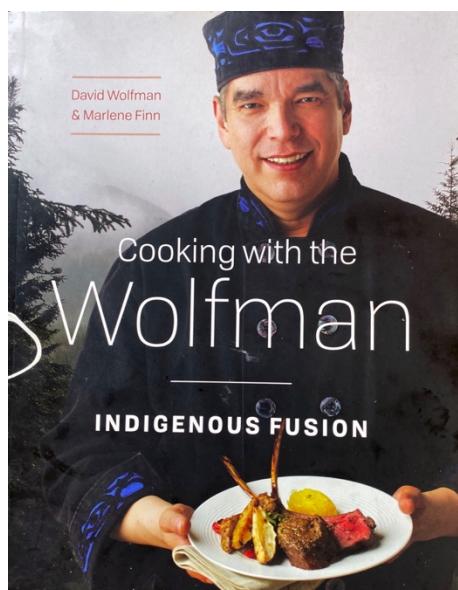


Spiraling through 500 years: Naming the Moment Workshops (1991-1992)

The 1992 “celebrations” of Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of “America” inspired a large number of counter events, including an eight-month series of workshops in Toronto on “Recovering Stories of Resistance of 500 Years; Redefining Canada in 1992.” As the coordinator of the Naming the Moment program at the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice, I pulled together activists to develop the series, using this moment to revisit this history through an Indigenous perspective. As I look back on it 30 years later, I connect what I learned then to deepening my learning now, in this era of Truth and Reconciliation. I go back and forth in time.



From good food to the good mind

April 2021

I page through the [beautifully illustrated cookbook](#) by David Wolfman, Indigenous chef and culinary arts professor at George Brown College. Wolfman, whose parents were Xaxli'p and Russian, relishes the recovery of traditional foods, combining them with other ingredients in healthy fusion recipes. He and his wife Marlene manage a business that includes a cooking class on APTN and Recipe for Success Workshops for First Nations community organizations, health and educational institutions and corporations.

October, 1991

How comforting it was to go from work to the Native Canadian Centre and have a meal before our evening workshops began. David Wolfman, then a young chef from Regent Park, introduced us to traditional foods, like salmon and wild rice, corn soup and bannock.

For eight months David fed us, before we gathered in a circle for our workshops that engaged 50 activists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, in three-hour sessions to recover the process and impact of 500 years of colonization and cultural genocide. As we digested Indigenous food, we also digested the presentations of knowledge keepers, men and women, from First Nations and Inuit organization. Trying food we had never tasted before and hearing stories we had never heard before.



I had invited Jackie Jocko-Alton of the Native Women's Resource Centre to represent Indigenous people on the multicultural steering committee. "If you are serious about learning about the colonial history of Canada," she challenged us, "you should not just invite us into *your* process. It should be led by Indigenous leaders, so we are deciding what, where, and how we do this." Somewhat hesitantly, I had to relinquish some control.

We added more Indigenous members to the committee, and through several months of planning meetings, the design took shape. The Indigenous members insisted that instead of meeting in the basement of a church where the Naming the Moment Workshops were usually held, we meet in the Native Canadian Centre, a space that would be welcoming to other Indigenous participants. There was a cafeteria in the centre, and they proposed that we offer a meal before the three-hour evening workshop. We secured funding from the Ontario Heritage Foundation, which allowed us to invite two Indigenous resource people to speak at each workshop, and to contract David Wolfman to feed the 50 participants registered for the series.



Jackie Jocko-Alton and Odongo, members of the Steering Committee

I thought the food was a nice gesture, and I enjoyed trying Wolfman's traditional fare, while sharing a hot dinner with other busy activists. But I don't think I really understood the importance of eating healthy food together before embarking on the difficult conversations we were about to have.

Fast forward 25 years. It was only through the [Earth to Tables Legacies Project](#) that I began to understand the connection between "good food" and the "good mind." An early conversation with Mohawk food scholar and activist Chandra Maracle, while sharing food at her table at Six Nations, gave me a fuller sense of that connection.



Chandra, with daughters Kiera and Vyolette, sharing her food and knowledge with me

Chandra (August 30, 2016)

When people have a full belly, feel at their best, not just emotionally, but scientifically, when your blood sugars are balanced and you feel good, that's the optimal time for making decisions and talking about things with a clear mind.

There's a direct link between the Haudenosaunee concept of Ka'nikonhrí:yo and "contentedness in your belly." Even science now is also explaining that as the mind-gut connection. There's no surprise that what's going on your gut and your head are linked. Food and eating good food and being contented in your belly will help you with good mindedness or making good decisions.

The Indigenous knowledge that the Haudenosaunee had about good mindedness and about feasting and about food was all connected. But the unfortunate part about the scientific explanation is that it doesn't give you the fullness and the richness of everything else that goes behind feasting and communing with people, the commensal. It was all there before, and we're on to something in getting it back. That's where science falls short when it doesn't include Indigenous knowledge.

A few months later, in October of 2016, we organized the second gathering of our Legacies collaborators, coming from Mexico, Muskoka, the Gaspé, and Toronto. Chandra invited us all to share a meal at her table at Six Nations and introduced us to a ritual that she had developed with her young daughters. Before we sat down to eat, she lit a candle and then asked us to hold each other's pinkies. "Take a deep slow breath" she suggested. After a moment of silence, she announced in Mohawk, "Nyá:wen tsi enskátne tentewa'tská:hon ne kakhwí:yo!" or "Thanks that we are eating this good food together!"



Legacies collaborators share a ritual before eating at Chandra's table in Oct. 2016

I am transported back to my childhood and to the dinner table ritual of my own family. We would hold hands, not pinkies, and sing together before eating. In the Christian tradition, this was called "saying grace" and it often drew on church hymns like "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" or catchy camp songs like the Johnny Appleseed song: "Oh, the Lord is good to me and so I thank the Lord, for giving me the food I need, the sun and the rain and the apple seed." It was a moment when we stopped our busyness, looked at each other, and often laughed. Those brief moments were often lightened by the passionate voice of my younger brother Van, who with Down Syndrome, could not pronounce the words clearly but sang at the top of his lungs, in monotone and an octave lower than the rest of us. His spirit of singing not only taught me that you don't have to be able to carry a tune to sing, but also reminded me that we were all deeply connected. We were then ready to share a meal and the conversation that came with the food.



Holding hands and singing grace with my brother Van, sister Kathy, and brother-in-law Tom

As a teenager, I was mortified when we were having a picnic in a public park, and my parents insisted on holding hands and singing before gobbling down our freshly grilled hamburgers. Now I see this as a ceremonial beginning not unlike the pinkie ritual at Chandra's table or the drumming that preceded our workshops at the Native Canadian Centre in 1991. Perhaps the main difference was the underlying belief: my family ritual was rooted in Christianity, while Chandra's was more in tune with Indigenous spirituality. A spirituality that has survived, despite the oppressive impact of an imposed Christianity, especially when the cross and the sword became complimentary tools for brutal colonialism and cultural genocide.

In the past few years, I have tried to reinstitute some kind of ritual at my table before we begin devouring a plateful of food. I am so much more conscious of the sources of what we are eating – after decades of documenting the stories of the workers in the food chain, the impact of agricultural practices on the earth, and the interconnections of all beings that make this food possible. I've met resistance from some family members, perhaps because of the association of this ritual with a particular religious upbringing that has been rejected, often for good reason. Nonetheless, I have found ways to transform a song of gratitude into a new version which better reflects my own Earth-based (rather than God-based) spirituality. So now the Johnny Appleseed song begins "The Earth is good to us, and so we thank the Earth..." I want to acknowledge all the processes and beings behind the food that then becomes us as we take it into our bodies. We are what we eat.

Serendipitously, my son Joshua's half-brother Leonardo told me that he had also adopted and adapted that song. He remembered visiting my family in Ohio in 1991 when he was around 10 or 11, and seeing us hold hands and sing the Johnny Appleseed grace. Now a father of two young children, he wanted his kids to have some dinner table ritual of thankfulness, so he changed the words to "The World is good to me, and so I thank the World." The impulse is similar. We crave ritual, connection, and meaning, but we need to create or recreate gestures in tune with our own beliefs and relationships.

Rediscovering Ceremony

February 1992

While no one offered a grace before we sat down to share David Wolfman's meals at the Native Canadian Centre in 1991-1992, our Indigenous partners insisted that we open and close each three-hour workshop with a drumming circle. The 50 or so participants were seated in a 3-row deep medicine wheel pattern, with the Eagleheart Singers and Drummers in the centre. Led by Jimmy Dick, the four male drummers, each coming from one of the four directions, lowered their sticks on the large drum, both covered with animal skin. The reverberations of the drum through the floor entered my body through my feet, as I slowly connected to that beat. The voices of the drummers filled the room with a welcome song, their haunting throat cries opening my chest. After a few minutes, I was in a kind of trance, transported to a more primal place, my own heartbeat connecting to the heartbeat of the Earth.



Other workshop participants noted the importance of this ceremony in their evaluations: “It was time to hear the heart of Our Mother, it is necessary to hear her through the drumming.” Another suggested: “Beginning with ceremony helped produce a feeling of community.” I am sure that opening and closing with the drum had an impact on the conversations that followed, but I still had a lot to learn about its power. A few years later, an Indigenous student of mine at York chose to focus his entire graduate study on The Drum. Through him and others, I began to peel away the layers and understand the profound and multiple meanings of the drumming ritual. The drum was a sacred gift connecting us to the heartbeat of the pulsating Earth and the wisdom of the ancestors. The ritual relieved stress and offered a focus; it viscerally prepared our minds, hearts, and spirits for the collective conversation to come.

The importance of opening ceremonies has crept into many of my current practices, beyond the dinner table. When teaching community arts at York University between 2005 and 2015, I invited small groups of students to create an opening ritual for each class, as a way to focus our collective energies in preparation for meaningful conversation. In our more recent Legacies exchange, we have also been learning about the rituals that accompany the planting and harvesting of vegetable gardens as well as protocols that precede the “honorable harvest” of animals when hunting, trapping or fishing in respectful ways. The Indigenous collaborators in our project have suggested that we can’t have a successful garden if we don’t know the songs and dances that accompany the sowing of the seeds and the harvesting of the fruit.

The boats and the canoes: Who are you? Who am I?

November 1991

In planning for the 500 Years workshops, our Indigenous committee members suggested that we frame the series with the two-row wampum, an early treaty first negotiated between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch in 1613. The [two-row wampum](#) has recently been reclaimed and promoted as a model for righting the relationship between First Nations and the Canadian state. One of the first Indigenous resource people for our workshops, Terry Doxtator, Oneida and then President of the National Association of Indian Friendship Centres, explained the original meaning of both the chain of friendship wampum and the two-row wampum:

The two row wampum belt is characterized by two parallel rows of beads. One represents First Nations languages, cultures, 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 other's.

We used the two-row wampum not only as a conceptual framework for the workshop series, but also as a device for all participants to locate themselves within the context of First Nations history. As they entered the cafeteria the evening of the first workshop, we took a polaroid photo of each participant and asked them to place themselves within the two-row wampum, in the ships or in the canoes.



Half of the long chart of the ships and the canoes representing the two-row wampum

In an article I wrote in early 1992, I described the aftermath of the exercise:

This process generated a lot of discomfort and intense discussion over three months. As 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.... 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 Terry Doxtator explained to us:

"When you are confused about yourself, I can't talk to you. When you know who you are, then we talk."



Terry Doxtator explains the "Covenant Chain of Friendship" wampum



This was a challenge for us then, and it remains for us today, 30 years later. Who am I? Who are we?

The two-row wampum is now much more widely referred to in discussions about how we should be reframing nation to nation relationships.

In our 2019 gathering of Legacies collaborators at Six Nations, Chandra shared a beautiful version of the wampum, or *Guswenta*, its beads made from purple quohag shells and white welk shells. She talked about its origins and its evolution over time, as one of the many [contributions the Haudenosaunee](#) have offered to us in North America (Turtle Island).

It was clear in 1992, and even more generally recognized today, that key actors in the ships have not respected the treaty, not only interfering in the path of Indigenous nations, but stealing their land and children, perpetuating “cultural genocide” and “knowledge imperialism.” The current tensions between Indigenous nations and the Canadian state are playing out in turbulent waters. The rocky movement of the boats and the canoes has been highlighted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women commission, the Idle No More movement, the more recent discoveries of unmarked graves of Indigenous children surrounding residential schools, and the heightened struggles over resources such as pipelines, mining, and water.

The questions of Who are we? And Who am I? are still central to this struggle. I have been inspired by other settlers who have traced their own ancestries and complicity with colonial histories.¹ My ancestors on my mother’s side were early pilgrims – arriving on the eastern shores of North America in the 1600s. My grandmother’s ancestors came from the Netherlands to New Amsterdam (New York City), then moved north to the Albany area. Since the Dutch entered into the first treaty of peace and friendship, the two-row wampum, I’ve always wondered if the Dutch were less imperialist than the British, French or Spanish. Digging into scholarly literature like *The Sorrow and the Shame: Dutch-Amerindian Encounters in New Netherland*, I learn that the seafaring Dutch were initially more interested in trading with the Indigenous people along the North American coast than in claiming territory. But into the 1700s, they began moving inland and adopted the same aggressive tactics of conquest, competing with other European colonial powers to take over Indigenous territory. I’ve reflected on the shifting Haudenosaunee-Dutch relationship in a [recent land acknowledgment](#).

Epilogue (2022)

On April 28, I attended the online launch of a new publication of the Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice, the continuation of the Jesuit Centre where I worked in the 1980s and 1990s when I organized the 500 years workshops described here. Entitled [*Listening to Indigenous Voices: A Dialogue Guide on Justice and Right Relationships*](#), this publication represents another moment of reckoning of the Jesuits confronting their own complicity in the brutal process of colonization and cultural genocide. While the launch featured strong Indigenous voices – Lee Maracle, Sylvia McAdam, Harry Lafond – only at the end did a Jesuit speak.

I was surprised to see Peter Bisson, now the head of the Canadian Jesuits, who had been a young novitiate working with us at the Jesuit Centre in the 1980s. As an official church delegate at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, he had listened to testimony after testimony of traumatized survivors share their experiences of being denied their language, their culture, their spirituality in Church-run schools. He spoke of his own transformation from a priest who “wanted to help” Indigenous peoples to one who was “asking them for help” in decolonizing and educating both Christians and the Canadian population about the dark history of colonization.

No surprise that our [*Earth to Tables Legacies educational package*](#) reflects many of the same objectives and is, in fact, referred to in this new Jesuit publication. Another spiraling of time and convergence of learning at a critical moment.

¹ Victoria Freeman. *Distant Relations: How My Ancestors Colonized North America*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2002.