

Reason for Passion

[*Rungh*. Vol. 8, #4, 2020. <https://rungh.org/reason-for-passion/>]

I am conflicted about the recent vandalism and destruction of colonial statues and churches in Northern Turtle Island. As a visual artist and writer who tries to make meaningful and well-made things, and who appreciates how difficult and fragile art and consciousness are, I distrust the direct, the rapid, and the destructive. Born with a preference for reason over passion, I am compelled to collect and evaluate the facts before judging, before acting. The problem with reason, however, is that it can be too reasonable. Slow, cool calculations oil the machinery of the status quo and discourage passionate action—any disruptive action, really—beyond opining or art making. And, at times like ours, both reason and art fail to satisfy the need for radical change.

Responding to the destruction of Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth statues “during events held at the Manitoba Legislature grounds in honour of the Indigenous children who died at former residential schools,”ⁱ the Honourable Murray Sinclair (Anishinaabe) wrote on his FaceBook page:

I am not at all impressed by acts of destruction such as this. The people who commit these acts and those who condone them, need to understand how much they set back any chance of moving the dialogue on changing the bad relationship we have, forward. Do you really think this is going to help? Of course you don’t. That’s not why you did it. You may have been instigated by those who want nothing to do with changing the relationship. You may have been instigated by people bent on making you look bad. You may have easily acted to do this because of the anger you feel and some sort of sense of getting even. I feel no pride in any of you who did this.ⁱⁱ

Sinclair is a reasonable man, a man of reason, but he is not without passion. His, “I am not at all impressed,” is rhetorical irony. Clearly, the statue wrecking made a deep impression, just not a favorable one. The message begins and ends with his feelings: “I am not at all impressed,” “I feel no pride.” His feeling, it seems, is the measure against which these actions should be evaluated. He is concerned that the slow, cool machinery of “dialogue” might be stalled by those not abiding by his preferred approach to reconciliation. In his imagining, the demonstrators subscribe to his “dialogue” agenda but are being misled by (unnamed) disingenuous radical actors, or strong feeling—which seems to amount to the same thing. This construction is painfully patronizing, but it may also express Sinclair’s own deep and chaotic feelings, as well as my own.

As I mentioned earlier, I was born reasonable. Education helped elaborate and craft my innate preference but is not responsible for it. Other people prefer feeling. These are orientations, not choices. Society, as it is currently constructed around here, tends to reward my preference more often than the alternatives. At other times and places, feelings have ruled. Post Enlightenment, capitalist, patriarchal societies prefer reasonable people. Passion is tolerated if it comes in manageable doses and is expressed reasonably in public or otherwise in private. However, each preference is haunted by its compliment. Folks who privilege rationality are nevertheless motivated by emotions, extra-rational forces, and metaphysical ideals. While these feelings may not always be articulable, they nevertheless constitute root motivations. Rational preferring

people, for example, fear chaos (see Jordan Peterson), and so marshal their logic in opposition to manifestations (as they see/construct it) of those fears, which is anything that seems to defy (their) logic. Those privileging compassion and feeling-based evaluations fear control based on laws, ideology, ontology, or any other non-relational ology that they don't comprehend or agree with. To logic preferring people, then, statue tipping and church immolating can only be the result of error: crimes of passion. Or they are the result of cold calculation and manipulation. To those who appreciate less binary and blunt modes, and have the capacity for extra-rational understanding, these may be expressions rather than propositions, and necessary actions capable of shifting logical paradigms. They may violate the laws of the moment but are in accord with universal justice. Strong feeling, of the sort that may have impelled the iconoclasts in Winnipeg, might not be confined to Sinclair's inventory of emotions—anger and revenge—but may be an extra-rational counterpoint to reason's polite, legal, but ultimately unjust grind.

Logic loving Plato ranked intuition above reason. Intuition is unreasoned understanding. It is the means of apprehending the real or ideal form that lies behind every particular thing. If laws develop through precedence and reasoning, justice is the essential force laws aspire to. Justice, Plato claims, can only be known directly, intuitively. This is our *sense* of right and wrong. However, there is another sort of intuition, a feeling of certainty that can be mistaken for the True and Real. Most intuitions are simply unconscious recall. We jump to the conclusions we are familiar with. Right feelings and reasons are most often those we comprehend and that best serve our preferences and positions. Racism is such an intuition.

Martin Luther King, in his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” tries to untangle this problem. He explains that “In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action.”ⁱⁱⁱ Intuitions of injustice must be interrogated and confirmed through reason before right action is just(ified). I am appalled that the colonial custodians of Indigenous children would think so little of their humanity, of their parents, families, and communities, that they would bury them without notice or markers, and otherwise erase them. Regardless of the nuances further investigation will reveal, you and I already know with certainty that this is a great injustice. Reasonable me may need to know the facts before proceeding to right action. Who were the children? What are their names? Who were their caregivers? What are their names? How did they each die? Why? Why was each one buried and not marked? How would my violence serve them? Dr. King would argue that violence would serve them not at all. Sounds reasonable. But such a process—unaccompanied by other forms of radical action—serve the colonial desire for slow change that revolves around a stable white supremacist center.

Unreasonable me is moved by the logic of Franz Fanon and Malcolm X, and wonders at what point we need to proceed by any means necessary? The answer may be limited by self-interest. I wonder if those who pulled down the statues and lit the churches experience greater oppression than Sinclair and I currently do. Perhaps they feel they have less to lose and more to gain. Perhaps they are moved by a spirit more compelling than either logic or passion. Intuition is a leap past reasoning to knowing. Physical intuition is a jump into action with a gut full of confidence. It skips analysis, negotiation, self-purification, or any other force that might arrest, dissuade, or temper forward momentum. Plains peoples used to have peace time chiefs who were

reasonable men who kept order and good relations. However, during war time, they were replaced by war chiefs who led other-wise.

Four days after his first post, the Honorable Murray Sinclair, responding to the suggestion that the colonial statues be restored, argued:

That suggestion borders on the idiotic. What an act of provocation that would be. Trying to return the Queens' statues to where they were without talking with Indigenous leaders and survivors would escalate tensions to the point that more people with more ropes would show up next time. Why can't those leaders of the right understand that the issue is not about criminal vandalism but about colonial gloating....You should see the logic behind leaving those spaces empty as monuments to a failed genocide....^{iv}

And there it is. Public statues and their removal is always more about feeling and symbolic action than logic and discourse. Restoring the effigies would be a "provocation," and would result in further vandalism; not that the former Justice would condone such a thing, though he might understand if such a thing happened. If it's best that they are not restored, does that imply that their removal was justified? It is not about the law ("criminal vandalism") but reactions against "colonial gloating," read justice; a restoration of pride, and other feelings. While Sinclair evokes the "logic behind leaving those spaces empty as monuments to a failed genocide," it is an emotional logic he denied protesters in his first post. I believe we share an oscillating ambivalence.

On January 15, 1905, the year-old Residential School in St, Paul des Metis was burned to the ground by students. Fourteen Metis boys, aged seven to sixteen, were arrested. Four were let go as too young to be prosecuted. Four were acquitted. The six who went for trial were soon released by Justice James Macleod. He agreed with the defense that the children were responding to their mistreatment.^v As a result of the fire, neither my great grandfather, John Garneau, nor his siblings and their children went to Residential School.

David Garneau

ⁱ Devon Kendrick. "Statues of Queen Elizabeth II, Queen Victoria toppled at Manitoba Legislature." CTV News. July 1, 2021. https://winnipeg.ctvnews.ca/statues-of-queen-elizabeth-ii-queen-victoria-toppled-at-manitoba-legislature-1.5493572?fbclid=IwAR3I2laFYVIK57aeHZrLh-Q5Rxzny72vGbCT1MzOnljHbVd_PgB-YaQMd_M

ⁱⁱ Murray Sinclair. FaceBook post, July 1, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter From Birmingham Jail. April 16, 1963. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

^{iv} Murray Sinclair. FaceBook post, July 5, 2021.

^v *Canada's Residential Schools: The Métis Experience. The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.* McGill-Queens University Press. Volume 3. 16-20. http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Volume_3_Metis_English_Web.pdf Accessed July 10, 2021.

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