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An Okanagan Worldview of Society

Jeannette Armstrong

I grew up in a remote part of the Okanagan on the Penticton Indian reservation in British Columbia, Canada. I was born on the reservation, at home, and I was fortunate to be born into a family that was considered by many people in our area to be a traditional Okanagan family. Our first language was Okanagan and we practiced hunting/gathering traditions on the land. I'm still immersed in that family today.

And while I've lived that life and I continue that practice with my family, my community was one that had been fractionalized by colonization, fractionalized in many ways in terms of the community itself. This gave me some valuable insights and observations. Thus, I have these two perspectives in terms of looking at society: the perspective of the small, extended, traditional family support system that I grew up in, and that of the larger community fractionalized by colonization.

One of the observations I have in regard to human relationships has to do with the relationships we have with each other and how these relationships impact what we do to the land. In other words, what we do to each other and how we look at each other—how we interact with each other—is one of the reasons that some things then happen to the land. In the extended-family community that I grew up in, our people organized themselves in a very different way than what I see happening

outside of that. I want to describe some of my perspective, from that point of view, to you now.

The land that I come from is very dry and semiarid. It's considered the northern tip of the Great Basin Desert and the ecosystem there is very, very fragile. At this time, the Okanagan is one of the most damaged areas and ecosystems in Canada because of its fragility. In our area many conservationists and environmentalists are very concerned about the species that are endangered and disappearing there. We live in an area where extirpations have been happening over the last one hundred years; I've seen some of those extirpations myself.

This has been difficult because we grew up loving the land. We grew up loving each other on the land and loving each plant and each species the way we love our brothers and sisters and that's the point I want to get across. That doesn't just happen as an intellectual process. That doesn't just happen as a process of needing to gather food and needing to sustain our bodies for health. It happens as a result of how we interact with each other in our families, in our family units, in our extended family units, and in our communities; the networks that we make outward to other people who surround us on the land. Those networks are extremely important insofar as what happens to the land and how we interact with the land.

Part of the educational work that I do is to find a way to interpret some of that and to bring reconciliation to members of my community on my land to bring health back to the land. I cannot do that responsibly if I cannot create that kind of understanding. In the Okanagan, our understanding of the land is that it's not just that we're part of the land, it's not just that we're *part* of the vast system that operates on the land, but that the *land is us*. In our language, the word for our bodies contains the word for land, so when I say that word, it means that not only is my ability to think and to dream present in that word but the last part of that word also means "the land."

Thus, in my mind, every time I say that word and I refer to myself, I realize that I am from the land. I'm saying that I'm from the land and that my body is the land. We love to go out to the land to gather food.

I have done this every year of my life and continue to do so; I look forward to it every year. I go out to the land to gather the foods that have given me life, and given my grandmothers life, and given my great-great-grandmothers life for many, many generations. When we go out to the land, our people have perfected a way of interacting with each other that is respectful to the land and respectful to each other but also fulfills some needs that we have that are human in terms of interaction and relationship to one another.

What our grandparents have said is that the land feeds us but we feed the land as well. What they meant by that was that we give our bodies back to the land in a very physical way but we also do other things to the land. We live on the land and we use the land and, in so doing, we impact the land: we can destroy it, or we can love the land and it can love us back.

So one of the things that I was looking at in the development of our educational program was to find a way to teach about how we, as a society, interact. I wanted to explore how members of our community interact with each other and to find a way to distill that, describe that, and to teach and reconstruct that in our communities.

In the most basic sense, our use of the land relates to our need for food, for shelter, for clothing, and beyond. When we look at society, we need to look at how society is constructed. There are things that we need to live and breathe every day. But beside that we need pleasure. We need to be loved and we need to have the support of our community and the love that people surrounding us can give us. If we think about how those two things are combined together and work together, if those two ideas and ideals can work together, then we can see how we can either impact the land in a negative way or in a positive way.

If I look around at how the land has been impacted by what I call the Western culture, one of the things I see is an overuse of resources by some people and a lack of access to those same resources for others. In other words, there are some people with a right to have more and some people with no right. There are some people who cannot access even the most basic things that they need. When you look at the idea of democ-

racy from that perspective, you can see there's something profoundly wrong with a hierarchical system in which people sitting next to you or next door to you don't have access to the same things you do. That seems to me to be a profoundly basic communal principle: Everyone in a community needs to have the same access to the basics and the same access to the joys and pleasures of life.

One of the things I was looking at with regard to this was the idea of the construct of how we make decisions. I looked at the Okanagan decision-making process in its traditional sense. I'm not saying that it's there today, that it works today, but elements of it are still present and have been carried forward because we are only two generations since colonization began.

One of the things that I came to understand is that in our decision-making we have a word, *en'owkinwiwx*, that demands a number of things from us. Specifically, there are four things that it demands from us; we use that process continuously in an informal way in our community. We can also engage it in a formal way and it's something like a framework or construct. Robert's Rules of Order,* for instance, is thought of as a democratic construct or an understanding of democracy wherein the decision-making power rests with the majority, as opposed to the minority.

From my perspective, embedded in that construct is an adversarial approach. It sets up the oppression of the minority, it sets up a dissension. It sets up a construct in which there is always going to be conflict. There are always going to be people who are in the minority and people who are in the majority. I do understand that this is probably the easiest way for decisions to be made, however, in terms of looking at what the outcome is, in terms of a decision-making process in this country and on the land and globally—systemically we might have to rethink how this works.

From our point of view the minority voice is the most important

*Robert's Rules of Order is a set of meeting rules and refers to the proper way to conduct a meeting.

voice to consider. The minority voice expresses the things that are going wrong, the things that we're not looking after, the things that we're not doing, the things that we're not being responsible toward, the things that we're being aggressive about or trying to overlook and sweep under the carpet or shove out the door. One of the things our leaders said is that if you ignore this minority voice it will create conflict in your community and this conflict is going to create a breakdown that's going to endanger *everyone*. This conflict will endanger how we cooperate, how we use community as a process, how we think of ourselves as a cooperative unit, a harmonious unit, a unit that knows how to work together and enjoys working together and enjoys being together and loves one another.

If that happens then the things that we need to do on an everyday basis for meeting all of our needs starts to break apart. I can see how that's working today. I understand that if we think about looking at the minority, if we use the process to think about why there is a minority, why there is poverty, then we should be able to find creative ways to meet the needs of the minorities. Is it about economics? Is it about societal access? What are those minorities about?

If we think of ourselves as human beings with minds, with the creativity that we have, we should be able to take into consideration how we can meet the needs of those minorities. We should be able to find every possible mechanism that we can to bring that minority group into balance with the majority. The process that we call en'owkinwiwx asks us to do that and tells us that if we can't do that in our community then our humanity is at stake, and our intelligence is at stake. We can't call ourselves Okanagan if we can't provide for the weak and the sick and the hungry and the old and the people who do not have skills.

In the same way, when we approach the decision-making process, one component is reserved for the land. We have one component in which we have people who are called "land speakers." We have a word for it in our language. I was fortunate in that I was trained and brought up as a land speaker in my community. We are different than other communities in that we have different people, trained as part of the family

system, to be speakers for the children, for the mothers, for the Elders, for the medicine people, for the land, for the water—for all of these different components that make up our existence.

My part has been to be trained by my Elders to think about the land and to speak about the land. What that means is that I don't represent the people's view and I don't think of myself as an expert; I think of myself as one person who must continuously be responsible to my community. Each time a decision is made, even the smallest decision, my responsibility is to stand up and ask, How will it impact the land? How is it going to impact our food? How is it going to impact our water? How is it going to impact my children, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren, what's the land going to look like in their time? So in that process of en'owkinwix, there's a built-in principle in terms of how we interact.

Another part of the process requires people to look at relationships. There are people who represent how a decision is going to impact people. How is it going to impact the children, what are the children's needs? What are the Elders' needs? What are the mothers' needs? What are the working peoples' needs? Someone has to ask those questions. That's their responsibility. When they stand up to ask those questions they also give their views in the same way part of our community is asked to think about the actions that need to be taken. Part of our community stands up and says, What are the things that need to be built? What are the things that need to be implemented and how much is it going to cost? All of those important details need to be examined and discussed.

Those people who are doers are given the responsibility of continuously reminding our people that there are actions that are going to have an impact. There are actions that are going to cause a number of *different effects* later on down the road. If we overuse something or if we take too much of a resource there are those people who are continuously asked to stand up to let us know that.

There is another group of people in our community who we call the visionaries, the creative people. They are the artists, the writers, and the performers, whose responsibility is to bring their perspective into

the community; a perspective that tells everyone that there are innovations, there are *creative solutions*, and there are new ways we can look at things. We should always make room for newness because we need to be creative when we come up against something that we can't resolve and that we haven't come up against before. So those people are always brought forward to look for new ways to bring creative ideas forth and discuss them.

All four of these components within a community can participate in a decision-making process. The process then becomes, in terms of a democratic process, a different one than that of Robert's Rules. The process becomes something that is participatory, that is inclusive, and that gives people a deeper understanding of the variety of components that are required to create harmony within community. When we include the perspective of land and we include the perspective of human relationship, one of the things that happens is that community changes. People in the community change. Something happens inside where the material things don't have a lot of meaning, where material wealth and the securing of it or being fearful and being frightened about not having "things" to sustain you, disappears. They start to lose their power. They start to lose their impact.

The realization that people and community are there to sustain you creates the most secure feeling in the world. When you feel that and you're immersed in that, then the fear starts to leave. When that happens, you're imbued with the hope that others surrounding you in your community can provide.

This is the kind of work that I'm involved in at the En'owkin Centre. I'm talking about all of the community. I'm talking about all of the people who live in the Okanagan and people who we reach outside of that. Not just the Indigenous People, because at this time in our lives, our Elders have said that unless we can "Okanaganize" those people in their thinking, we're all in danger in the Okanagan. It sounds very simple and yet it seems to be an overwhelming task—a huge task—and some days it feels like that.

Some days it seems to be something that one person has no power

over. But I think about my aunt who was talking to me the other day. She said, "Where are you headed off to now?" And I said, "Oh, I'm going to this conference, the Bioneers conference." And she said, "Oh, what is that about?" So I did my best to explain it to her. And she said, "That's a really good thing. How did you manage to do that?" And I said, "I'm not really sure, but I think I managed to do that by talking about some of the things that seem so simple and everyday to us. Things that seem to make sense to us, that seem to make complete strangers into loved ones of ours, ones that we've brought into our community who are now part of my family and part of my extended community. People like Fritjof Capra and people like Zenobia Barlow and other people who are friends, who are part of this movement."

For me, inside of me, they feel the same as my aunt to me, and I think that's how we all need to relate to each other. I think that's how we need to be with each other for us to be the way we need to be on the land, so that those things that are material lose their power over us. The voice that says, "You need a new car, you need lots of money, you need to do this and you need to do that." All of that starts to dissipate when we understand that the power is us, that we are our security on the land; *that's* what's going to sustain us.

The last thing that I want to share with you is something that makes a lot of sense to me and that is my father's words for insanity. For us it means that too many people are talking about different things rather than people talking about the same thing. There does seem to be insanity in the world because of what's missing inside in terms of our humanity with each other. When we start to take care of that, everything else will naturally follow.

In the work that we do, one of the things I've learned is the power of taking our young people out to the land to gather seeds or to gather our Indigenous foods. We started a program to replant Indigenous plants to renew the imperiled habitat that we share with some endangered animal species; we've got about ten thousand plants going now.

What we have found is that when we take the young people out to restore the land, all kinds of community members from the nonnative

community come out to participate, from multicultural societies or from the senior people's communities, for instance. They just love going out there, to gather seeds and pot them and replant the habitat.

One offshoot of this is that for the young people who are having such a difficult time (all young people are having a difficult time) it heals them. The process of being with people, out there on the land, has a healing impact. It's not just the work of collecting the seeds. People who are in farming know this: It's not just the work of collecting but it's being with people, the community, and communing with each other. It is how the land communes its spirit to you: it heals people and it does this in an incredibly profound way.

We need to think about how we can do more of that.