

Book Reviews

Becoming an Ally:

Breaking the Cycles of Oppression in People

Anne Bishop. Halifax, NS: Fernwood, 2002, 192 pages,
ISBN 1 55266 072 9

Reviewed by: *Alison Taylor*

Becoming an Ally is an accessible and important book for community workers, educators, and others who work for social justice. I found the book useful for two main reasons. First, Bishop's focus on the psychological as well as sociological aspects of oppression points to the need for individual and collective healing as a precondition for the development of cooperative and egalitarian structures. Second, Bishop's focus on the "relationships between people experiencing different forms of oppression" rather than on those who are actively promoting oppression draws attention to how forms of oppression are internalized by various groups and maintained by the fragmentation of resistance across groups.

Bishop's main argument is that forms of oppression come from a single root and cannot be addressed in isolation. She also assumes that, first, we all have the experience of both being oppressed and oppressing others; second, our experience of oppressing others is often hard to access because privilege is invisible; and third, our oppression of others is based on unhealed and often unconscious pain from our own experience of being oppressed. Therefore, the process of becoming an ally involves a number of steps that encourage us to make sense of our experiences as historical and structural.

First, it is necessary to understand how different forms of oppression came about, how they are held in place, and how they are reproduced. In the first four chapters Bishop articulates how competitive, hierarchical stems developed historically and how they are internalized and reproduced, often by those who claim to be fighting particular forms. Until we understand the histories of oppression for different groups and see all struggles as connected, radical social change is unlikely to occur. For example, the Black and Mi'kmak communities in Nova Scotia have different histories and issues; similarly, gay men and lesbians have different histories and issues. Bishop suggests that to build solidarity, there is a need to be "clear on the different forms oppression can take and look through them to see common interests" (p. 92).

However, there are obstacles to maintaining more cooperative and egalitarian approaches. One key obstacle, according to Bishop, involves unhealed pain resulting from past oppression, which when not addressed individually and collectively can undermine cooperative group functioning. For example, Bishop refers to how childhood pain can become adult abuse of power. Adults who have to come to terms with past oppression may be insecure, controlling, and angry. Before they can engage with others in a healthy way, there is a need to address this pain. Consciousness and healing are, therefore, a key part of becoming an ally in struggles to change society from a power-over to a power-with model.

Consciousness and healing are part of a liberation process that involves telling stories, analyzing how our experiences are shaped by larger structures, strategizing about what to do, and finally, acting individually and collectively. Although Bishop is realistic about the challenges in the process of building alliance, she is convinced that it is the only way to bring about sustainable change.

Bishop's book is helpful for those of us who agree that current isolated ways of resisting oppression are not working. It helps organizations working for social change to understand why challenges to cooperative group functioning occur and how to address them. In short, by providing examples to illustrate her arguments and outlining popular education exercises that she has used in workshops to help participants analyze various forms of oppression, I think that Bishop effectively fulfills her objective of providing a map for a process of building solidarity across difference.

Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin:

An Aboriginal Approach to Helping

Michael Anthony Hart. Halifax, NS: Fernwood, 2002,
128 pages.

Reviewed by: **Robert Cey, University of Alberta**

Michael Hart, a social worker of the Fisher River Cree Nation, provides an insightful, practical, and useful guide for members of the helping professions in seeking to address the needs of Aboriginal peoples. His text includes elements of grounding and framing his own life and perspective; a cultural and historical commentary, including a discussion of the importance of processes of colonization and decolonization; a description of the foundational values and concepts underpinning his approach; an in-depth consideration of the sharing circle as a means of helping; and a selection of illustrative case examples and specific issues for practitioners.

Hart defines the Cree expression *Mino-Pimatisiwin* as meaning a life of personal healing, learning, and growth: "the good life" (p. 44). In discussing his own background, he makes it clear that what he presents is *an* Aboriginal approach grounded in what he has learned and where he has come from, in the hope that it may stimulate critique and support other world views and practices. While acknowledging the divergences among various Aboriginal nations, communities, and individuals, Hart also underscores the common struggles of first Nations peoples that encourage the identification of commonalities among them. He offers a consideration of how Eurocentrism, colonization, and resistance, in particular, are significant to and affect Aboriginal peoples' mental, spiritual, and community health. Hart relates these factors to the practice of social work and other helping professions and describes how his approach contributes to Aboriginal resistance and decolonization. He outlines how this approach to helping, based on the symbolic model of the medicine wheel, expresses certain essential values and concepts. These include seeking wholeness, balance among all aspects of the self and society, inter- and intrapersonal connectedness, harmony within oneself and with the world, lifelong growth and development, and healing and restoration. From this

foundational beginning, Hart continues into a detailed description of his understanding of the sharing circle as both a therapeutic technique and a means to facilitate individuals' ongoing pursuit of growth, health, and self-development. He considers the history of the sharing circle ceremony, outlines what he has learned about how it is to be conducted, and reflects on the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the process. Hart's text concludes with a chapter that lays out how his overall approach to helping can be used in practice with individuals, groups, and families in a variety of contexts.

Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin is a well-written, informative, and valuable guide for members of the helping professions who may have the opportunity to work with Aboriginal clients. Hart's writing is thoughtful and well researched (by both Amer-European and Aboriginal standards). He presents his ideas with humility and skill, giving thorough consideration to the important theoretical aspects of his approach, as well as its practical, applied dimensions. *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin* should serve as an important primer on the conduct of respectful and culturally appropriate helping practices with Aboriginal peoples.

Full Circle: Canada's First Nations

John L. Steckley and Bryan D. Cummins

Toronto, ON: Prentice Hall, 2001, 274 pages.

Reviewed by: *John W. Friesen, University of Calgary*

As the literature continues to mount in the field of First Nations studies, it is to be expected that new approaches to describing the Indigenous peoples of Canada will appear. This book is no exception in that Steckley and Cummins have undertaken the difficult challenge of trying to cover everything in a relatively short space.

Full Circle: Canada's First Nations is designed as an introductory textbook for college students, but it may be a bit overmarketed. The authors attempt to tackle such vast parameters of the field that they necessarily have to give short shrift to important subjects. This approach makes the text more suitable to the high school level where survey-type texts are more readily appreciated. To illustrate this point one has only to examine the content of the 25 chapters. As I point out, many significant events and subjects are treated only in passing. Principally, the book is divided into five major parts: Part 1, Origins and Oral Traditions; Part 2, Culture Areas; Part 3, Legal Definitions; Part 4, Effects of Colonialism; and Part 5, Contemporary Debates and Social Action.

Part 1 deals with the origins of Aboriginal cultures in Canada, mercifully raising legitimate questions about the overpopular and now debunked Bering Strait theory. This part also includes chapters on oral traditions, Native languages, and "connections to the land" (the latter in less than five pages). No reference is made the Aboriginal spirituality, which comprises the very foundation of the Indigenous connection to the land.

Part 2 devotes 70 pages to a discussion of seven culture areas: Arctic, Eastern Woodlands, Eastern Subarctic, Western Subarctic, Plains, Plateau, and Northwest Coast. Naturally, some tribal configurations are allotted relatively short descriptions. For example, the Dorset are described in 24 lines of print, the Onondaga in

five lines, the Cayuga in six lines, the Yellowknife in seven lines, and the Dakota in four lines.

Part 3 offers treatment of five important legal phenomena such as the Royal Proclamation of 1763, the Indian Act, the signed treaties, and the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement. The case of the Golden Lake Algonquin, who were missed in treaty-signing, is discussed, along with the Sheshatshit fight for recognition. Part 4 outlines the effects of colonialism in terms of Native health issues, Native education, and child welfare. Negative social topics targeted in this discussion include diseases such as tuberculosis and smallpox, alcohol addiction, the residential school phenomenon, and hypocritical government policies.

The fifth and final part of the book offers descriptive outlines of contemporary social and political issues such as the Peigan fight against the Oldman River Dam, Native policing, the Canadian justice system, and Native governance. The authors offer hope for the future by citing a number of successful Native endeavors, for example, the fight against alcohol addiction by the Shuswap community of Alkali Lake. The 1970 takeover of Blue Quills School by the Cree community in northeast Alberta is also praised. As a result of a three-month sit-in, local band members persuaded the government to turn over control of the school to First Nations governance. Finally, Steckley and Cummins cite positive statistics regarding increased enrollments of Aboriginal students in postsecondary institutions. They note that because some of the more than 40,000 postsecondary students are experiencing difficulty in adjusting to urban university environments, a series of 31 tribal colleges have been established in Canada. These institutions allow students to pursue higher education without having to leave their home communities. Moreover, the staff, subject matter content, and school ambiance tend to be more culturally sensitive and relevant in these colleges.

The final pages of the book deal with the role of Elders in postsecondary education as resource persons and cultural brokers. It has been discovered that Elders can assist with vital learning experiences and provide insights about revered cultural knowledge and traditional protocols. The Cowichan Campus at Malaspina University College in British Columbia, for example, has established an Elder-in-Residence program. Innovative arrangements such as this are indicative of continuing dedicated Aboriginal efforts to "take their children back" to be educated in the confines of caring Aboriginal communities.

Full Circle: Canada's First Nations offers many features not typical of university textbooks. Each chapter contains a series of boxed information; for example, the chapter on the Plains culture area (chap. 9) has the following boxes: How much of Plains history is Native? Blackfoot Connections with Algonquian Languages; Why Object to Being called "Sioux"? and a Plains Indian Timeline. Each chapter ends with a list of key terms, a series of content questions, and related Web links. If the text does not contain sufficient relative information, readers can turn to the Internet to round out their educational search.

This book is striking in appearance with clear print and a useful glossary and index. Clearly it should do well in the nation's high schools. As a university textbook, however, it suffers by providing only cursory discussions of intriguing, albeit complex, subjects.