



L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from forty years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.

A Human Future

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Invited into Understanding: An Interview with AFN National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo



National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo is a Hereditary Chief from the Ahousaht First Nation in B.C. During two terms as the BC Regional Chief for the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), his skills contributed to a historic accord, overcoming decades of discord among BC First Nations leadership. He was elected AFN National Chief in 2009. He holds a Master of Education in Adult Learning and Global Change, and is Chancellor of Vancouver Island University. He is supported by his partner of 23 years, Nancy, and their two adult children.

This interview left me more hopeful about the future of First Nations people in this country than I've been for a long time. A builder of unity, the new National Chief brings with him clarity, energy, realism and hope. His traditional name means "everything is on your shoulders." In closing, I asked what helps him cope. He described a photo in his office, of himself with his grandmother, saying, "She's with me everyday—as she promised!"

A Human Future, is a free e-quarterly. Subscribe at www.larche.ca. We do not share our subscriber list. Beth Porter, ed.

Beth Porter: A survey described in *Macleans* last year showed First Nations youth as more optimistic about their future than average Canadian youth, but this seems odd given reports of suicides. What is your experience?

Shawn Atleo: These results could seem contradictory, but a resurgence is happening in our communities. It's no longer just the old songs and old dances being performed. New dances and songs are being composed. And there is a spiritual, ceremonial renaissance as people recognize the links created through exposure and involvement with organized religion, and see our spirituality being embraced.

Young people are part of this renaissance that is a powerful tool in creating cultural continuity. The Chandler study in the 90s showed that cultural continuity is strongly correlated with lower suicide rates.

"We need our education systems to tell the whole and complete truth of the history of this country."

Terri-Lynn Fox



Studies on creating effective learning communities in indigenous cultures stress the importance of building on the powerful positive stories and identities that are part of their heritage, of recognizing indigenous ways of seeing the world, and of incorporating indigenous values around leadership—courage, patience, fairness, generosity. Western educational approaches may not see these values as having the same priority as simply imparting the curriculum. To transform school environments into effective learning environments for First Nations youth, we need, first, to affirm, include and celebrate the students' indigenous identity within all facets of the school community. Second, we need spaces for on-going dialogue, reflection, collective sense making, and planning. And we need locally negotiated processes for assessing performance, and for recognition and celebration. This holistic approach will encourage teachers to promote and practice the needed transformation of school culture.

From a paper by Terri-Lynn Fox, referencing works by T. Alfred, and by S. Gorringer & D. Spillman. A member of the Blood Tribe, Fox is a doctoral student at the U. of Calgary and a co-author of the upcoming report, "Canada's Emerging Aboriginal Millennials: A National Survey Reading of Aboriginal Teens and Other Teens." The *Maclean's* '09 article is a precursor. www.ptc08.com.



I see this resurgence in the greater context of the federal government's formal apology two summers ago and the work done internationally on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which Canada recently said it is moving toward endorsing. As my late grandmother commented—profoundly, to my mind—"They are beginning to see us!"

The focus needs to be recognition, formal and informal. We've been left out of the history books, or described unfavourably. In the media as well, this has been true. This impacts the way people see us, and also the way our people have viewed themselves. I see our young people smashing these stereotypes through their acquisition of education in the formal mainstream system and also through their coming out from underneath the heavy oppression of the residential school era, reconnecting with elders, and receiving the teachings that have been missing for so long.

What First Nations teachings or values appeal to the youth?

Interconnectedness, *Hesbook-ish tsawalk* in our language, is a powerful worldview that tells us to respect all life forms—the water, animals, plants, and people. And you are to carry yourself with respect, *iisaak*. A third teaching would be *ya-ak-stalth*, to love and care for one another. Past policies attempted to remove these strong First Nations attributes along with others that we would give expression to through, for instance, our ceremonial systems such as pot latching on the West Coast. These values resonate powerfully for young people who see a world that is in moral and economic turmoil and plagued by conflict. They are values that can make a significant contribution to Canadian society, and First Nations youth see themselves as able to champion them. That's exciting to me.

In Winnipeg, where I come from, uneducated First Nations teens from the reserves are getting into trouble. How can poor conditions in the north be addressed?

I see several fronts. First, there is a response of the Government of Canada that should flow from the formal apology regarding residential schools. If the residential schools



Ed Johnson



When L'Arche was beginning in rural Cape Breton in the early 1980s, founders Tom and Anne Gunn were urged by their neighbours on the Waycobah First Nation to welcome Eddie, a young Mi'kmaq man living in an institution. Ed's eventual arrival to the fledgling L'Arche community was a homecoming for him. Despite having to leave his home ten years earlier, Ed had never lost his Mi'kmaq language or connection to his culture, but now, living next to the First Nation, he could again attend his own church on the reserve, participate in the annual Pow Wow, and run into his friends and relatives at the local gas station.

Ed remains, 25 years later, an important member of both communities—L'Arche Cape Breton and the Waycobah First Nation. He works at Mawi Ta'Mk, a pioneering program for people with disabilities run on the reserve. He continues to speak his Mi'kmaq language and participate in First Nations rituals and ceremonies. And he nourishes the links between his L'Arche and the Mi'kmaq communities, kindling a desire in young people arriving at L'Arche from around the world to learn about this vibrant First Nations community.

By Jenn Power, L'Arche Cape Breton community leader
www.larchecapebreton.org

policy, as the Prime Minister said, was wrong and caused damage, and it was under the guise of education, then education should be a principal tool to provide redress. That means making sure that if children were shipped from northern Manitoba communities to the south, those same communities get proper infrastructure and schools. Sixty schools are needed. I've been in many of those communities where, if they have facilities at all, I don't think anyone would find them acceptable.

Second, with an aging mainstream workforce, and with 50 percent of the First Nations population under the age of 25, there is an economic imperative to properly educate this potential workforce. It is estimated that a fully educated and employed First Nations work force would bring something like a 180 billion dollar contribution to Canada's GDP by 2026. Many people understand this economic analysis.

Third, this is also about social justice. With the corporate social responsibility movement, there is increased recognition of the rich opportunity that lies in developing full partnerships. The Vancouver Olympics stands out. It created lots of jobs and opportunities. But we are still challenged by perceptions about First Nations communities.

What is the situation of First Nations people with disabilities?

Marginalization is compounded many times over. As regional chief, I worked to connect the aboriginal disability organization in BC with Rick Hansen and others, in an effort to bring resources. Article 22 of the UN Declaration calls for particular attention to the rights of aboriginal people with disabilities. Joint work already produced "Jordan's Principle," protecting individuals from falling victim to inter-jurisdictional wrangling.

How do you see moving forward from the UN Declaration?

The Declaration provides an agenda, and, very importantly, it supports the principle that the work needs to be done jointly, whether it's addressing disability, health, education or any other area. No longer are unilateral, imposed solutions acceptable. We have experienced success already with the present government, for instance in working out together a 10 year,

2.5 billion dollar reform of the specific claims tribunal, a process that Phil Fontaine asked me to chair.

How do we build First Nations and mainstream unity?

Canada is still graduating people with 16 years of education who do not understand the essence of this discussion you and I are having. We need our education systems to tell the whole and complete truth of the history of this country, the challenges we have, and then to support us to get on with addressing the issues we've inherited. We need a real dialogue, not just high-level sound bite exchanges in the media. And we need people just to acknowledge that we still have much work to do together to close the understanding gap. It took a long time to get to where we are now, and it's going to take time to get to a better place.

My interest is in various major movements that have facilitated significant change, and in how we take to scale the kind of changes that we need in our communities and in our relationship with Canada. I am very hopeful, like the young people in that survey, that we are at a turning point. This can also be triggered significantly by leadership. If this government supports the Declaration and joins us with a major effort in education, so that every child has real opportunity, we could make genuine headway.



The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 136 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

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FOR YOUR INTEREST

Aboriginal Teachers Face Many Challenges

"A report released by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) found that systemic barriers in education continue to undermine Aboriginal teachers' knowledge and experience. Respondents felt Aboriginal content and perspectives were poorly represented in the current curriculum, while racism was generally 'denied, ignored and trivialized.' To ameliorate these issues, CTF recommends that ally networks extend their support for Aboriginal teachers and their contributions." *Read more: A Study of Aboriginal Teachers' Professional Knowledge and Experience in Canadian Schools* [Click here.](#)

From the March 2010 Canadian Education Association bulletin.

Resources (click on websites)

- UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: [click here](#)
- Assembly of First Nations: www.afn.ca
- Shawn Atleo: www.shawnatleo.ca
- Economic analysis referenced on page 3: www.csls.ca
(Figures used in the interview are adjusted for inflation.)
- *Macleans* April '09 on Teen Canada survey www2.macleans.ca
Upcoming final report on Aboriginal teen survey by Reginald Bibby with co-authors Terri-Lynn Fox and James Penner will be available in September at projectcanadabooks.com
- Michael J. Chandler & Christopher Lalonde, "Cultural Continuity as a Hedge Against Suicide in Canada's First Nations": web.uvic.ca
- Jordan's Principle: www.ainc-inac.gc.ca; the story behind it
- The "I am a witness" campaign supports a human rights challenge for First Nations children, and reflects Jordan's Principle. [Click.](#)
- On First Nations Child Welfare Rights: www.newswire.ca
- First Nations Pedagogy on-line: firstnationspedagogy.ca
- First Nations education in Alberta, a recent agreement: [Click.](#)
- "Digging Roots" a 2010 Juno-nominated indigenous group. [Click.](#)
- Lenny Stoule, "Music: Digging Roots adding new twists on ancient traditions": www.digitaljournal.com
- Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, (Oxford, 1999) and "Perspectives on Political Identity," June, 2009: www.afn.ca
- Tsawalk: *A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview*, by E. Richard Atleo, UBC Press, 2004.

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