ESSENTIAL LESSONS

BY PETER FORBES
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21 ESSENTIAL LESSONS
FROM FIRST LIGHT

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2020
Here are my markers:

Son of Daniel and Frances, yearners, outsiders who could re-invent themselves so I could have many priviledges. Father to Willow and Wren, who changed their last names to re-find a broken linneage. Partner to Helen, first generation in this country, with whom I share many forms of co-creation. I've worked all over this continent but am at home in northern New England. I'm of Ukrainian and French Canadian descent in the 6th decade of my life.
First Light: Repairing and returning at the speed of trust.

First Light is an ongoing collaboration between Maine conservation organizations and Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet and MicMac communities aimed at expanding Wabanaki stewardship of land.

Our long work is collaboration and reciprocity: we seek Wabanaki access and stewardship of land and we seek to create a stronger conservation movement that includes and reflects Indigenous expertise and perspective. Through expanding Wabanaki stewardship of land, we hope to grow the conditions for the on-going prosperity of Wabanaki language, culture and economy. All will benefit from this, and it all begins with the land.

After 350 years of colonization and broken treaties, the Wabanaki in Maine now have access to less than 1% of the land that once supported their place-based cultures.
Maine’s rivers and mountains may carry some Wabanaki names, but the people and the stories that those names belong to have been relegated to small reservations out of sight to most Mainers. In the last 50 years, land trusts in Maine have come to work on /have relationships with almost 23% of the land in the state which includes countless places of great importance to Wabanaki people and once stewarded by them.

We don’t have the power to change treaties, or to change a long history of colonization and injustice, but we can help change the future. Since starting this collaboration in 2017, we have accomplished much together: earned the commitment and participation of multiple conservation organizations, individual meetings with Tribal Chiefs, Council Members and representatives of the 5 Tribal Communities on their home grounds, held a milestone gathering in 2019 to affirm goals, held a joint canoe expedition together, developed a new legal tool -a cultural respect agreement- that would allow landowners to grant access to Tribes. Most importantly, we have facilitated harvesting permits over tens of thousands of acres affirming the seriousness of our intent. These gatherings and actions have built the relationships and trust necessary to make possible our larger goals.

We are simultaneously building separate and collective capacity to meaningfully identify and respond to land access opportunities through the creation of a Wabanaki Task Force and a Conservation Community Delegation to pool resources and put our best skills and abilities forward to collaborate.

www.firstlightlearningjourney.net
These are personal lessons learned that I’m continuing to learn, not just once or twice but in an ongoing way.

This circular nature of learning is a good thing to remember.

For me, and perhaps for you, there has never been a straight line from here to there.
Be grateful for the chance to meet.

There’s a long history of broken promises and neglect including the dispossession of most Wabanaki lands that came before my invitation to meet, and there are higher priorities facing an Indigenous community than my idea.

In light of all of that, I’m grateful to have the chance to meet.
Be equitable in how we meet.

Before we meet, I consider who in the room is getting compensated to be there and who isn’t. It's not okay for an Indigenous person to be volunteering their time to have this meeting when I’m getting paid. It's both important and difficult to be transparent about this and to respond equitably. The right answer is to start with equal compensation for those in the circle.

Be mindful and thoughtful about where we meet.
Be real about past mistakes that I’ve made.

I have made mistakes and missteps in my relationships with all kinds of people including Indigenous people. Saying sorry is important, but a more valuable action is demonstrating how I’m learning and moving forward in better ways.
I will do harm, so humility and awareness are doubly important.

A Wabanaki leader I respect a great deal said to me that my intentions were good, but I would still do harm to her people. The choices I would make out of both goodwill and ignorance were bound to replicate patterns of oppression.

I carry myself differently knowing that I will do harm by choices I make over who to work with and not work with.

Many of these hard lessons arise from this important understanding: I will do harm.

One of the ways to reduce the harm is to take responsibility for my own ignorance and education.
STILL HERE
Respect and acknowledge the history that has created the current situation.

I’ve seen how a peoples' trauma can be so deep it is passed on to injure future generations as a “blood memory.” To do the work of the present, this past must be acknowledged and given room to speak.

Anyone who has the luxury to be able to live only in the present or the future is a very privileged person.
Be curious and take responsibility for my own education.

Read the treaties and learn the history on Indigenous genocide and land dispossession.

Don’t put the burden to educate me on an Indigenous person. Ask a lot of questions about how to invite, who to invite, about gift-giving and about cultural norms — these are all things I could not likely have found answers to on my own.

It’s good to ask questions in a discerning kind of way.
Natalie's Poem
The process
The results

[Diagram]
- Calling In as if
- Call out
Don’t burden anyone else with my emotions.

My shame and guilt shouldn’t be anyone’s burden but my own, nor are they badges of wokeness. I’ve come to believe that shame and guilt are the privilege of someone who can choose whether or not to act on these issues. All that really matters is what I do with my privilege. Do I express shame and guilt, or do I take action?
Explore, understand and state my intentions around doing this work.

What are my motivations in doing this work?
Who am I in this work?
Am I just following a grant?
Am I motivated by a spirit of charity, or reciprocity?
Do I know the difference? I can be sure that the people in the room will feel the difference.

“If you’re here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you’re here because your liberation is bound up in my liberation, then we have some work to do together.”
-Lilian Watson
The most important credential for this work is being asked by a Native person to do it.

If you haven’t been asked by an Indigenous person to do this work, what’s the value of this proposition to them to engage?

What right do I have to think it's important enough?

I have my work to do. I can not be paralyzed into inaction. And yet I can't insist that my projects, my ideas deserve time and attention equal to or more than native projects.
Be real about what I can and can’t do.

The world between Native and non-native people is littered with broken promises and bad follow through.

Think hard about what you can do and know your limits.

Don’t waste a Native person’s time by believing strongly in something yourself, but not being able to deliver. No organization can ever do on the outside what it’s unable or unwilling to do on the inside.

Is your organization really ready to do land justice work? Are they a just organization themselves?

Are you prepared to side with Native people when that may mean consequence and confrontation?
Show up for Native events and ground myself in the work through personal relationships.

I’m doing the work because it’s inside of me, and not because I have a grant or because I hope to get a grant. The best way for me to demonstrate this to the people I am building relationships with is to show up in their lives outside of meetings.
Spend time together doing physical things outside.

Spend nights outside together. Take a canoe expedition together. Use your hands to carve a spoon, harvest food, make fires, build things together.
Check my time oppression and all other assumptions.

If something isn’t happening at a speed that makes me comfortable, then maybe it’s better for me to be uncomfortable. My relationship to time comes from a culture that has used time and productivity to oppress people to meet its own goals, not theirs. Organizations focused mostly on deadlines, transactions and year-end goals carry that oppression forward.

We can all notice were we are triggered and pause there long enough to be curious about why, to uncover and name what is really going on. And then to move forward with more responsibility and care.
Dates don’t matter, but trust and relationship do.

I’m recovering from a life-long obsession with time, dates and deadlines. Deadlines are important, but not as important as the conversations you need to have about how to be trustworthy to one another. In the end, a deadline really might not matter that much.
HERE ALL HONORED HERE.
Question my deep-seated desire to be thanked.

Ouch! I’m ashamed that on occasion this is true.

Even when I unpack it and expose it to light and air, there’s some awful white savior complex in my bag. It arises when I’m tired and from some lingering egotistical belief that I’m doing this work to help someone other than myself.

Prepare not to be thanked and don't feel entitled to gratitude.

The long arc of this work is for us all to feel belonging. We shouldn’t be thanked for that, only grateful when it comes.
Engage around what is actually needed, not around what I am offering.

I wanted to put solar panels on your roofs, and you wanted help getting mold out of your homes.

When I finally listened and started working on getting rid of the mold, that was the beginning of a real relationship that might one day lead to solar panels on the roof.
It's hardly ever my story to tell.

It's better to do the actual work and be respected for that versus telling a story about the work, risking appropriation or the shame of looking like a white savior, and feeling like I took a story that didn't belong to me.

I’ve felt that shame.
Humility is crucial.

Listen more and talk less. Lowering my head below my heart, letting others teach me, being vulnerable.

Don’t confuse humility with lack of knowledge or being ill-prepared. I know that there are many things I don’t know. Humility is a path toward being genuine and relinquishing power.
Don’t take pictures and don’t ask for testimonials.

Who benefits more by having an image of a Native person or their testimonial? Is it the Native person or the privileged or white-led organizations who benefit by that association?

If I'm not confident that others are served more by the photo or the testimonial than I, than my having it is an appropriation.

There should always be a high bar and always a risk of being caught taking something from someone else.
Show up again and again.

Showing up again and again builds trust.

If you or your organization have a time-line or deadline for this work perhaps it should be tossed away. Relationships don’t happen in a linear way or by a time-line. If your team is talking about a take-out strategy, perhaps this isn’t the work for you.
Be respectful and be trustworthy.

I seek to be trusted to deliver on this goal of land justice. I will stay with it over years and through changes in approach.

This work is mutual in that I know I benefit from it as much as anyone else.

This work is reparative because it is more important than access. It is about belonging: you to your ancestors, me to this place, we to eachother.

It is slow because it needs to be.

I approach this with determination and gratitude.
GRATITUDE TO MY TEACHERS
Eagle Poem
By Joy Harjo

To pray
You open your whole self
To sky,
To sun
To one whole voice that is you
and know there is more
can’t know except in moments
steadily growing,
and in language
circles of motion
like eagle that Sunday morning
over Salt River.
Circled in blue sky

with sacred wings.
We see you
and know
that we must take the utmost care
and kindness in all things.
Breathe in
knowing
we are made of
all this, and breathe, knowing

were born
a true circle of motion
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us
That it will

We pray
In beauty
In

To pray
to Earth
to moon
to one whole voice
that you can’t see, can’t
steadily growing,
that aren’t always seen
circles of motion

In wind, swept our
with sacred wings.

See ourselves
and know

we are truly born
and die soon

circle of motion
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us
That it will

beauty.