

What is it like to be Canadian?

By Beverley O'Neil, Ktunaxa Nation

What is it like to be Canadian? This is a question I was asked to speak on at the Westcoast Women's Network dinner "Celebrating Women". The complexity of the question was complicated even further by adding... "What is it like to be a Canadian Aboriginal woman?"

Dissecting this question, I began to ask others their perspectives, and I thought back to the days growing up when Aboriginal people were white people on television wearing red paint and black wigs. I recalled the days when Indian children wanted to be the cowboys because they were the good guys and the Indians were bad. I recalled the days when elementary schools taught us that all Indians lived in teepees, had totem poles and wore headdresses. Many of us growing up off reserve didn't have the opportunity to know this was false because Aboriginal people were still segregated from the white community, and Aboriginal people living off reserve couldn't go home.

Speaking with my friends and colleagues, I discovered that many of our stories were similar - common experiences of discrimination in the classroom, outside the classroom, not being included, and not knowing who was genuinely interested in knowing more about First Nations or least of all who you are. But during these conversations, I also realized these stories of discrimination and segregation derived right from our own back yards - from our relatives and those people we considered friends. Comments about not being Aboriginal because you were Bill C-31, or lived off reserve, or

dressed different, or had different interests colored many of the stories. And it was a shame. It was a shame that those people who one would expect to be the most understanding, because they knew you the best or had the same blood, were just as blind as those that did not know you at all.

I also thought about how times have changed from the Hollywood Indian to the actual use of Indian people in film, documentaries and commercials to finally seeing a true perspective of Indian people in Indian produced and directed media. Because today it is no longer acceptable to dress up like the Village People and pretend that an Indian is an occupation. It is not.

Fortunately, as understood by songwriter Bob Dylan, "The times they are a changing." And, I believe the times are changing for the better for all people. In Canada, people don't melt into the ethnic pot; they are recognized for their distinctiveness and valued for their diversity. Canada is, as someone described, a giant salad bowl where every person has the right to retain their own cultural identity and join into creating one of the tastiest and highest quality countries in the world. This country of Canada has become for many a home, and a place of welcome. For Aboriginal people, again enjoying our cultures in our homelands is again making this land home.

So, what is it like to be an Aboriginal Canadian? Being Canadian is special, and being a First Nation Canadian is an honor.

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