

MOOSE FACTORY JOURNAL

October 28, 2005 -- December 10, 2005

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KASHECHEWAN

This morning at about 1 AM, I got called to The Hospital. Anthony had just died. Yesterday it was clear that he didn't have much longer. Now the waiting and the pain are over. Anthony was about 30 years old when he died. His family is native to Kashechewan. (For those of you up south ... that's across The River from Fort Albany.)

Now it's time to make plans for the funeral -- always a difficult project. This time around it's made more difficult, because Kashechewan presently is being evacuated. The Village drinking water is making everybody sick.

The water is contaminated with *ecoli* -- even with a LOT of chorine added. The intake for the water supply is *downstream* from a sewer lagoon. People have been complaining about the water for years. A couple of years ago a report came out condemning the water and the water system. Nothing ever got done about any of that.

Last night in The Hospital one of the Staff told me that Hepatitis also is showing up in Kashechewan.

Now there are a lot of news stories going around. The Provincial and Federal Governments are squabbling with each other in a blame game. However, so far, anyway, the evacuation is proceeding. There's talk of rebuilding the village -- on higher ground, with potable drinking water. But that will take time.

Of course this reminds me of Katrina: neglect of an impoverished population, politicians ducking for cover when the problem hits the news media.

Here the problem seems to simmer under the surface for years. When I first got here (now three years ago) I used to hear "Well, that's the way things are" all the time. Being an American, and rude, I would speak up just about every time I came across prejudice and discrimination. I wrote up a lot of stuff on UPS, because their corporate/systemic blindness/cynicism exemplified the attitude white outsiders had towards Native People up here.

I had an interesting conversation with another (white) cleric on this matter. He suggested that, as an American, I had a much keener sensitivity towards racial issues than many Canadians. His remark was that 'they just don't see it' -- the way Americans often do. His point was that we had been sensitized by our own racial issues over the years.

Well, now there are plenty of Canadians who DO see the racial connotations in Kashechewan's drinking water, and they are speaking up -- judging from the correspondence that's gone into some of the papers (Globe & Mail, I think...) One correspondent called the Kashechewan matter a national disgrace -- like, a political moral failure.

We're talking about a couple of thousand people here in Kashechewan..... Did George Bush ever call Katrina a disgrace?

Meanwhile plans for the funeral go ahead, in the hope that, finally, perhaps, Anthony might come home.

Some links that may last for a while and lead to some relevant newspaper articles... are posted in the WEB version of this Journal.

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Monday, 7 NOV 2005
KASHECHEWAN, again....

It's ten days now since my last post.

Anthony died on Friday morning, 28 OCT, just after midnight, in his second night on Moose Factory Island. He had been in Kingston for several weeks, in Hospital, until the Staff there decided that no more could be done. He was being sent to Kashechewan to spend his final days at home. He got as far as Weeneebayko Hospital, Moose Factory. He was 33 years old.

He never made it to Kashechewan because of the water crisis. As his immediate family kept vigil in Moose Factory, Kashechewan was being evacuated. For a while some of the locals here at Moose Factory even wondered if it might not be necessary to have certainly the funeral and maybe even the burial here at St. Thomas' -- depending on how the evacuation proceeded. Several of the family would have to come NORTH for the funeral (wherever it was held). They already had been evacuated.

After the family reviewed their options, however, they decided to have funeral and burial in Kash. Rodney and Lisa (the incumbent clerics) were away from St. Paul's, Kashechewan, while all of this was going on. At the Vigil in The Hospital I talked about some of these things with Tony's mother. When the decision to have funeral and burial in Kashechewan was made, the family asked me to be at the funeral, and I was.

The funeral was at 3 PM on Tuesday afternoon, shortly after I arrived about an hour late. My flight was late because of the demands placed on the system by the evacuation. When I got to the Church, the Lay Readers and family had organized the entire Service and were ready to begin. I simply had to read the relevant passages from the *Book of Alternative Services* and preach. The family and lay readers did all the rest.

St. Thomas', Moose Factory, and St. Paul's, Kashechewan, are very different parishes. OK, you can say that about any two parishes. But here an important difference is that, on the one hand, part of St. Thomas' genius is its stable and historic multiculturalism. St. Paul's, Kashechewan, on the other hand, is quintessentially CREE. The predominant language in St. Thomas' is English. In fact, very few people are fluent in CREE in Moose Factory. Just about everybody speaks CREE at St. Paul's. Many speak very little -- or no -- English.

The Service had been created from a blend of personal recollections, hymns, songs from pop culture, traditional ceremonies, and Anglican liturgy. The constituent pieces were expertly joined and managed. The Service flowed. Even when the microphone was 'open' there was process and dynamic to our gathering and worship. Our time together evoked memories of Tony and encouraged each of us in our faith and hope. It was for all people -- inclusive, that is; and it was all straight from the heart. I felt like I was there -- not because I would have had to have been there to make the Service work but because my being there could be represented for what it was -- a gesture of support from many outside the family and outside that particular community.

Before the Service began, as I was standing outside on the steps leading in to the Church, I was approached by the CBC for an interview. (Please, any time but this for an interview! How about after the Service? No. It had to be now....) I can't remember half the questions they asked me. I do remember that the conversation turned to some of my observations about the

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peacefulness of the people in this part of the world. I had remarked that if folks like these were in other parts of the world, there might be a whole lot fewer wars out there. The interviewer asked me why this was so. I answered that I had no idea. I had come here to learn. I don't think that was what he had expected from me.

After the Service in the Church, there was the walk to the Cemetery. And then we all stood there until the last shovel full of dirt was thrown. And then I walked back to the Rectory.

The next day I was to fly out. I noticed some graffiti around -- welcoming us outsiders to the Community. Some of it was bittersweet. Thanks, in one instance, 'for letting us live.' A large Hercules aircraft had landed that morning. And it took off while I waited for my flight. Also, yet another planeload (37 at a time) of folks departed. This flight was bound for Sault Ste Marie. There was talk that there might be another two flights that day -- Wednesday.

By the time I was ready to leave, the water had been pronounced safe to drink. (I waited, however, until I got back to Moose Factory for my shower....!) Some of the papers to the south seemed to think that all of this evacuation business was an overreaction. My take: yes and no. Yes, in that airlifting an entire community isn't going solve the problem -- which isn't the water, really, anyway. And, a lot of useful work could have been accomplished with the money that went instead to the airlift. But, very simply, there are NO excuses for bad water. If the plant had been built right and/or managed right, in the first place, there would never have been an evacuation. Evacuations are expensive. When Dr. Trussler (Chief of Medical Services at Weeneebayko Hospital, Moose Factory) was consulted, he found the community of Kashechewan medically unsafe: bugs in the water, bugs in the people, and no evident plan of action by which to deal with the matter. In other words, the place was not fit for human habitation. In the face of his wholesale medical condemnation of the community the authorities had no choice then but to get the people out while they fixed the problem. All in all, a very expensive object lesson. There are several other communities (native communities, reserves) that have bad water. I'll bet their water systems get fixed really soon.....

But the larger problem..... A beleaguered community. Recently, several papers have opined that the reserve system just doesn't work -- because people don't have their ancestral way of life; and they don't have a way of life they can adapt to that they feel OK about. The problem, in other words, is in the morale of the community: lack of self-esteem, depression, self-destructive behavior(s). The remedy, many say, is: more jobs, adapt to the world outside -- become part of it. And, as roads are built in to the North, I suppose that for many that is exactly what is happening.

The Economist, in one of its recent issues (I forget which one) had another take. They said that some of the healthiest aboriginal communities are those which have intentionally gone in the reverse direction. They have become culturally MORE conservative. They have aggressively nurtured their mother tongue. They have been careful about who is a member of the band and who is not. They have successfully carved out for themselves a niche in a larger world. *The Economist* described them as landlocked nations -- culturally autonomous in their own right.

I have no first hand experience -- except for the community in which I am living. And it certainly wouldn't do for me to tell people how they should be thinking about these matters. I don't have any answers, anyway. My job is to be helpful, as much as I am able, as people figure out where they want to go and how they are going to get there. And to stay out of the way. I do have an attitude, of course. I hope that -- whatever changes there are going to be -- and the changes are going on as we speak -- that spirit I encountered as a young adolescent remains unbroken. It nurtured me and it taught me. And it had quite a bit to do with who I

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am. I was one of its adopted children. I think that most of North America has no idea of the presence of this resource, no idea of what to do about it, no idea of how precious it really is.

SOFTWARE CHANGE

New Software

Posted in Journal Post on November 12th, 2005

I'm starting with new BLOG software. I did most of 2005 with TYPEPAD. Now I feel confident enough to play with WORDPRESS. There's a lot more flexibility with this new application. But it's less forgiving to the absent-minded and incompetent. So, I have to be careful. We'll see how it goes. It's free. And that makes it very attractive!

COLD!

Posted in Journal Post on November 14th, 2005

Yesterday we had driving rain! It was a day for ducks on skis — somewhere in the 40's. Today we have low 20's. Maybe lower than that. The choppers are flying. Freeze-up is starting. Blue Hill, Maine, is somewhere in the high 50's or low 60's....

10 December 2005

The skidoos are now running back and forth to Moosonee. They HAD been on again off again for a week or so -- while things froze and thawed and couldn't quite make up their minds just exactly what they wanted to do. For a while we even had a mini-breakup. The ice out on The River now is very rough. That means that the construction of the ice highway may be a little more complex this year.

The choppers (for passengers) are threatening to cut back on service. The skidoos have taken up most of the passenger business. A skidoo ride costs something around \$10. Many of the taxi drivers have little enclosed sleds that they can pull back and forth, so they can haul that many more passengers -- comfortably. Since Moose Factory rarely plows its roads -- and never sands! -- the skidoos can deliver door to door service. Sometimes on land, even, they seem to be the only thing that will get through. A chopper ride (one way) is \$35 and extra for baggage. The freight choppers will keep working, I assume, until vehicles are out on the ice.

I, of course, will have none of it. I won't pay the \$35 that the chopper costs. And I don't like the skidoos. That is, I don't trust the ice under them. I will be one of those people riding in a warm Church van, behind the *second* School Bus that crosses. I announce this loudly and proudly to anyone who will listen. Everyone has learned by now not to listen.

But every year or so tragedy does strike. And it did, this year, at Albany. A young mother, around twenty years old, was on her way from Albany to Kashechewan -- to meet up with her husband and child. There was no ride available, evidently. And, although pregnant with a second child, she decided to walk. That's what a lot of people do. It saves money, and

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walking is good exercise. And if the ice is thick enough for the skidoos, it definitely is thick enough for someone walking.

The problem was that she got off the trail. I'm not sure whether she went through the ice or fell into slush on top of the ice. Whatever it was that happened, she got wet. She got to shore, up onto firm ground, wrapped herself in whatever overcoats she had, and waited for help. It never came. She may have been too far away from the trail. She froze to death.

In other sadness, Pauline died this afternoon at Moose Factory. So often Christmas is like this.