or our much-lauded (by us) statesman and self-taught constitutional lawyer, Andrew Paull? None of these fine men knew their ancestors to be cannibals, because they never attended your institutions. I might add that Andrew Paull was self-taught because Native men of his time were not permitted to attend law school without renouncing their status as Natives.

Who will teach Europeans that in 1974 an Inuit boy searched the frozen arctic for edible lichens, carefully sharing every morsel with a European man who was so cynical about life that he hoarded and hid from this child food he had found on the plane. He apportioned himself rations of food while this Inuit boy searched for food for both of them. He watched this boy search vainly, for hours each day, on an empty stomach, while his own belly was gratified. He watched him trudge through the frozen snow, braving the wind and cold, until starvation and weakness overcame him and he died. Still, he shared not a morsel of his food. Who will teach your children that the European was never tried for his criminal negligence because of a legal technicality which has never been rectified?

Would this treachery against humanity have gone unpunished had the heroic child been European and the man Inuit? We do not even have to ask the question. We know that they would either have both survived or both died.

What is really pathetic is that this shameless man's mother made excuses for him. She mumbled in a telephone interview about how there was not enough food for both of them. Are our mothers' sons less important than any of your mothers' sons?

My children have mastered their humanity. They have done so because every one of their mothers and their mothers' mothers would have died of shame at such a son. It is without hostility that they offer themselves up for your schooling. But, unlike many of the children in your school, they know about and strive to be like that Inuit boy. He speaks to their ancestry in a way Europe never could. He calls them to attention in a way that your queen and your flag cannot.

We are not awed by his heroism. We are nauseated by the creation of such a warped mind as could watch a child die of starvation while eating, secretly, the only food there was, on the excuse that "there wasn't enough to go around." That we still create such children is living testimony to the real strength and beauty of our grandmothers' words.

"Why can't we be just people?" Do you hear what you say? When did we ever question your right to be considered people? Do you question mine? I know what you think you say. You want me to consider myself not Native, not Cree, not Salish, but a person, absent of nationality or racial heritage. All of us just people, without difference. You fail to see your own hypocrisy. In the same breath, you pick up a guitar and teach European modern folk songs to all the children, but nowhere do European children learn the folk music of my children or any other nationality. Such sameness amounts to everyone's obliteration but your own.

I know we were supposed to have vanished by now. We do not apologize for our inability to do that. Not only are we still here, but some of us are amazingly intact. One hundred years ago General Custer's edict was to kill every man, woman, child and dog at Wounded Knee. To re-word this edict from physical

oblivion to cultural banishment will not soften my natural resistance. I refuse to vanish.

¹⁰ To be fair, ought you not to advocate your own obliteration before mine? 'Tis not my folk who teach children the sort of crude individualism that would allow them to starve one of your children to save their own ass.

... In the interest of humanity, you ought to sound the death knell of your own decadent ways and the renaissance of my ways. Such things as genocide, confinement and cultural prohibition are not part of my ways. We were almost obliterated by your ancestors. I realize you hold no gun to my head, dear teacher, but it was your culture that spawned physical genocide and now you ask me to erase the shadow of my grandmother. Before you ask me to erase her, please reduce yourself to a shadow. Then, we will at least be equal. At base zero, I am willing to negotiate a whole new culture, if you like. Otherwise, keep your offensive words locked in your narrow mind.