Tmix^{w}

I was driving into Penticton with a friend because of a nyslixcen word I didn't completely understand, but I knew it was important. (nyslixcen is an Okanogan dialect of the Salish language group) During the nearly 50 years that I have known him, my friend, Rick Gillespie, has published the Columbiana, first on paper and lately as a website, columbiana.org, a Columba River Bioregion Educational Project.

The Salish name for the Columbia River is swah'netk'qhu. We were travelling along a tributary, the Okanogan (US) or Okanagan (Canadian) River. The Okanagan Valley is farmed intensely. Orchards and vineyards seem to cover every acre of available land. It is watered from the highly controlled Okanagan River. On that sunny day In Penticton, we saw hundreds of people floating down the canal that now holds the river in check.



I first heard the word Tmix^{w} on a recorded talk by Jeanette Armstrong, one of the founders of the En'owkin Centre. The video stemmed from work done to collect indigenous knowledge for the Global Earth Repair Conference held at Port Townsend's Fort Warden Conference Center in 2019. I attended that gathering to learn more about Regenerative Agriculture. Finding out that two things of intense interest to me, agriculture and history, merged in a word, Tmix^{w}, and that there is a place with a program on Timix ECOliteracy drove me to visit the Centre.

Rick and I ran into each other again at this year's Salmon Ceremony. It is held to call back the salmon to the swah'netk'qhu. The spiritual guide of the ceremony was Richard Armstrong, brother of Jeanette. I met both of them in person for the first time there and Jeanette invited me to visit the En'owkin Centre. I invited Rick to come with me.



The word En'owkin is an "*Okanagan concept, which describes a respectful dialogue of clarification, conflict resolution and group commitment, to come to the best solution; essentially, consensus.*" We were greeted warmly when we arrived. They had arranged for us to talk with Chad Eneas, a guide at the Centre. He gave us some background on its origins. From 1902 to 1952 Canada had a potlatch law. It prevented aboriginal people from gathering together and also prevented them from getting lawyers to defend their rights. Since at least 1975 tribal people began planning for a way to restore their culture. In 1982

Canada revised its constitution to recognize more indigenous rights. All this time the country still had residential schools that are now being seen as deadly centers of abuse, physical, sexual and mental. Those schools were finally abolished in 1996. They were designed to destroy native culture. Sylix tribes knew that no one else could teach them how to be who they are. They set up the En'owkin Centre on land donated by Chad's own grandfather and others. They took charge of their sacred responsibilities to teach their nsyilxcen Language and through that to provide education, enhance mental, physical, emotional, spiritual and social needs. As a community-focused organization it is apolitical. But its success soon garnered international attention and some government support.



Listening to Jeanette's talk I had trouble imagining exactly what Tmix^{w} means or is. The x^{w} is a suffix meaning cyclic movement. Tmix^{w} meant a duty to reinforce those cycles. Sometimes it seemed to mean ancestors. At other times it meant the land itself or life itself. I was trying to assimilate it into an American English-speaking mind. At the Salmon Ceremony Richard Armstrong emphasized that "Everything comes from the land." In her talk Jeanette had said Everything on the land is knowledge. Everyone needs to know the land in the indigenous way in order for it to be healthy and water is the path to become that place. I needed help understanding that.

Chad gave an example of how we think of water as an object. As an object or even a commodity, water to us is the same word and same idea whether it is in some distant lake, the ocean or a bottle. It's H^2O. We impound it, pipe it, turn it into electricity and sell it. Water on the En'owkin land come from one of several streams from different hillsides and nourishes all of life as it flows. It is not just water. It is this sacred place, this sacred water from that particular hill. For the people and other beings living there, the land provides for all of life. Learning how that works in balance provides knowledge through the spirit of the land.

The fur traders coming to HBC Fort Colvile saw all of nature as a commodity to be collected, hoarded, made to be rare and sold at the highest price. The native word for beaver became their word for money. Chad explained to us that monetary value is not intrinsic value. A beaver skin is special. It is tough and hard to penetrate with an arrow. It is waterproof. It is warm. When it becomes just a way to buy a rifle or tobacco, it loses its intrinsic value. Life does not exist without water but water is cheap. Unless you are dying of thirst you can fail to recognize its intrinsic value.



Chad Eneas and Richard Gillespie

Then I mentioned that we are mostly made of air. (Four gases: oxygen, carbon dioxide, hydrogen, and nitrogen make up all but 4% of the elements in our bodies.) Chad pointed to a stand of Back Cottonwoods just outside. Plants breath in our carbon dioxide and exhale the oxygen we need to live. We are both part of the land and depend on each other. (Black cottonwoods are also a medicinal plant, wildlife habitat and are used to rehabilitate flood plains. They are of special importance to the Penticton Band of the Okanagan Alliance.)

I mentioned to Chad my last article in the Silverado, The Gift of Salmon. He acknowledged that salmon give their lives and help all other living beings. He told the origin story of salmon. Coyote wanted the River's most valuable possession, his daughter. In exchange Coyote offered salmon. It was an agreement not a gift. Wherever the water flowed freely to the sea there would be salmon. Where the river no longer flows free, no salmon. The Okanagan River is being diverted into agriculture. The water that is left is too slow and too warm to hold oxygen for healthy salmon. The water of the land is being exported as fruit and wine. Now that there are very few salmon, the whole of the land is impoverished.

Then Chad demonstrated the source of the value of gifts. If I give you an expensive gift, let's say a car, that may seem generous and noble. But if you already have a car, another one may be of little value to you or even a burden. The monetary nature of the car is not the real value. The value of a gift is in the value that the recipient gives it. My story promoted gifts as a way to strengthen community. They can be, but the needs of the community make them so, just as they do at En'owkin Centre.



It was slowly dawning on me that Tmixʷ is not just an idea, a thing, a person or a philosophy. It is all of these things and more. It doesn't fit into an English mindset. Dr. Jeanette Amstrong had cautioned us that the way to learn it is to do it and be it.

On the way home we again passed the orchards and vineyards, but they looked different to me. I tried to evaluate what they meant to the land and those who are the land. I also noticed that the Salish name on the door of men's restrooms ended with tmixʷ. We are Tmixʷ!