

IPL Course #2 Reflection

By Darcie Lich

I'm going to begin my reflection paper with a bit of a preamble. I'm going to be honest, here. The deeper I get into these courses in the Indigenous Pastoral Lay Ministry Program, the more difficulty I have synthesizing my thoughts into something that sounds not only coherent and reasonable, but like I've actually learned a thing or two.

Before this program began, I had considered myself reasonably "woke". I knew I still had work to do in terms of Indigenous – Settler relations (more on the word *settler* later), but I figured I was in a pretty good place. The fact of the matter is though, that the more I learn, the more I am confronted by an unsettling and very real awareness of just how much I don't know.

Job probably said it best after he got put in his place for being a jerk about what he thought he knew:

I talked about things I did not understand,

about marvels too great for me to know.

In the past I knew only what others had told me,

but now I have seen with my own eyes (Job 42:3, 5).

With every reading, every video, every discussion that I participate in, I realize that the learning I have done up to this point has barely scratched the surface, and that there is so, so, so much more learning to do. And frankly, the thought is a little overwhelming. So, to be invited to reflect on that learning is daunting. How can I reflect on what is so obviously the very little I know?

Well, like the urban proverb says, “You have to start somewhere to get anywhere.” So, I considered the things that caught my attention during this course, particularly the ones that dragged me down a few rabbit holes where I would spend a few days mulling things over. There were more than a few, but for the purposes of this (already rambling) reflection, I’m going to take the idea of ‘vocabulary’, and run with it for a bit.

Throughout this course, I found that more often than not, I would get sidetracked by a single word, or perhaps an idiom that stuck in my head. They’d kind of make my brain itchy. And it seems to me that a few other participants sometimes felt the same way (some more so than others).

Several times, a word or turn of phrase would provoke a strong response in me, for better or for worse, and it would invite some necessary reflection. *White fragility*. That one got my attention. *Hegemony*. Wow. I hadn’t considered that. *Reconciliation*. Hardly ever heard before the TRC and now the word is nearly cliché. As I reflect on which words seemed to sit with me the longest, I have come to realize that words associated with the concept of “naming” someone were what drew the deepest contemplation. *Colonizer* made me think. *Oppressor*. That one stung. But the word *settler* really pestered me for attention. And I couldn’t help but get the feeling that this word evokes some pretty strong, if not visceral, reactions from others, not only in the general population, but even among participants in this course.

The reasons for this negative response likely vary. But to my mind, the most common one comes from a certain sense of defensiveness. For some, to be called *settler* is to be branded with a pejorative term that casts aspersions on anyone who is of European descent. It evokes images of moving in, uninvited, and taking over. It speaks of complacency and entitlement. It

summons images of intrusion that don't align with the stories we hear of our great grandparents establishing the farms that have been in our family for a century or more.

But it runs deeper than that, I think: we've been named by someone else, not ourselves. A name not of our choosing. And we don't like it.

There's a bit of rather delicious irony in this that seems to escape most people, especially the angriest ones: we never even blinked when we did the same to the Indigenous peoples. We grouped the people of all the First Nations together as one homogeneous bunch and named them *Indians*. We used words like *savages*. *Uncivilized*. *Half-breeds*. It took ages to drum the most offensive of these out of common usage (even the Flintstones used the word *savages*), but such names (though perhaps seen as less derogatory, by some) are still endemic in our society. Even our sports teams use names like Redskins, Eskimos, Chiefs, Braves, and Blackhawks, and we actually object to calls to rename them.

What's more, some of us bristle at the idea of people of Indigenous ancestry naming themselves. People get indignant at being asked to use the terms *Indigenous* or *First Nations* instead of *Indian*. They're irritated when they are asked to remember that *Métis* is no longer merely a substitute for the term *mixed blood* or *half-breed*. And some are incensed over Indigenous peoples gathering themselves under the banner of the *Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations*. (Sovereign? Who do they think they are?)

White fragility, indeed.

Names are powerful things because they are intertwined so closely with identity. When a name is given to a group of people instead of being selected by themselves, their identity is shaped, to a certain extent, by a meaning or description that has been imposed on them based on others' judgment, stereotypes, or ideologies. Conversely, when a group self-identifies with a

name they have received through heritage or when they choose their own name, this flies in the face of how others may see them and defy the way in which they want to identify them.

When a name applies to a group of people, rather than an individual, its social meaning represents the symbolism of a name that has acquired historical meaning. So, when we are called *settlers*, of course it smarts. We didn't choose that name for ourselves. And it points to a very, very uncomfortable reality, so many of us defensively dismiss it.

But that street goes both ways. The fact of the matter is, we've been looking down that street in only one direction for a long, long time. We've chosen (so many) names for the Indigenous community over time, and have used them so indiscriminately, that it doesn't occur to us that maybe they don't like being named by someone else, either.

Relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers (yeah, I went there) have been strained for so long, and in an effort to call to consciousness just how harmful that relationship has been, we're being implored to learn more about it in order to set things right. But I suspect that, for many people (some of my family members included, sadly), attempts at renewing, repairing, and restoring these relationships are doomed from the start because both sides reject the names they have been given, and refuse to acknowledge the name the other side chooses for themselves. There it stops. And there it stays.

A brief example to illustrate my point: my name is Darcie. I like my name. It was given to me by my parents. Darcie is not an especially common name, so when my name is mentioned, many people think of me, and the qualities and attributes that I possess: I am a leader in Catholic education, I am a musician by trade, I am a wife, a mother, a sister, a woodworker, a football fan.

Imagine my reaction when I meet someone new and they call me Bertha. An honest mistake, perhaps. Please, call me Darcie. But as time goes on, they continue to call me Bertha, a name that I not only haven't chosen or been given, but that I intensely dislike.

How far is that relationship going to get?

Well, that depends. I have three options.

1. I can get mad and walk away. If they not only refuse to call me by a name that I prefer, but continue to call me by a name that I hate, I can just decide I'm done with them. They're not worth my time.
2. I can correct them every time I see them, and hope that something changes. Someday. Maybe. If I remind them often enough. The relationship will remain superficial to a certain extent because they don't know me all that well, obviously.
3. I can actually enter into dialogue with them. I can find out why they call me Bertha, and I can tell them why I don't like it. I may discover that they don't call me Darcie because the name is associated with something or someone harmful or traumatic in their past. Maybe they don't know that my name really is Bertha and that I dislike it so much, I changed it 40 years ago and that no one calls me by that name anymore.
We both get to know each other better by hearing one another's stories.

It's remarkable how something so seemingly small and insignificant can have such a profound effect on a relationship.

For some people, the second they are called *settlers*, the conversation is instantly over. They have already stopped listening because they are infuriated by the audacity of someone else choosing a name (and therefore identity) for them. For others, the conversation may not be fruitful, or only part of it may be heard, because they are angry, defensive, and offended.

But for some of us – and indeed I hope that someday it will be all of us – I hope that the discomfort leads us to dialogue. I hope that when we hear that word, or any other word or phrase that catches our attention, we seek to understand the reasons behind it. And what’s more, I hope that the discomfort motivates us to take a closer look at the words in our own colonialist vocabularies and think carefully about how we name our Indigenous brothers and sisters.

In order for us to continue the along the path of engagement, healing, and restoration, we need to continue talking to one another. But it is important to remember that language matters, not only in terms of delivery, but also in terms of reception. It’s not merely about clearing our own vocabulary of landmines. Without critical self-reflection regarding our own responses and reactions to something as simple as a single word, our relationships with our Indigenous brothers and sisters will never be able to reach a point where they can flourish. When we seek to understand not only others but ourselves, as well, “then [we] will understand righteousness, justice, and equity, every good path” (Proverbs 2:9).