Introduction

At a time of feeling at a dead end, I went to Scotland looking for my ancestral and even, I hoped, my tribal roots. In the rugged glens of the Tay River Valley, I discovered a legacy of which I had known nothing: a people, my people, living in direct relations with the land in self-governing commons and commons communities, small villages or hamlets called *fermtouns* or *townships*. They set *stints*, or limits, on the number of sheep and cows to be sent to the upland common pasture, and decided how often field strips should be left to rest, to lie fallow and recover their fertility. The legacy I discovered included great loss as well: a loss that goes well beyond the dislocation of people from the land itself through the Highland clearances. My ancestors weren't just displaced. They were dispossessed. They were stripped of their traditional knowledge vested in the land, their ways of knowing through the experience of working that land, their ways of sharing this in a commons of knowledge and, in their spiritual practices, honoring their place in Creation. They were disenfranchised too because they lost the legitimacy of local self-governance, the local interpretation of justice, fairness and the common good. The so-called tragedy of the commons, I learned as I explored this lost history, turns out to have been based not on the facts of how people like my ancestors lived

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on the land but on assumptions useful to those trying to clear them off of it.

Belatedly, awkwardly, I mourned that loss and owned it. Then I boarded my flight home. Even on the plane, way up there at cruising altitude, I knew that I'd crossed some threshold. I grew up with my hands in the dirt, in the backyard of our home in a postwar suburb of Montreal and at our family farm in Eastern Ontario, Canada. There, I'd planted trees, picked stones from the fields, plowed and even helped pull weeds, acres at a stretch, by hand. I've continued growing a vegetable garden every summer of my adult life, freezing and preserving to have a store of chemical-free food with which to feed my family. But having walked the land with which my forbears had lived in direct and possibly even right relations since before recorded time and having done some important memory work, I felt connected to the Earth in a way I never had before. It was as though the center of my inner gravity had shifted. The intellectual fact that the word human derives from humus, the fecund soil of the Earth, began to resonate with a deeper, felt meaning. Not quite kinship, but moving in that direction. As I left the airport that day, I knew I was onto something important.

I have stepped outside the box of modernity and stepped into a place where my First Nations neighbors no longer seem alien, exotic and totally different from me. As I watch them recover their lost traditions, renew their old practices and relearn their mother tongues, as I watch individuals I know struggle on their journeys of recovery, I sense parallels in the journey that so-called settlers in North America like me can undertake, personally and collectively, and perhaps need to as well.[1]

My journey gave me a precious new perspective for this, one of those Archimedean places to stand from which to change the world. The self-governing common is an economic and political institution that, according to some vindicating research by Nobel-prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom, continues to represent a viable alternative to the market or the state as a core regulator of society. Historically, though, the commons was more than that. It was a community in the fullest sense of the word, and an ecological one as well. The word *common*

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originally meant together-as-one, or together-in-one (see Glossary), with both the land and the people inhabiting it included in that togetherness. *Commoning* — cultivating community and livelihood together on the common land of the Earth — was a way of life for my ancestors and for many other newcomers to North America too. It was a way of understanding and pursuing economics as embedded in life and the labor, human and non-human, that is necessary to sustain it. It was a way of ordering this life through local self-governance and direct, participatory democracy. And it was a way of knowing, through doing and the sharing of experience through common knowledge and common sense. This commons shaped people's identity, through its web work of commoning relationships that spun themselves afresh each day through the sharing of work, stories and faith rituals, through struggle over differences and working things out together. The commoners who were my ancestors were no doubt individuals, with all the normal inclinations toward greed, spite and self-interest. They were also immersed in the rhythms of ongoing connection, of mutual obligation, mutual self-interest and quotidian lessons on the common good.

I've spent my adult life watching the scope for common ground and the common good slip away with both the loss of community locally and the withering of the social welfare state. I have also watched, and written about, the ascendency of market forces in all areas of life, including the care of seniors. I have witnessed a matching rise of dependency: dependency on jobs, on investment and credit, on credentials to act. Even at the level of knowledge to leverage change from an increasingly unworkable status quo, ordinary people seem to require numbers and experts to convince official policy makers to do something, be it about climate change or the toxic injustices of the global economy. Control has been concentrated into the hands of a small elite, not just in investment markets and global corporations, but in the research and regulatory bodies, including the World Trade Organization, that support this elite. Here we clearly see the realm of the 1 or 2% who control an estimated 60% of everything. The effect of that control can be called colonization and dependency when viewed politically. When viewed sociologically and

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psychologically, it could also be called conditioning for compliance with the status quo. Culturally, concentration of control has narrowed the vision of perceived alternatives and silenced any language for even considering them. As a writer, teacher and conference speaker, I have critiqued all this and tried to name the impasse it has produced. On the one hand, an overextended and increasingly dysfunctional global market economy is on a collision course with an overheated and increasingly damaged Earth. On the other, a combination of gridlocked vested interests and the lack of an alternative on which people can get a real grip keeps things stuck in the status quo. In North America, the only recourse has been protest. It flares up, touching people's deep-seated anxiety and their longing for meaningful change, and then seems to fade away. Protest seems to sometimes be all people feel capable of too, or have time for in their busy, often debt-burdened lives.

The legacy of the commons offers a way out of this impasse. It offers a model of society that is centered in people's relationships with each other and with the land, not in remote state authorities or an anonymous market. It offers a healing ethos of connection, not disconnection, of implicated participation, not remote control and management.

Some of these practices operate on a personal level, some at a more institutional level and some at a more political level still. Yet they're all of a piece. They all work together. Change must happen at every level of existence from the personal to the institutional and the political. It's through practices that a commoning ethos can be restored. A consciousness that has all but disappeared in the non-native community can surface again: a consciousness of our connection to the Earth.

I was there on December 21, 2012 when the Idle No More Movement marched on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada and a regional chief spoke of a "sacred covenant with Creation" having been broken by the Harper Government's omnibus legislation cutting regulation and custodial oversight of the environment. I was on Victoria Island on January 6, 2013 when a man identifying himself as a seventh generation descendent of Chief Tecumseh (who led a First Nations alliance with the British in the War of 1812) visited Chief Theresa

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Spence during the hunger strike she undertook as her own Idle No More initiative. I watched as he stood on one side of the sacred fire, Tecumseh's flag in one hand and told Chief Spence: "You speak from the heart of the Earth." And I was on Parliament Hill again on January 28, 2013 for another Idle No More protest where a young member of the Indigenous Environmental Network talked of "our sacred responsibility" to speak for the fish being poisoned by the seepage from Tar Sands tailing ponds.

Listening to those words, I heard a language that's virtually died out of public discourse and policy debate in Canada. I also recognized it as the language that must be revived if those of us who care for life on Earth and want a better future for our children are to break out of this impasse. It's a language of empathy and engagement, of mutual recognition, respect and implicated participation. It's the language of relationships and felt connection with each other and with the Earth.

Reviving this language, and the practices associated with it, is key to enacting a new social contract, one that includes a new covenant with Creation. The heritage of the commons, which so many so-called non-natives have in their ancestral past, is a way for such people, including me, to revive that language among ourselves. It's the language of relationships and felt connection with each other and with the Earth.

As a fifth-generation settler immigrant to North America, this heritage is what I can offer to the work of renewal that is going on in all its varied forms: common cause alliances among environmental, social justice, faith and First Nations communities around their specific goals of local self-governance and fulfilling treaty obligations; community-based healing and support, including local food and housing initiatives, for those displaced from the global market economy, or too sick to survive in its frenzy of competition and constant change; initiatives addressing toxins in the natural environment and change-agent activists trying to mitigate and reverse the forces of climate change. I hope that the commons, and its ethos of commoning with each other and with the Earth, might even act as a frame for integrating and building on some of these alternatives.

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Drawing on the legacy of the commons, I invite people to come home to themselves, come home to community as habitat and to the Earth as the larger habitat in which all life is nested. I also encourage people to take seriously their own knowing and local knowledge derived from implicated engagement in all the habitats in which their lives are immersed. I suggest ways to engage with the Earth in places where people currently live, and ways to build or rebuild the capacity for self-determination and responsible self-governance within those habitats.

I came of age under banner slogans like "reclaim the power of naming" and "the personal is political," and I bring the legacy of that to what I've written here. I speak in a personal voice as an implicated participant in my own life and the habitats in which I have dwelled, while also drawing on material I've researched. I also move back and forth between the more political language of capacity and institution building and the more intimate language of healing and personal growth. To me, a mixed perspective and language is necessary and mutually reinforcing. If we are to reconnect with the Earth and find the will to halt the environmental devastation of our time, both social and natural, we must also reconnect with ourselves and with each other.

The first part of the book is a road trip, a summary of my efforts to reconnect with a lost heritage of my ancestors in the Highlands of Scotland. The second part interprets the significance of what I discovered and identifies different forms of capacity building that the commons legacy can inspire and inform. The third part moves from capacity to action. Here I offer what I cheekily call a Commoning Manifesto, a brief sketch of what we might do, drawing in examples of initiatives going on right now that I see as fitting into a commoning framework.

The Indian writer Arundhati Roy told the 2003 World Social Forum that not only is another world possible, but is on her way, and that on a quiet day you can hear her breathing.[2] That breath could include the spirits of our ancestors calling to us, ready to inspire and guide us, as we open our hearts and listen.

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Reclaiming the Commons as Memory

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At an Impasse

I was feeling stuck at the time I first went to Scotland because I'd run out of things to say. I had been writing about market globalization and the shift to an online world, critiquing the disconnect from self, others and community, the deepening inequalities and the desperate dependency on jobs, jobs jobs, as well as the brave new Darwinism of speed and outperformance. More recently, I had linked this shift with the disaster of environmental degradation and global warming, seeing them as mutually reinforcing: an overextended global economy and an overheated planet. Yet I could offer nothing by way of real alternatives. I knew what I was against, but not what I was FOR. Or rather, I couldn't name any alternative or feel it in a way that I could get a real grip on, strong and real enough to inspire action, action that could be sustained through a movement for genuine change.

I was haunted by an image I'd encountered in a 1989 book, called *Technology as Symptom and Dream*, by American psychologist Robert Romanyshyn.[1] He used the astronaut in outer space as a metaphor for the dream embedded in modern technology and the pursuit of it — the dream of limitless freedom and control. He contrasted this image with the anorexic body, abandoned in that pursuit of control. The astronaut image has stayed with me because I see it playing itself out so clearly

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in today's wireless world. So many of us are out there doing our own space walks, each with a miniaturized life-support system built into our space suits (our screen masks, handhelds and earbuds allowing us to be anywhere anytime). It's total freedom far removed from Earth's gravitational pull, while tethered to a space station in an orbit all its own — the space station being the global digital economy perhaps?

I was reminded of Romanyshyn's imagery when reading Richard Louv's 2008 book, *Last Child in the Woods,* chronicling what he calls a nature deficit disorder in children growing up today, cut off from opportunities to simply be in nature. "Containerized kids" Louv called them.[2] Astronauts in training, I thought when I read this. But where was I in all this? I wasn't healing the deficit, the disparities or the disconnect. In the way I was writing, in the way I had been trained to write if I wanted to be taken seriously in the public arenas of discussion, I felt like I myself was an astronaut or perhaps on the space station itself. I was always removed from the situation, offering fix-it suggestions from my position as "expert" at the master controls. I wasn't grounded in real life, real people's bodies or the lived social environment. I wasn't implicated or engaged, nor could I be if I wanted to maintain my "objectivity" and therefore my credibility and my place at official (and well-funded) debates.

It was the same with other critics, I found. In book after book, whether critiquing the global economy and the financialization of everything or chronicling its effects in climate change and environmental collapse, the language and tone were similar: so remote it was as though the disasters were happening on another planet. No wonder no real alternatives were emerging. I was part of the impasse. I needed to break out of it, but how?

A few years earlier, I had accepted an invitation to join a native women's drumming and chanting circle that met once a week at Minwaashin Lodge near the Ottawa bus station. One day when women were introducing themselves, saying their spirit name, then naming their clan and tribal connections, I said that one day I hoped to find out more about my own tribal roots, which I knew were in the Highlands of Scotland,

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and bring back what I learned to this circle. The women had been so welcoming, so generous in sharing their traditions, their still-living heritage, and I wanted to reciprocate. I didn't know what looking for my tribal roots might entail, nor what I had in mind when I spoke my intention. But I could feel the call as soon as I'd uttered those words, and now, nearly four years later, I heeded it.

As I packed and prepared myself, I told my friends that I wanted to walk the land where my ancestral roots lay buried, not to learn details about my genealogy so much as to ground myself. I had a vague sense of wanting to dwell in a state of unlearning and even unknowing. I wanted to find and, if possible, set myself down in the gap where other paths and ways of being in the world had been abandoned and left to die away. These ways might whisper to me, I thought, maybe even speak to my troubled world. I sort of had in mind, though I never said so, what Canadian philosopher George Grant once referred to as "intimations of deprival."[3] These were all that remained, Grant wrote in *Technology and Empire*, when a society becomes "barren of anything but the drive to technology…" In such a society as ours has become, he continued, "the moral discourse of 'values,' is not independent of the will to technology, but a language fashioned in the same forge."[4]

When I spoke of my travel plans, most of my friends just nodded and smiled and asked no further questions. But Morning Star Woman (Bev) from the drumming circle did more than smile and nod. She chuckled as if she fully understood. "You're going to welcome your ancestors back," she said as if this was the most normal thing in the world to do.

"Yes," I said, surreptitiously writing down her words, making sure I packed this note in my bag. Because it hadn't occurred to me to even imagine such a possibility: that there might have been voices behind my sense of being called; a dialogue waiting to be renewed.

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