

When someone tells you who they are?

by BROCK WEIR

Have you ever had a spare moment to sit down and truly think about who you really are?

I'm not talking about pinning down your name, birthplace, and general background ? hopefully you know that already! ? but, instead, what you represent, how you hope others see you, the very personal philosophy that guides your life?

We should all give it a shot, but who really has the time these days?

Well, we all have the time if we really try to make it, but, if you really don't, I'm sure that, before too long, there will be a cavalcade of others who want to fill in the blanks.

There is an old saying that appears to be getting a lot more usage these days, and that is, ?When someone tells you who they are, believe them.?

I don't know when it started to really gain traction, but I remember it being trotted out with significant regularity in the second to last U.S. Presidential election where what was coming out of the mouths of some candidates was brushed off as pandering to a base of voters rather than representative of real platform planks let alone policy.

When the sound bites translated into legislation, some were left scratching their heads as to how it all went wrong. Well, they told you who they were but convinced yourself not to believe them.

Over the past Thanksgiving holiday, once the turkey had been finished and we were all sitting around the table chatting, discussions turned to our Provincial and Federal leaders ? in place or aspiring ? and what they represent.

When the chat swung around to one particular individual, the family member I was conversing with dismissed the rhetoric that was coming from the podium as mere electioneering that couldn't possibly translate into policy that would impact their life.

I'm not sure what would have given them the idea, except for self-comfort, but they were content to believe it and wouldn't be swayed otherwise ? but we have seen this movie before.

?When someone tells you who they are, believe them,? indeed.

Beyond politics, we see this spill into social issues as well.

Consider for a moment the backlash being continually levelled unjustly at the Trans community.

They are persons out there trying to live their lives authentically, as they feel they are inside, with the same rights, privileges and, ultimately, peace that cisgender folk do, yet see pushback every single day from those same cisgender folks who, despite what they say, really have no idea what it is like to walk a mile in their shoes.

Somehow people who have not walked down that proverbial road inexplicably feel they know what's best for others and are unmoved by the ample evidence that suggests otherwise.

?When someone tells you who they are...?

It all seems, at least to my mind, relatively straightforward ? but last week we got something of a curveball when the CBC's Fifth

Estate ran their investigations into the heritage of Canadian music icon Buffy Sainte-Marie.

Sainte-Marie, who has been an acclaimed artist for the better part of 60 years now, has, it was stated by family members and others, been falsely claiming Indigenous heritage, a factor that, despite her prodigious talent, has been a cornerstone of her career since bursting onto the scene in 1963.

The documentarians interviewed several family members who cast doubt on Sainte-Marie's story, including her claims that she was an Indigenous child who was adopted by Italian-American parents in New England, and charted various ways on which her origin story had changed since she began building her career as a young chanteuse.

On the surface, this is one area where, "When someone tells you who they are, believe them," might not apply. But, again, at least on the surface.

The evidence presented was certainly compelling, but will it be the end of the story? Not if Sainte-Marie and her adopted family in the Piapot First Nation have anything to do about it.

"I am proud of my Indigenous-American identity and the deep ties I have to Canada and the Piapot family," said the singer in a statement just before the program unspooled, stating that her mother told her she was adopted, there was no documentation, and she might have been born "on the wrong side of the blanket."

"As a young adult, I was adopted by Emile Piapot (son of Chief Piapot, Treaty 4 Adhesion signatory), and Clara Starblanket Piapot (daughter of Chief Starblanket, Treaty 4 signatory), in accordance with Cree law and customs," she continued. "They were kind, loving, and proud to claim me as their own. I love my Piapot family and am so lucky to have them in my life. I have always struggled to answer questions about who I am. For a long time, I tried to discover information about my background. Through that research what became clear, and what I have always been honest about, is that I don't know where I'm from or who my birth parents were, and I will never know. Which is why, to be questioned in this way today, is painful for both me and for my two families I love so dearly."

The Piapot First Nation also has her back, adding separately: "She is our Auntie, our relative, and a beloved member of the Piapot family and community. The accusations which are about to be made of our Auntie Buffy are hurtful, ignorant, colonial and racist. No one, including Canada and its governments, the Indian Act, institutions, media, or any person anywhere can deny our family's inherent right to determine who is a member of our family and community."

"Buffy is our family. We chose her and she chose us. We claim her as a member of our family and all of our family members are from the Piapot First Nation. To us, that holds far more weight than any paper documentation or colonial record keeping ever could. We are a sovereign nation, a sovereign people. Canada does not get to determine who we claim as a family, and neither does the media. It's up to us to determine who is a member of our community and our family. Every understanding of our spiritual practice, the history our grandparents shared with us, and the traditions of the Cree refute your suggestion that our Auntie Buffy is not Indigenous or a member of our community."

I am not here to determine who Buffy Sainte-Marie is. Is the paper trail troubling? Yes. Are there nuances to this story? Yes. Is there more to consider beyond our own traditions of what constitutes a family? It seems that there are.

"When a sovereign First Nation tells you who is and is not a member?"

An interesting national conversation awaits us.