

Living Vulnerability:

Indigenous Perspectives on Evangelism

AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIA VICKERS AND RANDY WOODLEY

BY STEVE HEINRICHS¹

Steve Heinrichs: *The word “evangelism” conjures up many different images and feelings and definitions. When I say the word, what kinds of things come into your mind—images, a gut response, a traditional teaching, or a story?*

Patricia Vickers: My initial response is that there is no difference between evangelism and “missionization.” I look to the past and what missionization meant on the Northwest coast. There were ceremonial masks that were burned and my great-grandfather burned his regalia and ceremonial paraphernalia because that’s what he was told he needed to do in order to accept the teachings of Christ. There was a great misunderstanding that took place. At the same time, I look at evangelism and I say, why are you concerned about that? Or even social justice for that matter? What’s of concern is that you and I live out

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Randy Woodley was raised near Detroit, Michigan, and is a legal descendent of the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma. Randy and his wife, Edith, maintain Eloheh Farm and Eloheh Village (“eloheh” is a Cherokee Indian word meaning harmony) for Indigenous Leadership, a permaculture, regenerative teaching farm and community in Newberg, Oregon. The director of Intercultural and Indigenous studies and Distinguished Professor of Faith and Culture at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, Randy is currently working on a book on missions. His most recent work is Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision (Eerdmans, 2012).

Steve Heinrichs, a white settler and the director of Indigenous relations for Mennonite Church Canada connected with Patricia and Randy to talk about evangelism. What follows is an excerpt of their conversation.

what we believe and our identification with mystery. I can't articulate it clearly other than to say that in ceremony—regardless of where it is happening—when we're in the ceremony we experience something that is beyond words, because words are a mere symbol or sign, trying to describe that which we experience. Identification is being in that space of unity with a greater force, a force that no one person can say they truly know. So I spend most of my day working to remember that place and to go into it—but not to be so heavenly minded that I'm no earthly good. So I'm still present with you in this conversation but the prayer is that wisdom be able to speak through us. So what does that mean? It means that my identification isn't in what job I hold or what work I'm doing—or the evangelism I want to carry out—it simply means I'm present as we go on this journey together; present with my life experiences and my limitations. So again, where is there evangelism in that or a concern for it? You simply live.

Randy Woodley: When you say “evangelism,” the first thing I thought about was the way I was taught when I first started following Jesus, back on October 23, 1975. That was a good decision; the best decision I ever made. But the church trained me to be what I would call a “flaming evangelist,” but not a good Indian. So, all the American Indian posters that I had on my walls, the Awkwesasne Notes that I was reading, and my long hair and braids...well all that, I was told, had to go: “Don't go on that road no more. Go on the evangelism road.” So I got myself a suit and a bunch of those white-man ties; and I was preaching at Jesus festivals; and I was in an evangelism internship in North Carolina at the Heritage School of Evangelism, where I won the evangelism award; and I was witnessing on the streets and setting up summer evangelism programs; and I was on the streets at least one night a week until 2 or 3 am passing out tracts to prostitutes and pimps and everyone else. I was a flaming evangelist. I took Evangelism Explosion in the Billy Graham School, I took the Glad Tidings School of evangelism training, and all the rest of those methods. I did all that because I thought that is what I was supposed to do if I loved Jesus. Yet, I always had this weird feeling deep in the pit of my stomach, that I was maybe not doing the wrong thing, *but I was doing the right thing the wrong way.*

So I had to wrestle with that for many, many years. And I had to come to terms with who I was as a Native person and how my own family history fit into all of that. And hanging out with different Indigenous traditional people helped a lot because I began to see the truth in a lot of our Indian ways and to see Jesus in all these things.

I think it was in 1989 that I was given a dream. At that time I was a

commissioned missionary with the American Baptist Churches in Anadarko, Oklahoma, “the Indian capital of the nation” they call it—there are seventeen tribes in a forty-mile radius. By then I was convinced I had been going about things in the wrong way. I had been—well, really—a missionary oppressor for two years in Alaska. After that, I went to seminary and I felt I had to figure out a way to do this ministry in a good way. So I did that by surrounding myself with a group of elders and I hit the ground running. We were still leading people to Jesus but it was different. We were involved in lots of social action, like homeless ministry, teen pregnancy ministry, food pantry, after-school tutoring, and other important ministries. There was also extreme racism in that county. For example, the community was 57 percent people of color, and only 3 percent of these were in the work force of the top three employers and, of course, the jails were full of mostly brown people. So we started something called “Christians for Justice” where we began to take on those employers like the city and the county, the police force and the electric co-op in order to protest the existence of racial discrimination. By holding a national press conference we showed the very visible symbols of racism like the “Redskin Theater” and “Step N’ Fetch It” convenience store. We resisted all the ways that racism was so embedded there in the culture. It was really at Eastern Baptist Seminary that I changed drastically. People like Ron Sider, Tony Campolo, Manfred Brauch, and Samuel Escobar were really incredible at modeling holistic ministry for me.

But I don’t look at it as “evangelism *and* social justice,” because that’s the dualistic approach that’s inherent in the western mind. What they were trying to do in the Gospels is to share the message of Jesus. It had to do with living, loving, learning and then along the way you share what’s important to you because that’s what’s important in your life. It wasn’t a separation where we said, “Now we’re going to go evangelize *and* now we’re going to do social gospel.” Those are all categories of the western mind. We have been tricked by Enlightenment-bound dualism that separates all of life into little categories. We need to come back to living a whole life and forget about those categories. They can be useful for a short period of time, but we can’t live in those false realities, we have to come back together...putting Humpty Dumpty back together again. That’s the main task of the church...to learn how to live in wholeness and put Humpty Dumpty back together again. I try my best to not live two lives. I’m the same person at work and the same person on the farm and the same person when I go speak somewhere, so I never have to look behind me and think, “What did I say there?” I can just be who I am.

SH: *Sometimes in these conversations around evangelism and social justice we*

don't name what we actually think the Gospel is. How do you understand the Gospel? What is it?

PV: I appreciated what you said Randy about dualism; how with dualism, we need to ask where your responsibility lies when you are living that life. It's easier to live in an illusion; I'm not responsible as long as I'm living that duality, whatever that duality is. The identification I spoke of earlier requires that one takes responsibility for my actions. And so when you choose not to live in duality there is a vulnerability that exists. Embracing that vulnerability is a crucial part of it all, meaning I make mistakes. So when I leave the ceremony, I've received a blessing and I am to live and walk in that blessing. I'm accountable to the Creator; I'm accountable to my understanding. Now, I'm not a theologian. But the teachings of Christ are sacred words; they actually have life in them. So when I speak anything that's of any value or worth to somebody, words that can awaken their hearts, it's because it is coming from that eternal place, it's coming from that mystery, it's coming from, let's use your words—that gospel. That's my understanding of gospel.

What helped me to heal in a deeper place is the sweat ceremony. I'm from the coast where purification happens through an individual going out to purify. So the community sweat lodge is a different way, but a way that has helped me to be able to go really deeply into where I've needed to go and where I've needed to be. The fasting lodge has also helped me to heal, to inquire into self, to see, and to relax.

RW: The vulnerability issue I think is central to this conversation. The sweat—that's a very vulnerable place. I've seen a lot of people share things they'd never share anywhere else because for whatever reasons it's just a good place. In Cherokee, we call it *osi* "the good house." It creates a vulnerability that's cleansing. And the funny thing is, I've been in sweats maybe thirty years and in different tribes all over and never heard anybody say "Now what you share in the sweat, stays in the sweat," but every time I get in that kind of environment in the western world, someone says, "Do we all make an agreement that nothing we say in this room will leave the room?" You don't need to say that in the sweat because it's sacred. You wouldn't walk out and share somebody's heart and sacredness in a way that dishonored them.

The thing that marks the Western church—and I've been around it for over half a century—is hubris; there's a deep-seated pride and an overwhelming desire to control. And the cure for that is vulnerability. A significant conversion for me was when I came to understand that Creator—Jesus—is the most vulnerable being in the universe. That changed my theology completely. If

God is love, and love means being vulnerable (and it must include this), then God must be the most vulnerable being there is. And Jesus' life was certainly vulnerable; the gospel stories show him taking chances, and that's one of the things that should be in the DNA of the church. And yet, one of the first things that happens when I share in church contexts, people routinely come up to me and say, "Thank you for being so honest, so vulnerable and open." Like, it doesn't normally happen...like it's a new way to be when that [vulnerability] is the norm with Creator. We live in a culture that doesn't value vulnerability. So, although Indigenous peoples don't have a corner on vulnerability, my sense is that if Western people want to convert, and get closer to Jesus, they're going to need to become more vulnerable, because that's who God is.

PV: I think the way most people look at vulnerability is in terms of "weakness." And that's frightening. But vulnerability is more along the lines of intentional nakedness, and that takes courage and strength, yet not a strength that I can claim. It just comes when one is willing to be honest. There's almost a protection that comes when one chooses to stand in vulnerability, which doesn't mean that I won't be slandered or suffering won't come my way, but there is a covering that comes. That happens in the sweat. It also happens in the Eucharist. The Anglicans were the ones that came into my father's village. And so I grew up hearing these amazing prayers of contrition. By the time I was seventeen, I would go to the traditional service because all the old people were there. And there was something about those old people—their lived experience and their humility—and I would just find myself overwhelmed and crying while listening to the prayers. And you weren't supposed to do that in the Anglican church. They didn't expect you to be emotional.

When one is willing to be honest and vulnerable, then it is possible to enter into the sacred space where a deep awakening is possible. That's what makes one stronger, seeing from the spiritual awakening. One is changed. When I come out of ceremony the awakening creates a new pathway.

RW: I see something similar happening in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings. The Church we had in Carson City—the missionaries had built us a big old stone building right on the Indian boarding school—when I first got there, there were only two Indians there, and both had worked at the old Residential Boarding School. Folks said "No Indians will enter that church unless they're being married or buried." But over the years we built trust in the community, and we had 60 or 70 people attending—it was an Indian mega-church! [*Laughs*] But when we had talking circles and sweats, people would come from the whole community. On special occasions we'd have

over a hundred for a talking circle time. Well, on Saturday nights, they would have over a hundred people for the AA gatherings. And I remember being brought to tears by the honesty in those circles and thinking, "If only people in the church could be this way, God would really be there."

SH: *In Canada, many settler churches have been brought to a profoundly vulnerable place through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools. Indigenous survivors have unveiled a Christianity that embraced colonial, religious supremacist ways; a Christianity that championed genocidal missional activities that sought to suppress Indigenous spiritualities and assimilate and break native communities in an effort to "save" pagan peoples. It's a dominant form of Christianity that continues in many ways. Some of these survivors are Christian. Many are not. Yet their collective witness has been gospel to us—leading the settler church out of the darkness and into the light. Often, the church positions itself as the one that bears or offers "good news," but in the TRC, the gospel is being offered by many who don't name Jesus as savior—they are bringing us to places of liberation. How might this inform a discussion on evangelism?*

RW: So how does it feel to get that "good news"? To realize that Jesus has been here [Turtle Island] all along, and that finally the settler church has something to learn? The dilemma is starting to unravel. In broad strokes: Europeans came to this continent with the message of the gospel, but not with the lives to match it. They came to a people who did not have the message of the gospel, but whose lives lived the gospel. And you people are finally starting to realize that. We've been waiting for over 500 years for some of you to listen!

SH: *But do we have to frame it in Christian terms? Do we have to insist that the healing words and ways that survivors are leading us into should be understood as, "This is Jesus." For example, Murray Sinclair, the lead commissioner of the TRC is Midewiwin (traditional Medicine Society of the Anishinaabe). I don't think he wants me mapping Jesus onto his work and to the gifts that he and others are offering. It's coming out of the roots and goodness of his spiritual tradition.*

RW: So the gospel that you and other settlers are hearing—that is freeing is it not? It reminds you of who Jesus is, right? The values that are promoted amongst these Indigenous communities—this vulnerability, peace, humility and truthfulness—are the same things that Jesus taught. But if you don't recognize what is being offered as coming from Jesus—as a Christian—then in some ways we would be doing what the first Europeans did to the natives. In other words, everyone gets to understand these spiritual truths in the way they understand it. You are not required to understand it in the Midewiwin way, or the Stomp Dance way or the Sun Dance way. You can see the beauty of it from

your own traditions, and your own ways, and you can definitely learn from the other ways as they stand on their own. But if Indigenous peoples are forcing you to understand it just according to their own ways, then we're guilty of the same thing that the Europeans did to us (and continue to do). The problem when the Europeans came is that they believed they had all of Jesus and the natives had nothing of Jesus. But if the church believes that Jesus is the Creator, then they have to affirm that Jesus has been here all along, in the Sun Dance, the Stomp Dance, the Midewiwin Lodge. It's not the task of the church to change those ways but rather to accept them as truth where they are. John 14:6 says Jesus is *the* truth, eh? Then all truth points to or reflects him regardless of where it's found or what we call it.

PV: What's the seed of the conflict that you (Steve) and other settlers are wrestling with?

SH: *I think it's the fear of Christian imposition. We've now seen how our faith was imposed upon the most vulnerable—more than 150,000 Indigenous children. We've seen the destructive spiritual violence that our churches have wrought. And we're afraid to do it again by saying, "Thank you survivors for showing us who the real Jesus is." Many of these survivors, I believe, don't want us to map Jesus on to this. In other words, we don't respect Indigenous spiritualities in their own right...we say, "Thank you Jesus! There you are at work again." And thus we commit the sin and violence of religious supremacy again.*

PV: It sounds like the fear is coming out of a conditioned mind, to see Christ in a certain way, with parameters, as to who he is and who he is not. And that entitles one to make judgments and to categorize because—what, you have the Bible? But Christ wasn't forced on the children. It wasn't the teachings of Christ that were forced on children. It was this collective conditioning. I think it comes back to our concern with dualism...conforming to certain beliefs about who Jesus is...but we don't know the fullness of the Creator now, and we will not know in eternity.

It's one of the reasons why I don't call myself a Christian—because "Christianity," from collective conditioning, a collective distortion of love, constructed collective illusion was imposed on children, my grandmother and my father.

RW: The church has to crawl out of the 500-year-old snakeskin that it's been in called Euro-centric theology. The Western church can't accept a lot of these things because their own theology continues to trip them up, because they think that European theology is the only theology. This is all related to white supremacy. Religious supremacy is inextricably bound to the white western European nations who produced it, and it resulted in the Doctrine of Discov-

ery—which is not just a religious doctrine, but a white supremacist Christian doctrine. None of those things can be separated. The history shows that they all worked in tandem. The white church felt like it deserved not only the land, the resources, the people and the power, but also the very gospel—*we know who knows God and who doesn't*. Now it's time for the church to come clean; to air their dirty laundry. Unless we wash and wash that dirty laundry and hang all that out to dry...we're not going anywhere. The western white church must learn to live with the fact they propagated a racist theology that was and is seen as normal. And I'm not saying all the missionaries and the pastors were terrible people, but that was the worldview and the religious system they were embedded in. They couldn't help but practice systemic racism. My concern is that the settler church today isn't digging deep enough and scratching hard enough to shed that old snakeskin, to see the gospel that is right in front of them. That will only come about through vulnerability, truth-telling, being confronted by the victims and realizing they don't have an adequate response because there is no sane response. Individually, this reconciliation can happen and it does. The problem is the larger church, the denominations, the ministries at the systemic level. They need to be dismantled, and control needs to be given up. But control is the *modus operandi* of the western church, so it's not easy—but it is the right thing to do if one claims to follow Jesus.

There are some good things that have taken place between the Western church and Indigenous peoples. But almost never have there been mutual and true partnerships. So we don't have much to reconcile back to...because that implies there was a relationship to begin with. And that means we need to talk about reparations and restitution and restoration. And it's the church, not the government, that bears especial responsibility because it was the church's Doctrine of Discovery that propelled colonization. That religious doctrine bore the progeny of Manifest Destiny—White Supremacy and, here in the States, American Exceptionalism—that really continues to dismantle Indigenous lives and lands.

PV: On the West Coast, when there is a conflict, we say there is spiritual unbalance. If we are to restore balance, there needs to be an acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Let me share an example: There was a group of seven young people who had vandalized a school where I was called in to help. So I called four hereditary chiefs together and asked how we could do this in a way that followed ancestral law. And the first thing they did was identify the nature of the wrongdoing; next they looked at the families of those who were involved, especially the father's sides, since that side was to step forward to take care of the damages; and then there was to be dialogue between the offended party

and the offenders, asking, "What will restore balance again?" The school said, "Simply an apology." But in ancestral law it was to hold a dinner, an apology from both the children and from the fathers, and they were to donate—each from their own pocket—the money that it took to repair the school. And then the question was, "Is this enough for those who have been offended?" And it is enough when the offended says yes, *and in this particular case it was more than what they were hoping for*. Then there is a public acknowledgement of restitution, and a feasting that takes place. When you get to that place, it is more about celebration. Balance has been restored. It's not about shaming or guilt.

Reconciliation—from an ancestral law perspective—begins first with people getting right as individuals. Never mind everyone else. You take care of your fears. You go into a fast or ceremony, so that you can walk in light and peace. My heart needs to be right. So that rather than living in duality, I can live the same in ceremony as I do out of it. That's what I understand the teachings of the many Indigenous ceremonies and communities that I've been a part of to be about. And it's how I understand what the teachings of Christ are about.

SH: *What are some Indigenous visions of what the Great Commission is all about? What do you make of it?*

PV: I don't think it's a big deal. I think back to being ten years old. My father was an alcoholic and my mother trained as a missionary at Prairie Bible Institute. It must have been a Sunday in the early afternoon, and I was the only one in the living room and the television was on and I was sitting there on the floor and listening to the preacher saying something that was really important about Jesus. Then I saw all these black hands and arms going up into the air and with open hands and the camera showing their pink palms and I sat there crying and I thought, "Wow, I want to be like that." I'm not like Billy Graham, but it just moved me really deeply. Something in this moment captured hope in the midst of oppression, in the midst of violence. I think that I wasn't really listening to what he was saying, but I was feeling what he was saying and entering into that space where people's lives were being awakened. I think that there's this thing that happens within the institution of the church and it comes back to what I said earlier, it's about being conditioned to think in a specific way. People generally grow up in that institution and they don't question how they are conditioned to think and whether or not it's an accurate representation of Christ's teachings. So I think that's our responsibility as we mature, it's to do that—to continuously do the fasting, to do the prayers, to go away to the spaces where I'm not distracted so I can be in a right relationship with the most important being. Then I can listen and be a part of a conversation, with whomever. And

there are some things that will concern you, but they don't concern me because I'm not called to do whatever it is. It's about this personal relationship and a practice within the relationship that I'm called to do certain things around purification that also come from my culture.

RW: The theology of the Western church fundamentally misunderstands the gospel. And so when it uses phrases like “the Great Commission” it already begins on the wrong foot. It begins with a misunderstanding of what the Great Commission is about. The Western church doesn't understand what salvation is. They don't get it. They think it's going out and telling people something and having them agree with what they said. I'm a missiologist by profession, and I'm writing a new book where I'm trying to lay this out for Western people. This all goes back to the problem of dualism.

Though there is no “Great Commission,” there is a “Great Commandment” and it's pretty straightforward: love Creator, Great Mystery, with everything you have (integrity of heart, mind, soul and strength, with vulnerability, persistence, patience, kindness, and all those things); and the second most important thing is just like the first. Note that in Matthew 22 it doesn't say here's one commandment, and here's number two. It says the second is just like the first, love your neighbor the way you love yourself. You want to see yourself be taken care, you want to feed yourself, you don't want to be hungry, you want to be in a relationship, you want to have people to love and that love you— well, treat your neighbour just like that and just with the same integrity. And what does that look like? Consider the Zacchaeus story. When Jesus comes to Zacchaeus's house he tells him—after Zacchaeus has promised to give back what he's stolen from the poor, and more—“now you have salvation.”

Or consider Jesus' inaugural sermon word in Luke 4, where he draws from Isaiah 58, which is all about justice. “This is the kind of fasting I want, free those who are wrongly in prison, lighten the burden for those who work for you—worker's rights—let the oppressed go free, remove the chains that bind people.” Now those stories are certainly appropriate to the church of the Indigenious people. Share your food with the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, give clothes to those that need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help. Then your salvation will come like the dawn and your wounds will quickly heal.” We should probably stop using the word “salvation” and instead use the word that it comes out of, which is “healing.” We will take that message that we have and that life that we live and we will do these kinds of things. And that is how healing will come to others and in coming to others, it will also come to us. That's what the Great Commission is about. It's not about going out and saying here's the message, but [rather] going out and living, being

and allowing—we can use this language—Christ to live through us as we go out and we live the life of Christ. And by the way, I come from Stomp Dance religion people. I wasn't raised traditional, but I came into it later. And we are not against preaching. In stomp they actually have someone who's called the preacher; as I've observed, he's usually the Stomp Dance chief or vice chief who gets up and exhorts with great passion and conviction, encouraging people to walk in the Harmony Way. Our way is called the White Path. It has to do with purity and not race or anything like that. And to live in harmony when we see each other and to help us and others in that journey, we have preachers. I know other Indigenous practices do as well in various ways. But it's not about whether or not we are sharing the message; it's about the message that we share.