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Magic Canoe: An Invitation for Reconciliation from Wa'xaid

Briony Penn

Briony Penn is a naturalist, writer, artist and educator who works in service to the species, environments and cultures that hold us all up. Her two most recent award-winning books centred on the life and teachings of Cecil Paul/Wa'xaid (1931–2020) a member of the Xenaksiala/Haisla nation from the Kitlope River watershed on the west coast of British Columbia, with whom she collaborated.

This chapter is adapted from *Stories from the Magic Canoe of Wa'xaid* by Cecil Paul as told to Briony Penn

EDITORS' NOTE: In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released their final report "in order to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation" (p.1), and it contained 94 Calls to Action. Three of those Calls to Action (62-64) relate directly to ensuring that all Canadian teachers and students acquire and embrace Indigenous knowledge and curriculum; and teachers should build "student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and respect" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p.7). Outdoor Learning (OL) is uniquely positioned to manifest these Calls to Actions outdoors on the land. The following stories are examples of an invitation for reconciliation from Wa'xaid, an Elder and Indigenous knowledge-keeper from the Xenaksiala people on the northwest coast of BC. These stories represent a unique way that OL can incorporate Indigenous knowledge through hiking, canoeing, and slowing down to connect with nature through all the senses. They are also a call to action to preserve the wilderness from industrial exploitation.

Cecil Paul (Wa'xaid) and I are on a ramble through the mud and devil's club, along a trail he remembers used to lead to the old reserve and oolichan fishing camp of the Haisla people on a side-stream of the Kitimat River on the north coast of BC. Oolichan are the oil rich fish that have kept nations alive for millennia on the coast. Both the oolichan and the village have gone. Eventually, we get stopped by a creek that has adopted the trail. Wa'xaid hardly misses a beat and bends down to remove his shoes and wade through. The water runs almost clear over the pebbles. "Gee, that cool water sure feels nice on my feet," he says. We cross the creek then sit down to put our shoes back on and as we do Wa'xaid notices his brothers and sisters moving around; small,

brown western toadlets on their migration out of their summer breeding grounds. The toadlets are perfectly camouflaged against the muddy, leaf-strewn bank. Their beautiful hands and small belly tapering down to long legs have the look of distant elderly kin. We would never have noticed them from our lofty positions in the sky. Sitting down on the bank, they start to come into sharp focus. It unleashes a story from Wa'xaid about amphibians and what he called the Indian way of teaching. The first and most important lesson is that it takes the experience of encountering the animal to trigger the story.

One of my Elders took us out [by canoe], close to Butedale. He got us into the right

position for this canoe, then he took a paddle and hit the side of the canoe. There was this little creek that trickled out to the ocean, and when he banged on the canoe, the little creek got bigger. Everyone was in awe. We thought he was magic, but he is telling us, "I'm not. Okay. Pick your paddles up." We didn't go far, tide was falling, so he told us to anchor the canoe out so we don't have to drag it down. We went for a hike, and we went up to a little lake there. It was summertime and the outfall was just a little trickle. Went by the river. "Walk softly," he said, "and don't make noise." We went to this little lake. Then we make noise, frogs all jump in the water and it made the river come up. The lake was just full of them frogs and little things what we seen. He had to show us that for us to believe. The Indian way of teaching – visual, not behind a desk with a piece of paper and writing and don't know how to spell. Outdoors is our classroom – visual teaching. What a benefit it has done me, our Native way, and that method of teaching of the children of visual teaching. But that has gone now too. Now they are going to classroom, inside eight hours a day; our classroom was open 24 hours a day. Got to be there to see. How would he put it together, that bang would penetrate or echo up to the lake? I just came out from Alberni [Indian Residential School]. I was 14, I guess. I left him later; I drink and never look back. He was my teacher. Too bad I didn't listen, eh?

When Wa'xaid recounted his stories, he asked me to write them down and add any western facts and dates that would be useful in improving understanding to other people not trained in his way of thinking. His concern for mother earth is founded in practical reasons of survival and he didn't believe we would survive the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change without that relationship. Here are my supplemental notes within his one small story:

- The story contains critical information about the 'trickle' of water during summer

and where a water source is—just north of a cannery called Butedale. Summer water sources are few and far between, despite it being a temperate rainforest, so knowledge of summer water sources is critical. With climate change, summer water has become even more scarce.

- The rising of the water from the rapid movement of amphibians back into the creek is almost unimaginable in this time of declining populations. The story hints at a previous abundance—a historic baseline—that brings a visceral understanding of the extent of our current damage to mother earth.
- The presence of amphibians is an indicator of clean, uncontaminated water sources. The Haisla watched their salmon and oolichan runs on the Kitimat (their main source of food) disappear due to contamination from pulp and aluminum mills discharging their effluent. Through legal cases triggered by the rights embedded in Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution, the Haisla were able to force the companies to clean up their effluent. The presence of the toads that day was the first sign of cleaner water in half a century and the hope of a return of life. At the time, a new threat was facing the estuary, LNG Canada, the biggest private sector investment in Canada's history. Toads were unlikely to survive the industrialization of an LNG plant adjacent to the reserve.
- Xenaksiala /Haisla stories often concern the sanctity of frogs and the perils of mistreating them. Death is the usual consequence of disrespecting nature: starvation and thirst chief amongst them. Western belief systems are predominantly indifferent to the thought of amphibious relatives; some are ambivalent, some are hostile, and some hold them up as highly valued members of the earth's family. Wa'xaid was interested in the commonalities between people and built on those shared beliefs.

- Xenaksiala /Haisla territory is rich in amphibian diversity and one of the few places in the world where they are holding their own. Currently, 64 per cent of frog and toad species in British Columbia are listed as species of concern. Even the western toad is experiencing sharp population declines in the south, both from habitat destruction and deadly fungal diseases brought in by humans. Wa'xaid territory, the Kitlope watershed is vitally important globally, not only because it is the largest unlogged temperate rainforest on earth, over a million acres, but because the remoteness provides less chance of the diseases dispersing.
- What better example of enhancing a limited water supply in the summer than working with frog populations. There is no need for a tap, well, pump or electricity, just a creek with frogs that can help recharge your water supply. Wa'xaid taught with one small, humorous but potentially critical example why respect for these creatures is important.
- Big tides are an ever-present phenomenon on the coast, you leave your boat in the wrong place and you can be stuck for 12 hours; or it will float away at your peril. Wa'xaid provides a tip on leaving the boat where it can easily be relaunched on a falling tide. Respect for tides and the sea is bound up in respect for one another, learned experience and keeping one another safe. He loved recounting a story of the cowboy actor, John Wayne, being rescued by the Haisla after disrespecting a tide.
- Walk softly. How often do people hear these two words these days? Walking softly not only assumes respect for plants and animals but shares a gentle way of being in the world, open to possibilities of meeting other beings.
- Visual teaching. Taking the young people up creek to see the frogs jump in was visual teaching at its best. Journeys up and down rivers have metaphorical meaning. Wa'xaid takes people up-river to see the source of the change and the historical causes of injustice.
- The '24-hour classroom' is an elegant way of bringing indigenous education systems to a western audience for whom a classroom is the prime and often only space for educating.
- The reference to 'just came out from Alberni' holds a lifetime of meaning. Alberni was an Indian residential school in which the students were forced into 24-hour, multi-year incarcerations. Wa'xaid was abducted from his home in the Kitlope at 10 and a half. He was never taught to read or write, just to be a labourer for industry. Alberni was the first residential school in which survivors brought successful criminal charges against the church and Canada for abuses. Children were not free to come and go and his brother was the only student to avoid recapture by the RCMP when he escaped the institution.
- Wa'xaid's teachings are never separated from the context of the times and the system that created these inequities. He was taken by the RCMP to Alberni while national plans were in process to develop his family's Kemano trapline or *wa'wais* (watershed that his family was responsible for) into the world's then largest hydro-electric project. The turbines in his territory powered the pulp and aluminum mills in the Kitimat estuary and both oolichan runs were impacted. Teachings that acknowledge colonial history enrich our relationships and our ability to work together to heal the damage.
- 'Too bad I didn't listen, eh?' Wa'xaid's rejection of his traditional teacher at the age of 14 and a turning to alcohol were sources of shame for him. He observed that the loss of visual learning and alcohol were equally as

harmful to non-first nations, disconnecting people from the land and each other and numbing their emotional intelligence. He emphasized the importance of this type of learning for all people.

- Xenaksiala/Haisla teachings emphasise the importance of experience, the teachings of respected elders. As a western academic, my evaluation and promotion was skewed towards my ability to demonstrate original ideas that I could apply to any place and to any university. There was little value in being a specialist in one's place in academia. Reconciling these two worldviews is a goal that Wa'xaid held tightly.
- 'We thought he was magic.' Magic and synchronicity are part of traditional teachings. Animals, people and places weave their way through the fabric of one's own life, and meaningful encounters are there at every moment if you take time to observe. Magic is the only English word that Wa'xaid could find to describe the feeling of connectedness when these flows start to happen. Magic was also the word he selected to the feeling of people working together for a common goal of protecting mother earth.

Wa'xaid by Introduction

The following is how Wa'xaid would introduce himself to any new group of students or guests to his territory.

My name is Wa'xaid, given to me by my people. Wa is "the river"; Xaid is "good" – good river.¹ Sometimes the river is not good. I am a Xenaksiala; I am from the Killer Whale Clan. I would like to walk with you in Xenaksiala lands.² Where I will take you is the place of my birth. They call it the Kitlope.³ It is called Xesdu'wāx^w (Huchsduwachsdu) for the "blue, milky, glacial water." Our destination is what I would like to talk about, and a boat – I call it my magic canoe. It is a magical canoe because there is

room for everyone who wants to come into it to paddle together. The currents against it are very strong, but I believe we can reach that destination, and this is the reason for our survival.

When you leave Kitamaat, this is Haisla Land,⁴ you go out to – they call it – Gardner Canal.⁵ You go into Gardner, and Crab River is where our boundary line was before the amalgamation of the Xenaksiala and the Haisla.⁶ Haisla and Xenaksiala share the same language, with a few word differences. Our language is close to the language family of River's Inlet.⁷ You can get the Haisla history from Gordon Robinson.⁸

When I bring the boat into Xenaksiala land, the tide will bring us through. There is a story for that. From Crab River we enter the Kitlope Valley. The Kitlope has many, many rooms, many doors – there is a lot of history going up to Kitlope Lake. Kitlope Lake, if we manage to journey that far, it is what I call the cathedral – a spiritual place.⁹ It is quiet. I think if you experience something when we get there, our people say that you will not leave that place unchanged. You cannot leave the way that you went in. Something touched you. Something grabbed within you that you never identified as yours, but something in there revealed a little of who we are.

When we get to the Kitlope, I am going to ask you to wash your eyes. Our story says that though you may have 20/20 vision or glasses that improve your vision, we are still blind to lots of things. We are blind to Mother Earth. When you bathe your eyes in the artery of Mother Earth that is so pure, it will improve your vision to see things. I will also ask you to wash your ears, so you could hear what goes on around you. So, I could hear you talk. I could hear the wind, and you can hear the birds and animals. If you have the patience to listen, to hear the songs of the birds early in the morning, all these things will be open to you.

We are so busy, we don't have the time for all these beautiful things. If you have the willingness and courage to do that, you will see little things that you have never seen before. You will take a better look at your children, your grandchildren, your best friend. You'll say, "Oh, I never saw that before." To get that vision back – and when you get that back – you will be more kind to whoever comes in your path on this journey. There are many legends that we talk about to our children, and above all, the people around the universe that came with their love and compassion to save something that is known around the world – the largest unlogged temperate rainforest in the world.¹⁰

At the time I recorded that introduction in the late 1990s, Wa'xaid, as he healed from his heart surgery, had joined Haisla Elders, Johnny and Bea Wilson, at the summer camps of the Haisla in the Kitlope. His storytelling around the campfire was legendary for a generation of kids – Haisla and white people like me. As one of the campers recounts, "There was just so many lessons that he didn't even know he was teaching them sometimes. That was the beauty of it."

The funds for the camps had not come easily. The Wilsons had written a letter to the Haisla council, asking for financial assistance for the summer camps with proper facilities so that they could teach young people how to harvest traditional foods. They needed "gas and grub" to get up to the Kitlope. They had been raising money through bake sales but needed much more help. When Wa'xaid put out the word to people to step into the magic canoe, support came for the camps from around the world. The Haisla Nation Women's Society took on the organizing. A broader agenda was designed for the Nanakila Institute "dedicated to conservation, stewardship, and appropriate development of the ancestral lands of the Haisla First Nation, with particular emphasis on the Greater Kitlope Ecosystem." There was a guardian training program for young Haisla to do research, monitor and enforce Haisla policies in their territory. They invited western

scientists to share their knowledge of species and ecosystems. Wa'xaid was quoted in their brochure "I feel we cannot lose when I see young people come and deposit a piece of their hearts in the bank we call the Kitlope." Eden Robinson, now a nationally-recognized author, was a young teenager attending the program. She wrote for the Nanakila brochure, "The first time I saw the Kitlope, I was ready to believe in something larger than myself."

In 2008, when the giant oil pipeline company, Enbridge, in its submission to the federal government to construct the Northern Gateway pipeline all the way to the Kitimat estuary from the tar sands in Alberta, stated in their impact report that the Canadian toad dwelt in the area but wasn't at risk, they were challenged by the Haisla nation in the cross examination. The Haisla argued that Canadian toads don't occur anywhere within 500 kilometres of their territory. They have Western toads which are only found west of the Rocky Mountains; Canadian toads are found east of the Rockies. They are distinct species separated by geography and culture. The Enbridge biologists were lacking in experiential education and the Haisla had strengthened their knowledge with western taxonomy and species at risk language. They stopped the pipeline, not for the toad but it was a part of the argument. For Wa'xaid that was reconciliation through shared knowledge.

In 2013, when LNG Canada came to Kitimat, Wa'xaid cautioned the new leadership against agreements with an industry; 'less damage' he said, referring to the impacts of liquified natural gas as opposed to oil, 'is still damage.' The delicate skin of amphibians and oolichan cannot tolerate hydrocarbons even in the minutest quantities. Since amphibians were kin, he could not support the movement of natural gas into their territory. He felt the failure came in the break of the old teachings due to residential schools. Visual learning for him was survival of our planet. Our role as fellow paddlers in the Magic Canoe is to observe, listen and communicate the importance and beauty of Mother Earth and why our survival depends on it.

References

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Notes

The ten notes below refer to explanatory details of Wa'xaid's introduction of himself.

- 1 Louisa Smith, Wa'xaid's sister provided the spellings of her language using the International Phonetic Alphabet. She is one of the three last fluent speakers of Xenaksiala. Wa'xaid shared Xenaksiala words when there was no English equivalent, such as *Lä göläs'* – Put your canoe ashore and rest.
- 2 Xenaksiala lands (also written as Henaksiala) include the entire watershed of Gardner Canal, south and east of Kitimat, British Columbia. Part of that territory, the Kitlope watershed, at one million hectares, is the largest unlogged, temperate rainforest on the planet.
- 3 When Wa'xaid says, "they call it Kitlope," his "they" refers to European mapmakers, like Captain Vancouver, or their closest Tsimshian trading partners. Kitlope is a Tsimshian word for "people of the stone" because of the huge granite cliffs. The Tsimshian live north and west of the Haisla and Xenaksiala, largely along the Skeena River and out into the islands. The Tsimshian language, known by its speakers as *Sm'algyz*, is a completely different language than that of the Xenaksiala. Wa'xaid and the Paul family have close ties to Tsimshian families.
- 4 Haisla territory covers most of Douglas Channel.
- 5 Gardner Canal is BC's longest inlet at 320 kilometres (200 miles). Vancouver named it after his boss, Admiral Alan Gardner, who never saw it.
- 6 Of the wa'wais (watersheds, areas of stewardship, determined under traditional laws or *nuyem*) that pour into Gardner, the first is Crab River, which demarcates the beginning of the territory of the Xenaksiala people and the end of the Haisla wa'wais. Halfway along Gardner is the Kemano River, which is the wa'wais held by Wa'xaid and where the Kemano and Kitlope people officially "lived" until 1948, when the two villages amalgamated with Kitamaat to survive. In the colonial maps of British Columbia there was no indication of the 54 wa'wais boundaries of the Haisla and Xenaksiala.
- 7 River's Inlet is the English name for *Wuikinuxv* (Oweekeno who speak *Oowekyala*). The linguistic group is described by linguists as Northern Wakashan, with four related languages: Haisla/Xenaksiala; *Oowekyala*; *Heiltsuk*; and *Kwakw'ala*.
- 8 The late Gordon Robinson was a renowned Haisla Elder who wrote down some of the *nuyem* (code/laws of stewardship) and stories of the Haisla, published in 1956 as *Tales of the Kitamaat*. *Nuyem jees* is "the place where you get your ethics relating to the world." At least that is how Wa'xaid's friend and anthropologist John Pritchard describes it to people with a Judeo-Christian background "Think of the *nuyem* as the Ten Commandments; Kitlope as Mount Sinai."
- 9 The Kitlope River flows into a lake, oval and luminescent with its milky-blue glacial water. Ice-capped mountains tower above this lake, and for that reason the Xenaksiala call it *Ka-ous*. The closest Wa'xaid can come to translating that word into English is "cathedral" as it gives people a sense of the beauty, peace and awe you feel when you enter the lake from the river
- 10 A coastal temperate rainforest is a forested area lying between 32 and 63 degrees latitude with over 2000 millimetres (80 inches) of precipitation (rain, fog or snow) per year. In 1991 Kitlope represented 2 per cent of what was left on the planet of this threatened ecosystem.