

The Merchant of Venice as a Call to Heal

by Ralph C. Martin

The Merchant of Venice is about racism and how prejudice builds to block understanding and relational resilience. Shakespeare, in writing the play, elucidated anti-Semitism. Its subsequent rise over centuries was eventually spewed as pent up rage and horror in fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and other parts of Europe in the 1930s and during WW II. Thus this year's Stratford Festival production, set in the 1930s, in Venice, Italy, shone a light on the potential impact of relentless racism. Supposedly harmless racist jokes to amuse circles of homogenous friends are not harmless.

Today, Cecile Kyenge is Italy's first black Minister in the Italian government. As Minister of Integration, she has been steadily insulted and attacked because she is black and was born in the Congo. Racism is still current.

Canadians have not been immune from racism either. Eighty years ago, in Toronto, the Christie Pitts riot of 1933 was the violent expression of torment and resistance after years of arrogant anti-Semitic persecution and taunting.

About 400 years ago, Europeans arrived in Canada with a cultural snobbery and an assumption that the raw landscape and uncivilized people must be developed to have "real value." Nevertheless, when Champlain and his crew arrived at Port Royal, Nova Scotia, in 1604, they were welcomed and assisted by the Mi'kmaq Nation.

Eventually across Canada, the original keepers of this land, died of small pox and other European diseases, from 'gifts' such as Hudson's Bay blankets. There was a steady displacement of First Nations people by Europeans, especially on fertile land.

Finally, Aboriginals—their populations decimated—lived on small reserves. There was a deliberate attempt to assimilate their children with specific racist policies and subsequent actions, in residential schools. My friend, Tod Augusta-Scott, points out that "First Nations people originally received gifts for their land but the language shifted to them getting relief and then to being on welfare. It's quite possible that they originally understood gifts would be ongoing, as rent." Certainly they did not welcome, assist and then negotiate to be displaced and marginalized.

At a recent workshop, an aboriginal elder who was abused at a residential school, invited workshop participants to walk beside her and other Aboriginals. "That's all we

ask” she said. “We don’t want you to walk behind us or ahead of us. Just walk beside us and we’ll learn and grow together.”

It is remarkable, after so much hurtful history, that the invitation is still open to walk side by side on Canadian land.

The persistence of unequal acquisition hurts not only the ‘have-nots’ but also the ‘haves,’ according to Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in *The Spirit Level*. Their data show that highest income earners are healthier in societies where their incomes are closer to low income earners, than in societies where the spread is more pronounced.

The challenge of our time is to sustain communities of all humans and other species with our diversity of potential contributions. Each creature of the interdependent web of creation has unique gifts. Increasingly, we need all hands on deck to adapt with resilience to gusts of climate change, pollution and excess resource use.

Every human tradition offers ways of knowing and wisdom. We hurt ourselves when marginalizing or attempting to stamp out those who are gifted differently. The common Sunday school song pertains. “Red and yellow, black and white. All are precious in God’s sight.”

Joanna Macy (www.joannamacy.net) is an eco-philosopher and scholar of Buddhism. She advises that “healing wounded relationships within you and between you is integral to the healing of our world.” Doors of appreciation for landscapes, other creatures and humans may open to the same inner source.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia concurs with her eloquent plea in the court scene, which hinged on narrow interpretations of justice.

“The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as a gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesses him that gives and him that takes.”

Mercy was not sincerely chosen by either side in the court. The audience at the Stratford Festival then heard the ominous sirens and hateful speeches of WW II. However, as a small act of mercy at the play's end, Portia gave the yarmulke of Shylock, the Jewish money lender, to his daughter Jessica. Portia had retrieved it after another Christian humiliatingly yanked it from Shylock's head in the court.

Macy also encourages us to build on small acts of mercy and healing, as did the gracious Aboriginal elder. As we walk side by side, sharing our gifts, we co-create a future, with balanced relationships.

Ralph C. Martin, Ph.D., P.Ag. is the Loblaw Chair, Sustainable Food Production and Professor, Ontario Agricultural College, University of Guelph. Comments welcome at rcmartin@uoguelph.ca