The Man to Send Rain Clouds

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Rain clouds have always seemed depressing to me—that is, until a year of drought. Now, I look for the clouds and hope. I hope that they will not pass us by, that they will give us more than a mere sprinkling, that they will quench the thirst of this parched land.

It had been a hot, dry summer, and the August heat hung heavy in the air. As both a gardener and a teacher, my mind was consumed on one particular August afternoon with two types of drought—the drought that was torturing my vegetable garden and the drought of racial intolerance that was permeating my school.

The second type of drought was the reason I was sitting in the Ojibwe culture and language workshop at Bemidji State University. Sponsored by the Minnesota Humanities Commission and taught by Dr. Anton Treuer, the two-day teacher workshop had already cleared up a lot of misconceptions and myths about Native American history and culture. So far, we had already learned "the rest of" the Columbus story, the early American genocide, the boarding school nightmares that led to generational distrust of education, and the history of treaty rights.

To say that we teachers were thirsty for this knowledge is an understatement. On the morning of the first day, when Dr. Treuer opened up the floor for questions and discussion, the session went almost forty five minutes past the allotted time for lunch, yet nobody moved a muscle. We were that parched.

Later that afternoon, as we were mesmerized in our seats, none of us noticed the black clouds rolling in. We were completely surprised by the gift of a beautiful rainstorm. The rain came down in torrents, and I found myself, along with several others, drawn to the window overlooking Lake Bemidji, watching the life-sustaining rain that we so needed. Our spirits were lifted, and we shared stories about our farms or gardens at home, and our hopes that, now that we've had this rain, things will get better.

There are other kinds of drought than the kind that can be cured by rain: the drought of ignorance, the drought of misinformation, the drought of stereotype.

Back in 2002, I had perhaps the most promising student I've had in the nine years I had been at Park Rapids High School. His name was Greg Roberts, but everyone called him Moon. I never knew how he got his nickname, but I believe it had something to do with the fact that he was preparing to be a medicine man. His long black hair was always pulled back in a ponytail at the base of his neck, and he had special permission to wear his amulet containing tobacco in school. He relished and celebrated his cultural heritage, thus inviting others to relish and celebrate it too. He was special. Even though he often missed class because he was traveling around the country presenting Undoing Racism workshops, he was still one of the best writers, one of the best students in the class. His dad was Ojibwe, his mother German, and they didn't just want him to succeed, they expected him to.

Moon was in my College English class the first year that I taught it. The material was as new to me as it was to the students, but we discovered the literature together. One of the texts we used was the *Braided Lives* anthology, published by the Minnesota Humanities Commission. It is a multi-cultural text, with Native-, African-, Asian-, and Hispanic- American literature.

I'll never forget the day that we were discussing the story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," by Leslie Marmon Silko. It is a story that depicts the death of a Native American elder,

Teofilo. The people around him deliberately keep the death secret from the local priest, because they want to bury him their traditional way, without the priest's interference. However, at the end, they do ask the priest to bring some holy water, so that Teofilo could send them rain clouds to alleviate the drought. The priest resists because taking the holy water out of context does not seem appropriate to him. At the end of the story, though, he does bring the holy water, and there is a blending of the two religions, a compromise, and a red sunset that is a sign that "the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure" (53).

I was leading the discussion of the story, encouraging the students to look at the use of color in the story--the priest is described in shades of brown while the elder, Teofilo, is given white, blue, green and yellow paint, and is covered with a red blanket. We talked about the contrast between the two—the lifeless, dark colors of the priest's clothing and the vibrant colors of the elder's. At the end, there is a faint red glow as the sun dips behind blue mountains—perhaps symbolizing the compromise between vibrancy and darkness, of traditional beliefs and organized religion.

That's when Moon raised his hand, and I became the student as he taught me that there was more significance to the sunset than I realized. According to Native American traditional beliefs, after death, spirits travel west to go to the spirit world, and the journey takes three days; this would mean, according to the timeline of the story, that Teofilo would be arriving the following day, and would send rain.

That little drop of information made me thirst for more. Ever since then, I have made an effort to learn.

Our school has a fairly large population of Ojibwe students, our biggest minority group. Most of them come from Pine Point, a school on the White Earth Reservation that goes up to 8th grade. When the students get to 9th grade, they come to Park Rapids High School. The Pine Point students tend to stick together, which is understandable, since they have already formed friendships, and it is hard to break in to already-established friendship groups. However, this voluntary segregation has led to much more than casual rivalry between cliques; the anger is brewing to the boiling point. Fist fights, racial slurs, and a whole lot of negativity permeate our hallways and classrooms. I've seen "Natives suck" written on bathroom stalls, and, in response, "white girls suck."

In one tenth grade class, I had a girl completely lose her temper with the boy sitting behind her in class, tipping his desk over and hitting him. Apparently, he'd been calling her a "prairie n[redacted]r" under his breath just loud enough for her to hear.

These are just the blatant cases, though. Mostly, the racial tension is beneath the surface, a symptom of a much deeper problem: a lack of understanding.

It was in this tenth grade class that I chose to address the issue. I put aside all planned lessons and we tackled the issue of racial tension. I shared with them the knowledge I had gained from Dr. Treuer. Every day we tackled a different topic: mascots, cartoon and picture-book depictions of Native Americans, Columbus, genocide, treaty rights and boarding schools. We circled the desks, and each day, the assignment was to write a one page reaction to the class discussion. Obviously, the generational racial tension wasn't going to be cured in just one classroom setting. Yet it was a drop in the colloquial bucket.

Another classroom, another year, I welcomed Winona LaDuke as a writer-in-residence, and she articulated the problem. She said that she had been speaking for the local Rotary club, and found that some members didn't even know what tribe of Native Americans live on the White Earth reservation, just twenty miles away. She said that there is a sort-of one-way mirror

in which the Native Americans are expected to know, understand, and adopt white culture, but there is little or no reciprocal effort.

Ever since Moon graduated, I've thought about having him come and do an Undoing Racism workshop at our school. But when I've looked at the People's Institute website, I've been intimidated by the cost of the endeavor. For various reasons--an accounting error, many years of failed referendums, declining enrollment--our school had no money. So I waited--

Too long. How could I have known that in November 2005, I would be at the Pine Point school, attending Moon's funeral? That on the third day after his death, I would be facing a red sunset, picturing his spirit crossing the river to the other side? That I would be listening to the drummers who were using his drum, and imagining his voice among them? That I would be trying to hold back the flood of tears for three days, so his spirit would not turn back to the living, to no avail?

No one in this world will ever know, but some said that the pedestrian/ semi-truck accident that killed Moon was suicide. Maybe we all expected too much of him. Maybe the responsibility of undoing racism cannot be shouldered by one young man alone.

At the time, all I could think about was all the good that will go undone now that Moon was gone. Robert Frost once wrote "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." I think today we could write, "Something there is that doesn't love a civil rights activist." Martin Luther King, Jr., JFK, Princess Diana, Paul Wellstone, and now Moon.

When Moon graduated from high school, I had told him that I wanted to vote for him for president someday. He said no, he wanted to be a teacher. I had hoped he would be in more of a position of power and influence, but his goal was to teach. Now he'll never get the chance.

Or will he? Because of that little drop of information that he sprinkled on me, I have been thirsting for more. Ever since that day when we discussed "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" in my classroom, I have been learning, little by little--through reading, having various speakers in my classroom, attending pow-wows --about the rich culture that is all around us.

But those have all just been light rain showers--nothing to cure the drought of ignorance that I, and many others, had been suffering from. That is, until I attended the Ojibwe workshop in Bemidji and jumped for joy at the rainstorm that was going to end the drought.

I felt myself drinking in the information, as though I were the parched earth. Mine was not the polite sipping of cocktail parties. I found myself gulping, drenching myself, wanting to splash like a child in the puddles of the life-sustaining downpour that came like a broken dam in the sky.

Could I help noticing that the professor, Dr. Treuer, with his long black hair pulled back into a ponytail at the base of his neck, bore a striking resemblance to Moon? Could I help thinking *that could have been Moon up there*? Could I help believing that Moon was the man who sent that rain cloud?

Now the question is, what do I do with this knowledge? What can I do, a mere teacher? If I were in a position of greater authority, I could do so much more, but the only authority I have is in my classroom--thirty students at a time. But maybe, I'm starting to realize, maybe that's what it takes. A little bit at a time.

One day, a few months after Moon's death, I walked into my classroom to discover the word "Moon" written on my whiteboard. I didn't know where it came from. I asked my students, but they didn't know and didn't understand why I was so affected by the word. I believed that it was a sign, but I didn't know what it meant. Now I wonder if maybe it was Moon, asking me to be his voice in the classroom.

Ever since my experience at the Ojibwe language workshop, I have longed to bring the knowledge back to my hurting community. The journey came full circle when, through a grant from the Minnesota Humanities Commission, we were able to invite Dr. Treuer to do an on-site training for our teaching staff. Now I'm not only one teacher spreading this information to thirty students at a time, but one teacher among many. The more teachers who make an effort to learn, and then to share what we've learned, classroom by classroom, the more exponential the growth of understanding and tolerance.

A dam maintains its power through the tension between the water that wants to be free and the man-made wall that holds it in. Right now, there is a wall--a wall of ignorance and fear--created by those who don't want to learn about people other than themselves. The tension is building up behind that wall. Just like the wildfires that are a symptom of drought, we are experiencing racial tension, fist fights, anger, and flare-ups as a symptom of the drought of knowledge. If we break down that dam all at once, there will be devastation. But if we take down one row of bricks at a time, little by little, the water will flow gently over the parched land, and once the dam is completely gone, the water will find new equilibrium

Work Cited

Silko, Leslie Marmon. "The Man To Send Rain Clouds." *Braided Lives: An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing.* Minnesota Humanities Commission, 1991. 49-53. Print.