

The Ignorance of the Elders

By Skid Crease

You know, there are just some times when I hate being right.

It happened recently at a popular fast food and coffee spot in Bolton.

Now, keep in mind, that as a storyteller and author, I love to observe people, join in on their conversations and get to know their stories. Every once in a while you meet an elder, the kind we are taught to respect and honour. I have found them in some of the scientists, artists and authors, spiritual mentors, systems thinking engineers and educators with whom I have had the privilege of knowing. I have equally found them in farmers, hunters and trappers who, contrary to popular belief, deeply love the land from which they gather our food, and they pass on those wisdoms quietly and firmly with few words.

I also meet the synapically challenged, whose uneducated opinions are largely formed by the bogus untruth websites and big boys locker room talk that provided the fodder for a narcissistic megalomaniac to become President-Elect in the U.S.A.

Ideally, we all try to see the best in others, accept other people on their individual merits, and avoid stereotyping. But every once in a while we fall into the trap.

So, when I saw a group of three older men, who are always sitting at the same table, having coffee, pontificating their views on the world, and hoarding a stack of free newspapers, I couldn't resist. My first reaction in observing them (and picking up on snippets of conversation) was: white old boys club, maybe high school education, read the Sun newspaper mainly to ogle the Sunshine Girl, vote Conservative, watch Fox news, listen to right wing talk shows, and think Donald Trump is the Second Coming. I wanted to be wrong.

I walked right over, sat down at their table and said, "Gentlemen, I'd like to join your table."

A chill spread through the group. I had violated their sanctum sanctorum, but I just sat right down and introduced myself. There was a younger man with them that day, the only one among us who wasn't retired.

They ducked out for a quick smoke break, and when they returned the fun began. The older man, who had retired from something when he was only 45, began a long rant on the glory that was Donald Trump and the horror that was Barack Obama. I had no idea, until I listened to his holy words, that Obama was responsible for every disaster from hurricanes to floods to the financial crisis that pre-dated his presidency. Nor had I realized the extent of the horrible scandals that Barack and Michelle hid away during their eight years in the White House.

The younger man tried to explain that the U.S. economy was on the upswing, like employment figures and growth expectations, but he just couldn't get a word in edgewise. The older man was in that zone where, as my mother used to say, "Don't confuse me with facts; my mind is made up!"

Now, our elder couldn't name any legitimate sources for his research, but that didn't stop him from believing in nonsense and passing it on. The earth is flat, and the sun revolves around us, and the planet is only 6,000 years old. And I thought all the dinosaurs were extinct. My worst fears were confirmed. I came, I stereotyped, I was right.

As children, we are taught to respect our elders. Their years on Earth have supposedly given them insights into life. They made all the mistakes that the passion of youth demands, learned from those mistakes, and grew in wisdom and vision. At least, that is what the best of our elders bring to their communities.

I have had the privilege over the years, through my work in outdoor education, to work with some of those elders from the First Nations from Manitoulin Island, Brantford Six Nations, Inuit hunters from Nunavut and the Mississaugas of New Credit. During those times, I developed an even deeper respect for their wisdoms and their stories. They have survived the lies of broken treaties, forced relocations, the residential schools "what doesn't destroy your culture makes you stronger. However, their wisdoms were attained through Vision Quests in their youth and a life deeply in touch with natural systems. Not so in our society.

When I encounter elders like the ones I sat with briefly at the restaurant last week, it makes me fear for our future. The greatest danger facing humanity is not accelerating climate change, or a nuclear winter. It is the ignorance of the elders who may lead us there.

A long time ago I saw a poster of a very overweight man. sitting at an elegant table that was covered with crystal glasses and fine china. He was dressed in a fancy dinner jacket, sitting with hands holding a fork and knife raised over his plate. But then I saw that on the plate in front of him was a steaming pile of manure. The caption underneath read: "Eat excrement. Ten million flies can't be wrong." Choose your elders wisely.

Like young Anthony who, in a busy line-up at a gas bar later that same morning, calmed down an impatient older man with the words: "Life is short " don't rush it. We're all going to get to the end sooner or later."

Now that is wisdom.