Indigenous Women, Water Justice and *Zaagidowin* (Love)

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Le principe de "zaagidowinza" ou l'amour est l'élément central pour définir la répartition égalitaire de l'eau. Le terme ¨amour¨a plusieurs significations en Anishinaabemowin, mais nous verrons comment le principe légal Anishinaabek réalise le bien-être ou le Mnaamodzawin. Nous verrons aussi que le principe amour était et est toujours inclus dans les WaterWalks de la Mère-Terre, que je discuterai dans mon texte. Je considérerai la notion de justice environnementale, de l'eau en particulier. A ce sujet, les Anishinaabek considèrent non seulement les traumatismes subis par les peuplades et autres qui sont dus à la contamination de l'eau, etc., mais ils estiment que les eaux sont des êtres sensibles qui ont besoin de soins pour guérir de ces traumatismes. Seulement quand les eaux seront guéries et capables de remplir leur devoir face à la Création, la justice de l'eau sera alors reconnue.

> *I can feel the water, I can hear the water, I can sense the water, you can do all of that too, if you listen to it.* —Josephine Mandamin

I would like to open by saying *Chi-miigwech* (a big thank-you) to those Elders/Grandmothers who have shared their stories and teachings with me over the years. Some have since passed on and I hope that through my words, their love and generosity will continue the process of healing the people and waters upon which they so integrally depend.

The paper which follows contains many references to notions of love, mutual respect, and responsibility towards the natural world, and water in particular. These ideas may seem a little tenuous for a serious paper on a critical environmental justice issue, but concepts of love, kindness and generosity are not naive ideals in Anishinaabek society. These obligations and relationships are living examples of Anishinaabek natural law. They are principles that have enabled us to thrive for millennia, and may in fact prove to be of the utmost relevance in our quest for sustainability.

People must relate to water in order to live. This is true no matter where you reside, whether in cities, on-reserve, or in rural communities; what you do (your occupation or livelihood); your age; the nature of your relationship to water (good, bad, indifferent); or what your beliefs are about water (whether you view it primarily as a resource, a commodity, a human right, a life-giving substance, or a sentient being). All humanity shares this basic need for survival: at a fundamental level we need water to live, as the United Nations General Assembly recognized in a 2010 resolution.

Such basic understandings, from an Anishinaabek perspective, provide the foundation for what is referred to as "natural law," which is derived from fundamental experiences and "observations of the natural world" (Borrows 29). Through Anishinaabek interactions and lived experience with the natural world, we derive a great deal of knowledge. As Cecil King states, "We gained our knowledge by living on this land" (5). Among this knowledge were laws such as the *Enendagwad*, or "Law of the Orders" (2), governing human relationships with other Orders of beings, and the *Ginamadawinan*:

> [a] code of conduct, a set of lessons, derived from the Law of the Orders....They spoke of what was appropriate behaviour, what was forbidden, and the

> responsibility ensuing from each. These laws pertained to the relationships among human beings as well as the awesome responsibilities of co-existence with members of the other orders. (5)

Enendagwad and *Ginamadawinan* form the foundation of the way that we conduct ourselves and relate to other beings in Creation. Properly understanding and enacting such natural law requires vast knowledge of the environment and how it functions in ensuring survival for all of Creation. In this sense, natural laws are not created by people; rather, they are derived from nature and they apply to all of Creation. Indigenous legal traditions, in part, build upon natural law (Borrows 28). In this way, the Anishinaabek have developed laws, protocols and practices over time to ensure that relationships with water remained in balance, and that life continues. Establishing and maintaining healthy relationships with Creation has thus been a pre-occupation of Indigenous peoples since time immemorial (LaValley 19).

The United Nations (UN) is catching up to the Anishinaabek. In response to increasing recognition of water scarcity, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2010 adopted Resolution 64/292: *Human Right to Water and Sanitation,* which is intended to guarantee that water and sanitation are available, accessible, safe, and affordable for all people, without discrimination. More than just within the UNGA, political, economic, legal and technical debates around water continue to dominate global environmental discourse (see, for example, Davidson-Harden et al.). Nonetheless, water justice remains elusive for many. The water crisis in Canada, for example, reveals that many of those issues identified in international fora are of significant concern for people in this country, and that Indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable.[1]

In this paper, I describe how water justice, as understood by the Anishinaabek, can be achieved by considering the concept of *zaagidowin* (or "love") as central to achieving water justice. The term "love" has multiple meanings in Anishinaabemowin, as Nigonwedom James Sinclair discusses, but in this paper we will see that it can be understood as an Anishinaabek legal principle for achieving well-being, or *Mnaamodzawin*. We will also see that this principle of love was and is being enacted and embodied through the Mother Earth Water Walks (MEWW). I will also consider the notion of environmental justice, and water justice in particular. Water justice, in Anishinaabek understanding, considers not only the trauma experienced by people and other life due to water contamination, etc., but values the waters themselves as sentient beings in need of healing from historical traumas. Only when the waters are well and able to fulfil their duties to all of Creation is water justice achieved. We begin with a brief discussion of the historical trauma that the waters, and the peoples relying on the waters, have undergone, and from which they must recover.

Water Injustice: Historical Trauma

The dominant discourse on water, including the water justice movement, continues to view *nibi* (water) primarily as a resource. The water justice movement is for the most part ocused on developing viable alternatives to increased commercialization, commodification and privatization of waters. Understanding the nature of water remains problematic, but is generally limited to "competing definitions of water as either a fundamental human right or a commodity to be bought and sold" (Davidson-Harden et al. 3). Anishinaabe worldview, as expressed through undertakings such as the Mother Earth Water Walks, transcends this binary conception of water and expands notions of justice to include responsibilities to non-human entities and the waters.[2] In November 2014, Katrina Walters, of the Choctaw Nation, delivered a profoundly thoughtful lecture at the International Indigenous Research Conference in Aukland, New Zealand. In her keynote address, "Transcending Historical Trauma with Loving Responsibility," she made explicit reference to *love* as a critical principle for ensuring the well-being of future generations. Water, she stated, offers an ideal example of how we (as Indigenous peoples) are connected to our ancestors and future generations at the same place and moment in time. *Water transcends time and space*. In some respects, the waters we interact with in the present are the same waters our ancestors experienced, and the same ones that may be experienced by future generations in turn, should we take care of the waters sufficiently to ensure their (and our) future viability. This understanding holds us, as the current generation, highly accountable, and obliges us to ensure that our grandchildren, great grandchildren, and so on, can engage with the waters as we have.

Water connects generations over time, and can do so in both healing and destructive ways, depending on how the various generations interact with it. Walters explained that the waters we interact with today have experienced historical traumas, just as we have as Indigenous peoples, to the point where the waters are no longer able to fulfil their duties. Myself, I do not know the waters of the Great Lakes in the same way my ancestors did. Indeed, my own children are not able to relate to the

waters the same way I did growing up. As a child, I grew up being able to drink the water from the bay in front of my home. In my lifetime the water quality in this bay, while still considered quite clean in most respects, has deteriorated to the point where my family can no longer safely drink it without effectively filtering or otherwise treating it. My ancestors were able to fish from the lakes and not worry about contamination, but as I was growing up, fish advisories were (and still are) common, especially for women of childbearing age.

The distress that waters experience is well documented, although it is not generally expressed as trauma. Understanding water as having experienced historical trauma requires a different approach to restoration and healing, including recognition of the waters as sentient. It certainly involves recognizing that water injustice has had devastating impacts on the well-being of many Indigenous communities in Canada, with Grassy Narrows, Kashechewan, and Aamjiwnaang serving as infamous examples. Okay to leave out reference, then, issues are well known enough. (Dhillon and Young).

Not only has our own relationship to water been disrupted through displacement, relocation, and alienation, but the waters, too, have experienced alienation through these same processes. Indeed, many scholars have documented the negative impacts of human activities on water, and how this in turn causes people to be negatively affected (see, for example, Phare, or Davidson-Harden et al.). As an Anishinaabe-kwe, I learned from many Elders how the actions of people have disrupted the ability of the waters to fulfil their responsibilities around giving and supporting life. I understood how these actions also constitute injustice to the waters and that balance and reciprocity with them needs to be restored.[3]

Healing Principles: Power, Love and Vision

Addressing the historical traumas of the waters via existing and proposed political, legal, and technical "fixes" is not likely to restore balance, achieve justice or facilitate healing. For example, the Government of Canada's response to the First Nation water crisis, the *Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act* (2013), does not address historical trauma in water. The Act may in fact cause more trauma to occur. How, then, do we restore balance in our relationships with water, when the waters remain traumatized?

Healing from historical trauma can occur through power, love and vision, and these concepts apply to waters as well people. This is the approach that was taken by Katrina Walters in her community-healing journey that traced the path of her ancestors along the Trail of Tears, their forced relocation. Acknowledging the historical trauma of her ancestors and the Earth offered people the power to heal. To exercise such power means permission is not required to heal ourselves or the earth.

As Indigenous peoples, we can work toward healing through *loving* responsibility; through caring for ourselves, our communities and the Earth (waters, forests, animals, etc.). It is not enough to heal ourselves; we are obligated to heal with the Earth to fully recover from historical trauma and reclaim *well-being*. Power enables us to take up our responsibilities with care and love. Loving responsibilities and obligations flow from natural laws and thus are not mandated by governments through legislation, policies, funding or programs. Instead, knowing our responsibilities gives us power to act.

Vision for the future directly links us to both our ancestors and our descendents: What was the vision of our ancestors? Our ancestors had agency; they made choices despite the larger political, economic and military forces at play, and their decisions were based on ensuring the *well-being* of future generations (King 256). Our ancestors made important decisions, including treaty decisions, based on *loving responsibility* to future generations. In a documentary for the CBC radio programme *Ideas*, Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows argues that love was "almost always present even in the face of sharp disagreement in referring to historic treaties.". How will we, as the current generations, make decisions? How will we enact our loving responsibilities to future generations? How will we ensure our descendents live well?

The Anishinaabek have always been water people (Nelson 217).

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Historical trauma to the peoples and environment has been recognized in Anishinaabek communities. Anishinaabe writer Lawrence Gross described the results of such ecological destruction as "postapocalypse stress syndrome" (qtd. in Miner 328). How do we recover from this trauma? How do we go about achieving justice for the waters in light of it?

Loving Responsibilities and Enacting Anishinaabek Law

> *I go on my knees and I take the water in my hands, and I wash it over my face. When I did that for the first time with Lake Superior water, that water really spoke to me. It's almost like being in love for the first time. I felt a great deal of love for the water. That feeling of being in love with water is cemented in my being.*
>
> —Josephine Mandamin

The Mother Earth Water Walks (MEWWS) were initiated in 2003 by Anishinaabe women, led by Grandmother Josephine Mandamin. The aim was to raise awareness of the sacred connection between people, especially women, and the waters. This action was taken in response to the decades and even centuries of rising pollution levels in the Great Lakes and elsewhere, and the increasing need for people everywhere to take action to protect the waters by renewing their responsibilities towards them. In order to achieve this, the group established a goal of walking the perimeter of each of the Great Lakes, covering one lake each spring.

The ideology behind the MEWWS remains distinct from the dominant political discourse, even within the Indigenous arena. The MEWWS relied on a different epistemic foundation and were not motivated by a political agenda, but sought to re-establish reciprocal relationships with the waters through healing journeys (Anderson et al. 16). The Walks were born out of *love* for the waters (Mandamin 21). They were a call to consciousness by current generations, a call to enact obligations to ensure that future generations would know the waters as healthy living entities. The Walks were grounded in enacting Anishinaabekwe responsibilities to care for and speak for water. There is now a grassroots "water walk movement," which has since been taken up by women of many nations.

These Walks were not the first time Anishinabek had traversed the waters of the Great Lakes (Nelson 217). As Cecil King indicates, there is a long, pre-contact history of Anishinaabek on and around the waters of the Great Lakes (1). The Mother Earth Water Walks were not inspired by a simple or narrow political agenda, but by respecting Anishinaabek natural law and reawakening peoples' understanding of the requirements for maintaining harmonious and reciprocal relationships among beings. Natural law is always present, and must be remembered and enacted for healthy human relationships with other beings to continue. The MEWWS were undertaken for the peoples, for the waters and for everything that depends on water to live. From an Anishinaabe perspective, there is a clear need to re-affirm our understanding of natural law in order to ensure the continued existence of all of Creation.

The intention of the MEWWS was to honour, respect, and heal waters,—the very same values that have motivated our ancestors since time immemorial. The MEWWS represent a living enactment of natural law, an expression of the original instructions, as relevant today as they were to our ancestors centuries ago, long before encounters with the newcomers. In that sense, the Water Walks movement is ancient, much the like the waters, connecting the past, present and future. Josephine Mandamin, in "walking the talk," has inspired a grassroots movement that will continue to grow as Ansihinaabek continue to "pick up their bundles" (14).

The MEWWS have not been taken up by Indigenous and non-Indigenous media in the same way as other recent movements such as Idle No More. However, the lack of political commentary and social media attention does not mean the MEWWS are any less important a movement. To date, the MEWW have had little impact on broader public policy debates or negotiations; they were, for example, completely ignored as part of the consultation and development of the *First Nations Drinking Water Act* (2013) and associated policies.

Josephine Mandamin continues to devote a considerable amount of time to mentoring and assisting others as they initiate activities such as the Migration Water Walk, planned for 2015, to re-trace the original migration from the east. Mandamin's involvement in canoe-making and canoe journeys serves as an innovative extension of the work of the Water Walks movement. A canoe journey requires spending time *on* the waters, thus strengthening and building upon the relationships gained by walking around them. Mandamin's participation in the 2012 Coast Salish Tribal Canoe Journey with youth activist Sylvia Plain of the Aamjiwaang First Nation, enacted Anishinaabek diplomacy by engaging in nation-to-nation relations with over 100 different canoe families from various Indigenous nations around the world (McGregor and Plain 2014: 97).

The MEWWS have grown to the point where the success of the movement is not reliant on one person or organization. Many women have taken up the role of speaking and caring for water, thus renewing their traditional responsibilities: the

Anishinaabe Kweag's defence of the Alliston Aquifer is one such example (Monague 21). In another example, Anishinabe-kwe activist Lynzii Taibassigai of the M'Chigeeng First Nation organized community water walks and environmental youth camps and founded the *Love Shkakmi-kwe Project* (Love Mother Earth Project). Although some water-related activism of Indigenous women, such as the Aki Kwe in Bkejwanong Territory, began prior to the establishment of the Water Walks many youth water activists credit Grandmother Josephine as their inspiration. Through sharing her stories, Grandmother Mandamin shares traditional knowledge regarding taking care of water and enriches our understanding of the relationships involved.

referred to as the "Seven Grandfathers teaching," have been applied in numerous contexts, particularly health and education. *Zaagidowin* as a concept is generally missing in political and public policy discourse (Borrows 2014), yet it is not usual to refer to love as an important guiding principle in Anishinaabek political, legal and treaty discussions. "Love is the capacity for caring and desire for harmony and well-being in interpersonal relationships and with the environment" (Bell 94). *Zaagidowin*, like water, transcends time and space; it links us inexplicably to our ancestors and future generations.

racism, colonialism, the expression of *Zaagidowin* in our relations with others becomes increasing difficult, yet it is a guiding principle for how to conduct ourselves in a "good" way. However, love is a powerful force in Anishinaabe creation and re-creation stories. For example, in the Anishinabe re-creation story, Muskrat is willing to sacrifice his life to bring a morsel of soil to surface for Sky-Woman. Muskrat is motivated by love for Creation and compassion for Sky-Woman in making his decision. Love continues to guide our vision, our future.

By literally walking around each lake, Grandmother Mandamin and the water walkers retrace the steps of the ancestors to reclaim the ancestors' vision of *Mnaamodzawin.* Enacting *Mnaamodzawin* involves establishing loving and personal relationships with the waters: *coming to know* them.

Mnaamodzawin: Being Our Ancestors' Sons and Daughters

The spirit and intent of the mother Earth walks legacy continues and has awakened many youth to their inherent rights and responsibilities to attain the Anishinaabek ideal of *Mnaamodzawin,*[4] or the total state of being well (Manitowabi and Maar 117). *Mnaamodzawin* involves living on respectful and reciprocal terms with all of Creation on multiple planes (spiritual, intellectual, emotional and physical) and scales (family, clan, nation, universe). *Mnaamodzawin* is guided by the seven original teachings: love, honesty, respect, truth, bravery, wisdom and humility (Bell 93). The original teachings, often

For example, Anishinaabek communities in the Manitoulin area have developed their own set of ethical research guidelines based on the principles of the Seven Grandfathers teaching, and interpreted love in a research context as thinking of the well-being of future generations. In this project, ethical research was guided by our ancestors and our descendants: the guidelines ask "Is the obtained information shared in a way that will benefit the future 7th generation? Does it reflect our love for the future generation and their survival?" (Noojimamowin Teg 10). Love is not an easy concept to embrace in the face of the violence and environmental degradation that many Indigenous peoples face every day. Anishinaabe scholar Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair observes that love "may be the greatest Anishinaabeg face in the coming years" (96). In the face of continued oppression, violence,

By literally walking around each lake, Grandmother Mandamin and the water walkers retrace the steps of the ancestors to reclaim the ancestors' vision of *Mnaamodzawin*. Enacting *Mnaamodzawin* involves establishing loving and personal relationships with the waters: *coming to know* them. By participating in a MEWW, in experiencing the hardships of the journey, it is possible to face and overcome challenges, and to feel the presence of the ancestors. The journey is one of mutual recognition: just as the waters become known to the walkers, the waters come to know the walkers—a connection is forged. Moreover, the obligations to attain *Mnaamodzawin* are *mutual.* The waters encountered on the journeys are recognized as living entities imbued with both the power to heal and the need to be healed. Grandmother Mandamin speaks of how waters are often in need of prayer, song, meditation and ceremonies (21). In retracing the

path of the ancestors, as the MEWW walkers do, we create a future for our descendants based on love.

Conclusion: Achieving Water Justice

> *Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.*
>
> —Robin Kimmerer

The MEWW movement offers a profoundly different way of understanding water's relationship to humanity than mainstream discourse offers. The water walkers are able to listen to the stories told by the waters, both good and bad. The waters are witness to our history and remember times long before contact. The responsibility we have to re-establish our relationships with the waters is based on love. Our love for the waters will help the waters recover from historical trauma, and in turn, the waters will hopefully love us and assist us in recovering from our own traumas. Lovingly enacted responsibilities, as undertaken by the water walkers, will assist in the restoration of appropriate co-healing relationships with water.

Water justice will be achieved when *Mnaamodzawin* is realized, not only for people, but for the waters as well. The work of the MEWW movement extends the current conception of water justice to include the well-being of the waters, not just for the sake of humanity, but for all of Creation. Anishinaabe scientist Robin Kimmerer observes that there is much that we humans cannot control, especially when confronted with such rapid environmental changes as those due to human-induced climate change, but "…what we are in control of is our relationship to the earth.... Here is where our most challenging and rewarding work lies, in restoring a relationship of respect, responsibility and reciprocity. And love" (336).

How, then, do we renew the covenant between people and the waters? Josephine Mandamin suggests fostering healing relationships with the waters by changing our mindset from one of *taking* to one of *giving*. In the Anishinaabek tradition, this means also learning from the teachings of Windigo, a cannibalistic being that simply consumes and destroys. From Windigo, we learn that greed and obsessive consumption are destructive. "For the Anishinaabek today, windigos come in different forms, even today. There are other harmful forms of cannibaslitic consumption that destroys land and people" (Kimmerer 84). We can choose the path of the windigo or the path of *Mnaamodzawin.* We can choose a path of "taking," or one of "giving".

Humanity is the recipient of the generosity of the Earth, and in turn, we must share and give something of ourselves back to the Earth, including the waters. Inherent in Anishinaabek ways of life are ways of engaging in reciprocity with other beings, such as ceremonies, prayers, and fasting. Mandamin urges us to …"go and sit on her [Earth's] lap and be without food and water for four days, seven days, however long you are able" (21). When we fast, we do not take from the Earth. For Anishinaabe at least, returning to some of these traditional practices may be helpful in re-establishing an appropriate approach for achieving *Mnaamodzawin*, and in the process healing the Earth. The importance of these views was underlined by Elder Robin Green, whose explanation of Anishinaabek concepts of sustainability will always remain with me: understanding these concepts must begin with asking ourselves the question every day, "What is our gift to the Earth going to be?" Robin Greene has passed away, but I write about his ideas in two works. McGregor (2004: 76) and (2013: 86).

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[1]For further discussion see, for example, McGregor 2012; Swain et al.; and Walken.

[2]The understanding of water as expressed through the Anishinaabek, Muskegowuk & Onkwehonwe Water Declaration includes, but it not limited to: rain waters, waterfalls, rivers, streams, creeks, lakes, mountain springs, swamp springs, bedrock water veins, oceans, icebergs, snow, and the seas (COO).

[3]I discuss this understanding in my 2009 article "Honouring Our Relations."

[4]*Mnaamodzawin*, *Bimaadiziwin*, *Minobimasawin*, and *Pimadaziwin* are all Anishinaabemowin language variations of the concept of the art of living well (see Bell; King; LaDuke)

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JANNA PAYNE

disregarding the pain of others

try your hand at slinging. sling yourself from coast to coast. sling yourself to big cities, small towns,
and into loving arms. sling your truth. sling your glory. sling like you mean it. sling underdogs.
sling the underdogs up, up, and closer to you level. sling, sling. almost
to eye level. sling them close but not too close. still a little
worse off. sling words like good and bad as though
they exist. sling them as though god himself
swept down and endowed you with an extra sharp
moral compass. sling your moral compass. sling it at
parties. sling it far. sling it wide. sling a downward glance at others.
sling, sling. sling you love at the lonely, the lowly, and the mangled. sling the
lowest of low. sling your body, your mind, your expertise. sling your services, your
compliments, your sympathy. sling your way on up, on up to heaven, where good and bad exist.
where the slingers of the lowly dwelleth.

then,
slung out,
consider that
encountering
the other
is about
encountering
the self.

Janna Payne is a Canadian poet. Her work has recently been featured (or is forthcoming) in: BROAD: A Feminist and Social Justice Magazine, Communities, Role/Reboot, Room, The Steel Chisel, *and* Women and Environments Magazine. *To read more, visit www.facebook.com/jannaspeaks.*