

In a world of Cultural Appropriation - Where does this fit in?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

I might be alone on this one but I'm going to put it out there anyway. It's been niggling away at me for some time, something that's been bothering me on a gut instinct level. It may be nothing to you perhaps it's only an issue for me? I'm referring to the use of the word 'Tribe' as a descriptor for a group of people who are friends, or business cohorts ? as in 'this is my tribe' or 'these people are my tribe.' It seems with International Women's Day having just been celebrated, a particularly perfect time for these shared thoughts. Why, in a world where we are so sensitive to others; to language, to understanding, acknowledging and recognizing the changing dynamics of the world around us ? isn't anyone else bothered by the fact that in the last few years we seem to have embraced the use of the word 'tribe' as representative of a group of (usually) female friends? In a world where we now begin most major events here in Town, in our schools and in the community with words honouring the indigenous peoples who walked the land before us, doesn't the use of this word smack of cultural misappropriation?

Most definitions of the word tribe sound something like this: 'a social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognized leader, according to Teaching Tolerance Magazine. The very definition implies division ? or separateness ? how we might belong to one group but are separate and distinct from all others. In a world seeking inclusiveness, I believe our ultimate aim as the human race should be about celebrating how we are all the same ? we are human ? and not celebrating our social, economic, religious or even 'tribal,' differences. In an article about tolerance that examined the use of this word from an African American perspective (but which I think is equally applicable here) the use of the word tribe 'promotes a myth of primitive African timelessness.' This article, and others like it, correctly point out that whether of African roots or Native American, the Indigenous preferred self-identifying terms would be either 'nation' or 'people' instead of tribe. In fact, history reminds us that in North America, tribe was more often a term assigned by, and for, bureaucratic purposes.

I'm uncomfortable whenever the word comes up in reference to a group of women gathering together in support of one another. Obviously I'm not uncomfortable with the support ? but why the word tribe? Why do we need a word at all? Women stand up for, support and promote one another every day. I know who are my group of friends, my business associates, the people I can call on in times of trouble, or when I just need some positive reinforcement. They have names. They are not my 'tribe' they are my friends and family and business cohorts. We don't have a recognized leader. We often don't share the same religion or even blood ties. What we share is the fact that biologically or by gender choice we are women. I'm not sure we need a label at all but I am sure that any label should not include the word tribe.

Maybe you think I am over thinking this. Perhaps I am but, in a world, full of labels and a world where we're trying harder every day to eliminate some of those labels and to become more accountable and responsible for our choice of words, I feel the use of 'tribe' as a descriptor for a group of women should be one of the first to go. At one of the International Women's Day events I attended, the speaker referred repeatedly to 'community.' Examples of how the word community is defined include: as 'a unified body of individuals,' or as 'an interacting body of various kinds of individuals.' Seems more inclusive to me ? and far less offensive too.