

**Revisiting the Boats and the Canoes:
Popular education around the 500 years**

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DEBORAH BARNDT

**REVISITING THE
BOATS AND THE
CANOES: POPULAR
EDUCATION AROUND
THE 500 YEARS**

"When you know who you are, then we can talk."

Terry Doxtator
Oneida man and

President of the National Association of Indian Friendship Centres

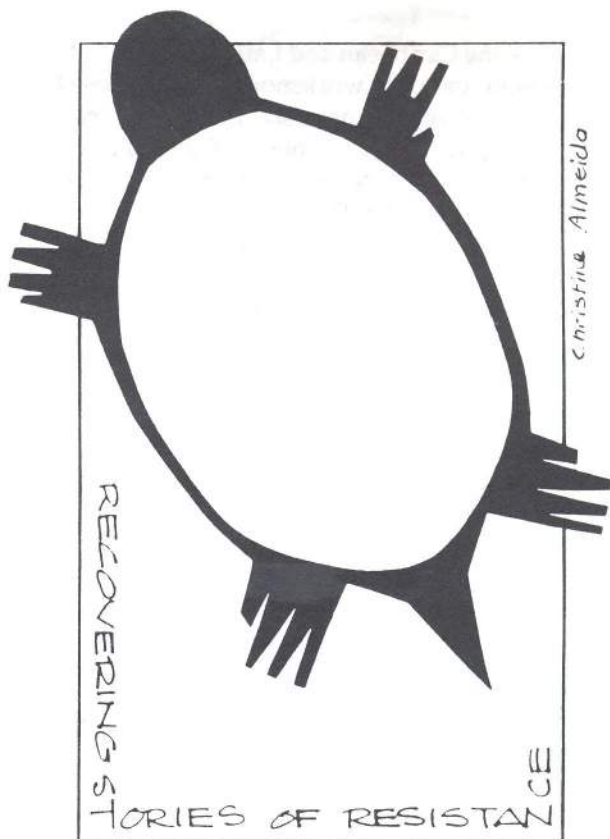
What happens when a group of Native and non-Native community activists work together to organize a workshop series on "Recovering Stories of 500 Years of Resistance"? What do we learn from each other?

As coordinator of The Moment Project of the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice in Toronto, Canada, I helped launch this special series. I am a white middle-class North American woman of European extraction. The Steering Group of the series is made up of people of different First Nations as well as people of colour from communities with a history of European colonization. While this essay is framed by my perspective on the project, the Steering Group members have contributed their thoughts and critiques to it. At the time of writing, we have only completed five of the eight workshops, so this process has served as a mid-year reflection for us, but does not cover the entire experience.

THE PROJECT IN TIME AND SPACE

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, Turtle Island (North America), Western Hemisphere: city founded on Iroquois land by English settlers, destination over recent decades for hundreds of thousands of immigrants and refugees fleeing war, economic hardship, and political repression in "third world" countries, urban "refuge" to 40,000-60,000 Native people pressured by poverty off government-imposed reserves.

Canada in the 1990s: After the failure of a series of conferences on Native self-government in the mid-80s, First Nations leaders warned of growing frustration of Native people whose inherent right to self-determination (control of land and resources, government, language and culture) had been denied consistently by colonial governments. A confrontation at Oka, Quebec, in 1990, revealed the present conservative government's willingness to use military force against Native people; it also politicized the Canadian population and mobilized Native communities across Turtle Island. As an Ojibwa woman reflected: "We have gained more strength. And the government recognizes this, and they know they will never be able to destroy it. Because ordinary people (in Canada) will say: 'No! This is no longer meant to be.'"



The Moment Project: Since 1986, the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice has organized monthly gatherings of community activists to develop a collective analysis of current events, linking issues and groups toward building a broad-based movement for social change. We have used a participatory methodology called "naming the moment" to look at Native self-government, the Canada-U.S. free trade agreement, racism and police violence, and the Gulf War. This process has also compelled us to reflect on our own cultural identities and to question oppressive patterns within ourselves and our movements.

The multiracial composition of Toronto; moments of stark confrontation and growing consciousness among First Nations peoples; the questioning within The Moment Project around identity and solidarity — these were the conditions in which this project grew.

DESIGNING THE WORKSHOPS

The year 1992 brings two critical moments together in Canada: the "celebrations" of 500 years of resistance and survival, and the efforts to create a new constitution, raising deep questions about our identity as a nation. In May of 1991, we invited several community organizations representing First Nations people and other groups with a history of being colonized by European powers — peoples of Africa,

Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America — to join a steering group to shape a series of eight monthly workshops around these two moments.

Over the next six months, we carefully developed our team of twelve people, including members of three Native organizations, a coalition of refugee groups, Latin American women's coalition, Filipino cultural group, cross-cultural centre, and staff of The Moment Project. This was a slow and difficult process. Some of us knew each other, others didn't. We had to develop trust in order to design a joint project. We made personal visits to the centres of Native members. We held our summer meetings in a grassy backyard in downtown Toronto, opening with a sweetgrass ceremony to focus us. We slowly laid the ground for collaboration.

Our original plan had been to give one month of the workshop series to each of six different cultural communities. After three months of Steering Group meetings, we faced a critical moment as our Native colleagues challenged us non-Native community educators/activists: Was this going to be another instance when they would be asked to: "say a few words and step aside?" This dialogue led us to reform our primary objective: "to learn the stories of 500 years of resistance by people of First Nations". We began to realize that the conception and educational process in the workshops also had to be shaped by Native members of the group. Though each brought the perspectives of different First Nations, they contributed important new elements into the design: an Aboriginal historical view of our relations as a framework; the involvement of a Native man and woman as resource people in each workshop; and the integration of the sweetgrass ceremony to open and prayers to close the sessions. A South Asian woman on the Steering Group reflected: "This is the first time I have the opportunity to be in a workshop where Native people are clearly given the floor, where what they have to say is the agenda."

We decided to hold the workshops at the Native Canadian Centre, a community centre that is a real gathering place for urban Natives in downtown Toronto. We planned to offer dinner, catered by a Native chef, giving participants a chance to unwind and visit before the workshop formally began.

One political event helped us: the 1990 election of the New Democratic Party as the first social democratic government in Ontario. We received funding from the Heritage Division of a sympathetic Ministry of Culture, allowing us to subsidize participants, to offer child care, and to invite Native activists as speakers.

Our outreach and recruitment strategies had to change if there was to be substantial and not token participation from both First Nations and from racial and cultural communities with colonial histories. Our major strategy was for each member of the steering group to recruit from her/his own community. We found inadequate the standard techniques of mailing promotional material, requiring advanced registration forms and fees, and accepting on a first come, first served basis. We used quotas, subsidies, and personal visits. The response was good: we cut off registration at 70; there were at least 15 Native participants and over 25 of Asian, African, Latin American or Caribbean ancestry. This rich mixture of participation was essential to the learning process we had designed.

KEY MOMENTS IN THE 500 YEARS SERIES

Since our first workshop in October, 1991, we have been continually challenged by the Native resource people and participants to rethink many of our basic assumptions about history, about spirituality, about education, about solidarity and collective action. I'd like to highlight five of those moments and the questions they raised.

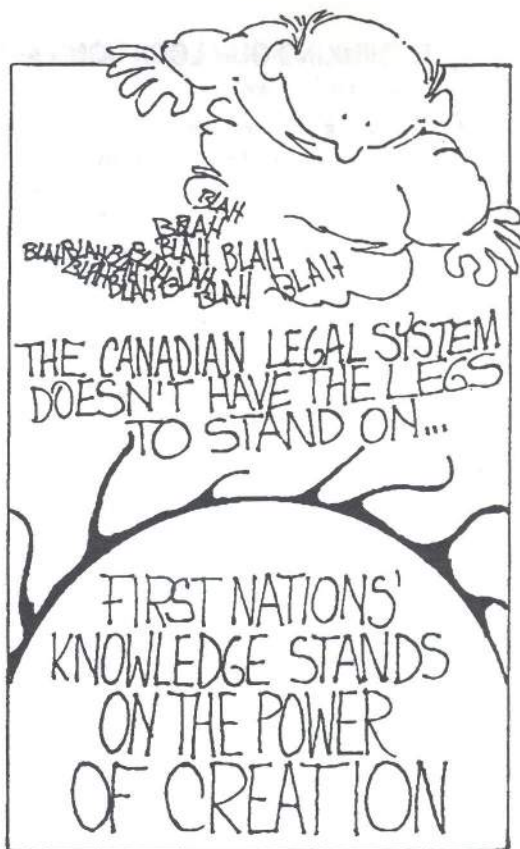
1) RETHINKING HISTORY

Initially, some of us had imagined working our way through 500 years, starting with 1492, and marking key events along a linear path, left to right. Our Native colleagues suggested, however, that we start this process in the present, in the personal lives of all of us, then move back to the roots to understand both how we got here and where we might go from here.

We had to realize that the 500 years frame was limiting. For many First Nations people, 1492 marked a new tumultuous period of destruction and pain in a much broader, cyclical understanding of time, one that also sees forward into the next seven generations. In our first workshop, Fred Plain, Anishnawbe elder of the Chiefs of Ontario, reminded us that First Nations law does not stand on the European legal system: "(We) stand on the power of creation...the hands that piled up the mountains, that scooped out the rivers and the valleys, that power that created what we know as Turtle Island."

Sally Gaikezheyongai taught us the Ojibwa prophesy of the Seven Fires. The seventh fire is where we are now, a new generation emerging who will not let all of this pain and anger and untruths stop them from finding out the truth about who they are.

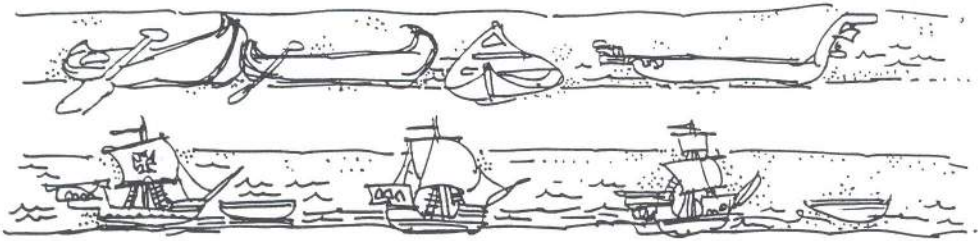
This was just the beginning of what one participant described as an opportunity to learn the history of this country not from the western point of view but from the Native peoples' perspective. We were continually challenged not to group all Native people into one monolithic stereotype. Some non-Natives admitted they had a long way to go: "I have been educated the Hollywood way, i.e., the Indians we knew were the villains in western movies. Each resource person brought the particular stories, legends, and teachings of his/her particular nation, often differing one from another. As in the initial contact between any different peoples, the more we got to know each other, the more complex those histories became."



Carlos Freire

2) RETHINKING OUR LOCATIONS AND OUR RELATIONSHIP

We chose as a conceptual frame for the workshop series the two row wampum treaty belt, *Kuswentha*, based on an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and Dutch settlers in the 1700s, and reflecting a vision of co-existence, as one of our speakers, an Oneida man, explained: "The belt is characterized by two parallel rows of beads. One represents First Nations languages, culture, beliefs, and governing systems. The other represents the newcomers' languages, cultures, beliefs, and governing systems. The two paths exist side by side, but never cross, representing the idea that each row would maintain its own traditions and cultures without interfering in the others.



On the first night, we asked participants to place polaroid photos of themselves either in the canoes or in the boats in the two rows of the wampum belt drawn on a large mural. This process generated a lot of discomfort and intense discussion over three months. At the heart of the activity was a core question that Native people were asking of us non-Natives: "Who are you?" We could not remain as voyeurs; we have had to put ourselves and our own ancestry into this picture. And that was not always easy. Among non-Native participants were included both people of white European descent and people of colour from countries colonized by Europe. Clarifying who we are was in itself a profoundly political action, as one steering group member, a white European man, reflected, "If this series ends with half the participants understanding the importance of knowing who they are then it will have been a success."

The difficulty non-Natives had in placing themselves in the boats reflected several tensions. One was the discomfort of acknowledging that my privilege exists before I deny the fact that I want/have it, as another white man admitted. "I move myself to a boat closer to the front, way out front, because that is where my privilege places me. It ain't that I want that power - it's that I have it, so I gotta figure out what to do." This grappling with historical complicity tapped a lot of complex feelings about one's identity: "I want to understand how I fit in, without guilt, with pride, as a European-Canadian, whose family escaped the poverty of Europe," wrote an Irish woman.

What happened, in fact, once we started looking more carefully at the boats, was that we had to unpack them: examining class differences (who were the captains? who scrubbed the decks? who came in the galleys? what about the slave ships?), asking why different peoples came and whether they came voluntarily or not.

But even as we unpacked the boats, identifying differences among non-Natives, we had to face this reality — we were not in the canoes and we were not being asked to jump into the canoes with First Nations peoples. Rather we were being asked to respect their path and to know our own. As an Oneida leader explained to us: "When you are confused about yourself, I can't talk to you. When you know who you are, then we can talk."

The two-row wampum belt was more than a catalyst for uncovering our differing histories and tapping our confused identities. It remains a central symbol for First Nations people today in their struggle for self-government, a poignant metaphor for the relationship of respect, friendship and peace that they have sought and still seek to develop with other peoples, coexisting on this land. An Ojibwa woman, a member of the steering group, reminded us: "We are not pointing the finger at you for things that have happened with your ancestors. The question for you now is: are you going to allow this (oppressive) situation to continue or are you going to help change the situation?"

3) RECONNECTING COLONIAL HISTORIES

A second objective of the workshop series has been "to link the history of First Nations people to communities of different races and cultures that were colonized by Europe." Columbus's arrival in the Americas set in motion a series of events over centuries, during which many peoples were conquered in their own lands or were sent to new lands as slaves. From the start, we saw 1992 as an opportunity to unearth the deeper roots of the major injustices we are fighting against, to reveal the ongoing and global nature of this oppression, and to connect the common interests of those struggling for liberation from this system.

In the third workshop, a Filipino cultural group presented a play based on their own colonial history, dramatizing the arrival of the Spanish colonialists (complete with sword and cross, culture and education) and the more recent neo-colonial intervention by the United States. We used this play as a catalyst for all participants to examine their own cultural histories, by asking how did the story of their people differ and concur with the Filipino story.

For small group discussions, we divided participants on the basis of their continents of origin, forming one group of First Nations of Turtle Island, but reproducing the colonial categories of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Because a large number of participants were of European extraction, we divided them into northern and southern European. And we formed one group of Jewish people.

There were two major responses to this process. On the one hand, the small group conversations were tremendously generative and lively. People were being asked to share their histories, many of which had been made invisible by experiences of immigration to a new land. Participants named both similarities and differences between their histories and those in the play; there were strong connections: "I come from Goa in India. My people were colonized in 1495 by Portugal. For me this 500 years is part of my history, being the anniversary of the spread of European mercantile capitalism and all the legacies that that has brought into our lives at this time."

"In Kenya, we had boarding schools started by the British, where kids had to leave their parents and go to learn the colonial way."

"In the Philippines, we were educated the American way. I can identify so much with First Nations history, I feel like I know them precisely because of my own history."

But this division of people into groups based on colonial categories also provoked strong protest, reflected by a Central American man: "I found the division of Europe into three groups very racist. As racist was the division or lack of division of the rest. I wonder how our Mother Earth feels about these actions we take when we are trying to save her."

Another participant reflected on the double edge of the groupings: "The geographic divisions were problematic but seemed to work in that it promoted critical analysis. The question of Jewish being a separate category needs further classification especially because there were no Palestinian representatives."

The critical unpacking of the categories was, in fact, a good example of the "unlearning" which has been an important part of this process. We have inherited from colonialism ways of thinking that are unjust and inaccurate. Rather than accept them as natural, we need to find new ways to name and understand our origins, histories, and identities.

4) SHARING PERSONAL STORIES

As we started to share our different histories and to examine critically the categories that have often denied us our humanity, we have found the sharing of personal

stories most profoundly challenges the old stereotypes. Over time, participants have been more and more willing to share those stories and to share the questions we have about our own identities.

In our fourth workshop, the Native resource people were a couple, an Ojibwa woman and a Métis man, who shared their personal experiences with residential schools and foster homes. They spoke of the pain and loss of identity caused by these forms of cultural genocide, and they shared their own experiences of recovery, reconnecting to their culture, and helping others to heal. Participants were very moved: "The way they presented their stories, as personal testimonies of spirits that refused to be conquered, set the tone for our small group exchange. People were willing to share openly, both their painful experiences and their



determination to rise from those experiences. For the first time the Native members of my group jumped right in and spoke their stories, taking the time they needed."

There are risks involved in sharing at this level for Natives and non-Natives. In talking about "just how one's everyday life is conditioned by one's race, one's colour, language, culture," noted a South Asian woman, "(these) first very tentative steps are filled with quite a bit of pain and discomfort. How do we begin to talk about these things without avoiding them and yet in a way that allows us to go somewhere with that conversation? Allowing ourselves to take a risk, to make a mistake, and yet knowing how both to give each other the support to learn from those mistakes, while at the same time being able to offer each other a critique."

As we move through this series, we are developing the personal relationships that make our commitments to each others' causes much more profound. An Oneida man on the Steering Group feels the greatest value of the series for him has been in getting to know each other as people. Only on this basis can we truly move into the next 500 years together.



5) MOVING FROM REFLECTION TO ACTION

Another objective of the series is "to build solidarity with the present struggles of First Nations for self-determination." We have entered this educational process, not knowing exactly where it would lead us, but hoping that some collective actions might grow out of it. Several ideas for action have emerged already: critical analysis of the media around Native issues; production of an annotated resource list; work with schools around "rethinking Columbus"; lobbying the government for the inherent right of First Nations to self-government; and organizing cultural activities around the October 1992 counter-celebrations. However, even our understanding of action is being challenged in this series. Non-Native people have been asking Native people for direction: tell us what to do. Yet, as one steering group member reflected: "We ask Native people what we can do to help and we hear two powerful messages: listen to our story and know who you are. In the context of this struggle, for non-Native peoples to find out who they are is a profoundly political action. It seems reflective, yet it is where reflection and action meet."

He concludes: "Our little monthly workshops in the Native Canadian Centre on Spadina Road in Toronto in Ontario in Canada in the Americas are a vital act of resistance in themselves."

We have entered uncharted terrain. And we are not sure where it will lead us. But as we become friends, as we move into deeper dialogue, we become less concerned about knowing the outcomes ahead of time. There goes another western construct.

Perhaps more importantly, as one white male participant said: "We are learning to listen. And in doing this we hear new silences and new voices and new ways of speaking." Listening is not a skill we can assume. Some non-Natives have complained about "sitting still for longer than 30 minutes." The Native speakers in the workshops have been riveting, and many of us have found ourselves willing to listen for hours. It is small compensation for 500 years of not listening. And, as one Oneida participant observed: "It's nothing compared to the five days we sit in the longhouse to receive the teachings."

And we hear this from an Ojibwa participant: "When you begin to really understand us, our spirituality and our culture, to feel it, then you will know what you should do."

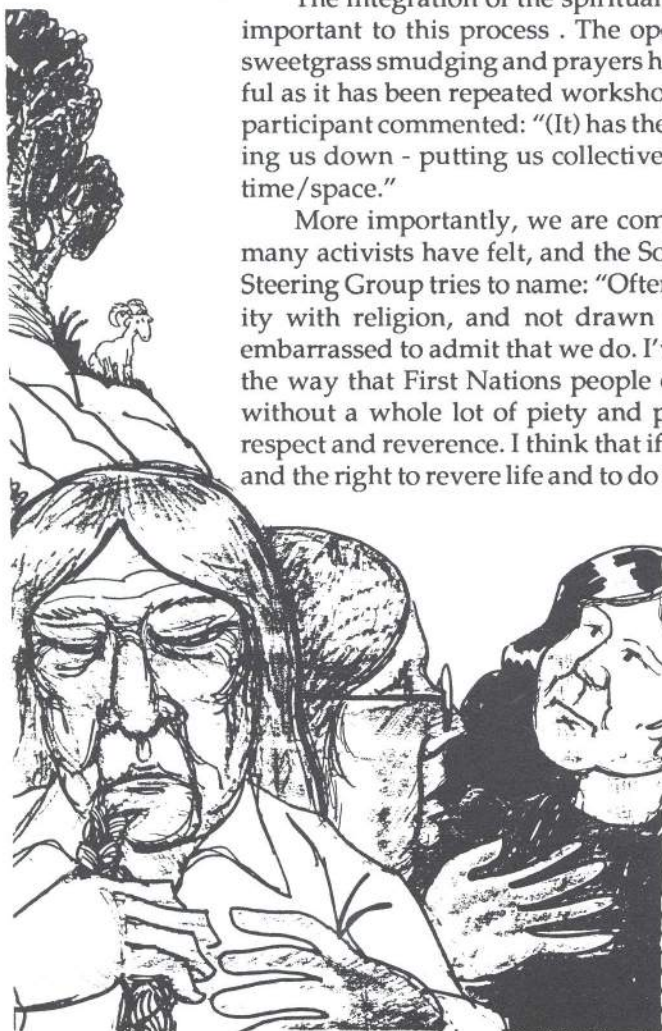
The integration of the spiritual dimension has been very important to this process. The opening ceremony with the sweetgrass smudging and prayers has become more meaningful as it has been repeated workshop after workshop. As one participant commented: "(It) has the wonderful effect of slowing us down - putting us collectively into a different type of time/space."

More importantly, we are coming to terms with a need many activists have felt, and the South Asian member of the Steering Group tries to name: "Often we've equated spirituality with religion, and not drawn upon it or at least been embarrassed to admit that we do. I've appreciated very much the way that First Nations people exercise their spirituality, without a whole lot of piety and pretention, but with great respect and reverence. I think that if we can reclaim the ability and the right to revere life and to do so openly and make space

for that in our work, we'll be planting ourselves in rich ground."

THE NEXT 500 YEARS

While we don't know where this workshop series will lead us, many of us feel that it is a transforming experience. We no longer see it as a discreet series of educational events, to end in May.



We have begun a process that has challenged our understanding of who we are, as social and spiritual beings, as Natives and non-Natives, as actors in history. As Canada faces a critical moment of also asking "Who are we?", this local educational experience must feed into a broader, national process. And as we deepen our own sense of identity and make links across boundaries, we will likely face the challenge of not accepting the situation of the last 500 years, but working to change it.

And we are surely being changed in the process.

For information on The Moment Workshop, contact the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice, 947 Queen Street East, Toronto, Ontario M4M 1J9 Canada.

RETOUR AUX BARQUES ET AUX CANOËS : ÉDUCATION POPULAIRE À L'OCCASION DU CINQUIÈME CENTENAIRE

DEBORAH BARNDT

L'auteur examine l'expérience d'intervenants communautaires autochtones et non-autochtones qui ont travaillé ensemble pour organiser et tenir une série d'ateliers, « L'histoire de 500 ans de résistance : la redéfinition du Canada en 1992 ». La conception et le processus éducationnel des ateliers ont été formulés par les autochtones. Ils ont contribué les éléments d'une perspective non-linéaire de l'histoire; une vision historique autochtone de nos rapports; la participation de femmes et d'hommes autochtones à tous les ateliers; une cérémonie religieuse traditionnelle à l'ouverture de chaque session; et des prières à la clôture.

Les ateliers ont été structurés autour de cinq éléments : la révision de l'histoire, de nos places et de nos rapports, l'enchaînement des histoires coloniales, le partage des histoires personnelles, et un passage de la réflexion à l'action. Même si la série est encore en cours au moment de la préparation de cet article, les participants ont déjà convenu que l'expérience est transformatrice. Elle a mis en marche un processus de remise en question de leur notion d'identité — en tant qu'êtres sociaux et spirituels, en tant qu'autochtones et non-autochtones, et en tant qu'acteurs dans l'histoire. Alors qu'ils approfondissent leur sens d'identité et qu'ils établissent des liens au-delà des limites établies, ils en viendront sans doute à refuser d'accepter la situation des derniers 500 ans, et à s'efforcer de la changer tout en changeant eux-mêmes.

RETORNO A LOS BARCOS Y LAS CANOAS: EDUCACIÓN POPULAR SOBRE LOS 500 AÑOS

DEBORAH BARNDT

La autora analiza la experiencia de los militantes de comunidades aborígenes y no aborígenes en su trabajo conjunto para el diseño y realización de una serie de talleres llamada "Recobrando historias de 500 años de resistencia: redefinición de Canadá en 1992." La concepción y el proceso de educativo de los talleres pertenece a los aborígenes. Ellos traen los elementos de una visión no lineal de la historia, una visión aborígena de nuestras relaciones, la participación de mujeres y hombres aborígenes, la integración de una ceremonia particular de apertura de las sesiones, y oraciones para el cierre de las sesiones.

Hay cinco momentos clave que dan forma al taller: repensar la historia, repensar nuestra ubicación y nuestras relaciones, reconectar las historias coloniales, compartir historias personales y pasar de la reflexión a la acción. A pesar de ser ésta una revisión a mitad del camino, los participantes ya están de acuerdo en que ha sido una experiencia transformadora. Ha comenzado un proceso que ha planteado un desafío a la comprensión de su propio ser — en cuanto seres sociales y espirituales, aborígenes y no aborígenes, actores de la historia. Al profundizar su propio sentido de identidad y establecer vínculos más allá de las fronteras, es probable que enfrenten el desafío de no aceptar la situación de los últimos 500 años y sino de trabajar para cambiarlo al mismo tiempo que experimentan el cambio.