

# Reading John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*

An ARE Study Guide for Canadian Unitarians

Rev. Steven Epperson, Unitarian Church of Vancouver

In order for Canadian Unitarians—professional ministers and lay members alike—to express themselves theologically in ways that are congruent with our national context, it's helpful to have a "picture" of this nation and its peoples—its history and its "myths," or foundational stories—that describes who and what we are as accurately as possible. "Picturing" any nation—its peoples, institutions and myths, is a daunting, controversial task. *A Fair Country...* by John Ralston Saul is one of those books, and given the complexity of the origins of this nation, the fateful encounter of its peoples, its colonial and neo-colonial relationship with foreign countries, its burgeoning Aboriginal and immigrant populations, any attempt to "tell truths about Canada" is bound to be controversial; it may also prove to be enlightening and exciting.

During six, one and half hour sessions in the Fall of 2009, 35 members of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver met with the Parish Minister, Rev. Steven Epperson, to read, critique, explore and discuss *A Fair Country...* The book and the ensuing Adult RE class explorations were exciting enough to keep the members of the class showing up through the whole six session course. Saul's provocative assertions, his re-interpretations of Canadian history, his scorching critique of Canada's political, economic and cultural elites, and his call to Canadians to re-imagine ourselves *provoked, delighted, exasperated, and inspired us* week-after-week. Whether we agreed with him or not (and frequently class members didn't!), we did agree that we appreciated the ways in which Saul incited us to think, read, and discuss issues about our nation and its identity.

The format for the six class sessions was quite simple: 1) class members read the assigned reading *before each session* (this is crucial!!) to ensure wide participation and familiarity with what we were talking about; 2) the minister served as discussion facilitator introducing the reading, posing a few provocative questions through the evening, and striving to ensure that everyone had a chance to participate. That's about all it took; Saul's work was sufficiently provocative to keep the class engaged in discussion through the hour and a half each evening.

### *Suggestions:*

**CHILD CARE.** Our group was comprised of UCV members ranging in age from mid 40s-mid 80s. If we had provided child care for each session, (and not scheduled it the same night as UCV choir rehearsals!) more, and younger, UCV members would have attended the class.

**EXPERTISE.** We found it very helpful, on occasion, that some in attendance had professional expertise in areas such as Canadian law (especially for chapter 7), medicine and social work (especially chapter 17), and business (again, chapter 17). These "experts" helped us understand Saul's arguments on technical issues and offered withering critiques of where they thought Saul was mistaken in facts and assertions. Where professionals were not on hand, the

facilitator sent photocopies of the assigned readings to an “expert” for their review and comments. Epperson thanks Geoff Gomery and Dr. Nancy Barker for their generous comments/critiques of sections of chapters 7&17. We could have benefited by having someone with more financial business background reading/commenting on parts of chapter 17.

STYLE. *A Fair Country*...is a polemic; that is, a partisan argument in favour of certain propositions, certain re-readings of Canada’s history, and certain recommendations. That has consequences for the style of the book’s writing. It is not a cool, dispassionate research dissertation. It is meant to provoke argument and critical (re)thinking. As well, a polemic “paints” with rather broad brushstrokes; if you’re looking for nuance, sensitivity, and equivocation/hedging, you’re not going to find it in *A Fair Country*. The book is written to pack a punch. Some class members sorely wished for a more complex, less strident handling of the material. That said, again, we all appreciated the way Saul’s book provoked us to think and argue. Still, forewarned is to be forearmed; the book is what it is, not what it is not. One more note on style: a number of people in the class complained about the book’s repetitiveness. We noted a zig zag style in the writing. Given Saul’s argument for the importance of “oral” culture in Canada, for what he called “orality,” some even suggested that his form embodied his advocacy for a re-valuing of the oral style. (I’ll leave that one to the literary experts.)

(MY SINCERE THANKS TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ADULT RE CLASS AT UCV WITH WHOM I READ *A FAIR COUNTRY: TELLING TRUTHS ABOUT CANADA*, OCT-NOV. 2009. IT WAS A GREAT, LIVELY JOURNEY TOGETHER! Rev. Steven Epperson)

(Suggested course description and class schedule)

## **Reading Saul's *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada***

*Six one and a half hour sessions.*

**The only requirement/expectation is that you will read assigned pages/chapters before the class, and bring your questions, critiques, and ideas.)**

In June 2009, Rev. Steven Epperson, Unitarian Church of Vancouver, stated that John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada* is the most important book he's read about Canada. In this class, we will read and discuss *A Fair Country...* We will examine/critique Saul's provocative ideas/assertions, his re-interpretation of Canadian history, and his contentious reading of contemporary Canadian financial, cultural and political life. In a final session, we will consider the impact his "new story" may have on how we look at our country and our faith community.

### **Schedule:**

**Session 1:** Saul's Provocative Proposition: A Metis Civilization? (**read:** preface and chs. 1-5; pp xi-44)

**Session 2:** Reimagining Ourselves and Our Past (Part I): An Enlarging Circle and Fairness (**read:** chs. 6-11; pp 45-116)

**Session 3:** Reimagining Ourselves and Our Past (Part II): Order and Fear (**read:** chs. 12-15; pp 117-69)

**Session 4:** Elites and the Colonial Mind (**read:** chs. 16-22; pp 173-276)

**Session 5:** If not now, when?: Action, the North, and *A Fair Country?* (**read:** chs. 23-25; pp 279-323)

**Session 6:** If so, what of us?: *A Fair Country...* and Canadian Unitarians

*Note that the reading assignments for sessions 2&4 were quite long. In our ARE class, we decided to add an extra week before sessions 2&4 in order to complete the reading assignment.*

(Sample introductions and discussion questions for a six-session Adult RE course on JR Saul's *A Fair Country*.)

**Session 1:** Saul's Provocative Proposition: A Metis Civilization? (**read:** preface and chs. 1-5; pp xi-44)

According to Saul, Canada is not primarily a "European" nation created in the image and values inherited from France and Great Britain. Instead, he asserts that we are a Metis nation, that our ideas, values, and institutions are based and influenced by the original and on-going encounter between French and English speaking immigrants and the First Nations people. Indeed, more than that, Saul claims we are more aboriginal than we are European, and that our failure to come to terms with this foundational experience and reality prevents Canada from being the self-confident and progressive nation that it should and could be. As a result, we misrepresent ourselves to ourselves; we don't know who we really are. This fact about us has dire consequences: a dysfunctional elite, an uncertain, frustrated citizenry seriously adrift, and a nation plagued by an endemic problem: poisonous relations between European and recent immigrants and our First Nations peoples.

*Sample Questions:*

Intro-ch. 1

- What is Saul's provocative proposition?
- What does he identify as key elements of aboriginal values that are our national endowment (peace, fairness, good government; non-racial, non-linear, non-rational thinking/acting; an inclusive circle, etc.)
- How/in what way does Saul's proposition run counter to the standard story/history we tell about Canada/ourselves?
- Why does he call this the wrong story?

ch. 2: Saul adduces some historical facts to prop up his Metis nation claim, e.g. intermarriage

- Do his historical examples help to validate his claims? Do they ring true? How do they change our perceptions about our founding and development?

ch. 3: Saul claims that Canadians commit a "double denial" of history and our roots.

- Discuss role of Natives as full partners in Canadian affairs for 250 years.
- What are the consequences of the "double denial"?
- Define colonialism.
- Define "myth." Saul is striving to rewrite/re-imagine Canada's founding myths. Discuss.

ch. 4: racism and being trapped in the wrong story

- Why are "we" trapped in the "wrong story?" What are the consequences?
- What is the difference of the old and new racism in Canada? Are Canadians racist?

Ch. 5: we either continue as we are, or we re-think our history WITH 1st Nations, Metis, Inuit.

- How and where is this re-thinking in the presence of others going to occur?

**Session 2:** Reimagining Ourselves and Our Past (Part I): An Enlarging Circle and Fairness (read: chs. 6-11; pp 45-116)

With regard to this section of reading, Saul writes: “All the ideas I have evoked...are linked to our need to develop a vision of ourselves that is built upon our foundations....We must try to think of this place in another way. We must step away from the conquering, owning ways of thought and move toward seeing ourselves as part of the place. All of this is contained in the idea that you are reconciled to the place and thus to the Other by widening the circle.”

*Sample Questions:*

ch. 6: the European view of human “progress” (EVHP) does not fit Canada

- What’s wrong with the EVHP when applied to Canada and the Canadian story?
- Describe Canada’s regions. Who are the “real” nomads in Canada?
- What are the features of 1<sup>st</sup> Nations’ “complexity” and how is it different from European “monolithic” assumptions?

ch. 7: How we formally describe ourselves is at odds with how we “think of ourselves at an unconscious, instinctual level.” In chapters 7-10, JRS cites/brings forth evidence to make his argument about our implicit reality and values and how they have been and are influenced by aboriginal values.

- How do we imagine ourselves in fact? (We counted and discussed eight values/ways we “unconsciously” think of ourselves, according to JRS.) How does that list compare/contrast with conventional, euro-centric self imagining? e.g. place vs. race, on-going negotiation vs. clarity, oral vs. written authority, etc.
- What are the two acts in the “creation of the idea of Canada?” (1701 Great Peace of Montreal, 1764 Niagara Peace...anybody even heard of them?)
- What does he mean by the “honour of the Crown”?
- What does he mean that “culture carries a greater truth than fact”?

ch. 8: If we re-thought environment and society with input from indigenous philosophy (minimal impairment) the consequences would lead to a renewal of Canada’s positive standing in the community of nations. “The single greatest failure of the Canadian experiment so far has been our inability to normalize—that is, to internalize consciously—the First Nations as the senior founding pillar of our civilization.”

- Why do nations view us with increasing suspicion/disrespect with regard to the environment?
- What obstacles have “we” placed in the way of 1<sup>st</sup> Nations from realizing their foundational/relational role?

ch. 9: the imperative of “minimal impairment” in the battlefield is an expression of the historically deep encounter with indigenous practice and values.

- What examples from Canadian military history illustrate a distinctive Canadian approach to military tactics?
- How has that sensibility been expressed in Canada’s contribution to the community of nations?
- Do you buy JRS’s argument?

ch.10: First Nations are reasserting their role in Canada in culture, economics, and demographics; the future of Canada will increasingly be “aboriginal.”

- What are the necessary conditions for “reconciliation” to take place between non Aboriginal and Aboriginal Canadians?

ch. 11: Here we begin Part II of JRS’s presentation: “Peace, *Fairness*, and Good Government.” Saul asserts, through a detailed, revisionist historical examination, that after Confederation Canadians came to forget our Metis origins, and that the very nature of the country was distorted by subsequent misinterpretations of our founding documents.

- What does “welfare” mean? What did it mean in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and what’s it doing in early Canadian political documents?

**Session 3:** Reimagining Ourselves and Our Past (Part II): Order and Fear (read: chs. 12-15; pp 117-69)

ch. 12: Saul continues to review/revise our understanding, our reading of Canadian history. Here we approach and move into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Sample Questions:*

- Why does he think that the Royal Proclamation of 1764 and the Quebec Act are so important for establishing the legal basis of Canadian civilization?
- Do you think that what Canadians pulled off as they moved toward Confederation as “more revolutionary” than the experience in the US?
- Why is reading the official French versions of legal/constitutional documents so important for Saul?
- Does Saul’s reading of Canadian history up through 1848 ring true to you? What’s new in his focus on certain events and individuals, anything? And what difference does it make?

ch. 13: Immigration, “order,” and the “Middle Way”: where did “welfare” go? Saul continues to review/revise our understanding, our reading of Canadian history as we move through the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

- What did the 1848 law about immigration reveal about Canadian identity?
- What does “Manichean” mean? And how is opposed to the “Middle Way” in Canadian politics and self-understanding?
- How did “welfare” come to be displaced by “order” as the middle term in the 1867 British North American Act? And how is it a distortion of the founding principles of Canadian identity?

ch.14: How a “new school of thought” distorted our history and mythic self-understanding: the Tory re-write of Canada’s past, and what was lost as a consequence.

- How can one misplace the “ideas” of *Terrebonne*, Lafontaine, Baldwin and “much of our history?” What happened?
- Why does Saul rip into Great Britain and its foreign policy regarding Canada? What is the “Judicial Committee”? and why was it so noxious to Canadian well-being?

ch. 15: the role of memory and being locked, as if, in a bad dream.

- What difference does it make whether we place “welfare”/fairness, instead of “order” at the centre of how we imagine ourselves?

**Session 4:** Elites and the Colonial Mind (read: chs. 16-22; pp 173-276)

In this session, we enter Part III, “The Castrati,” an assault on corporate Canada. It’s quite a romp; Saul accuses Canada’s “elites” as cowardly, emasculated, dysfunctional and alienated. They neither understand themselves or their country. As a result, they forever lapse into a subservient, colonial mentality vis a vis centres of imperial power (Great Britain, France and the United States) with dire consequences for the nation. What Canadians imagine about themselves and what we want in health care, social services, democratic governance, fisheries, housing, foreign policy, domestic ownership of industries and natural resources, etc. etc., our identity and aspirations are thwarted by our own “colonized” elites.

*Sample Questions:*

ch. 16: the nature of an elite

- Let’s define just who Saul is talking about: what/who are Canada’s elites?

ch. 17: failing to live up to our aspirations

- Do these “signs of failure” ring true to our own understanding/experience of key sectors of Canadian politics, society?
- Define colonialization. What are the features of a colonial country? Do we fit the description? Was there a period when Canada wasn’t a colonial country?

ch. 18: post-modern and not caring to bother

- Is Canada a “post-modern” society? What does he mean by “post-modern” anyway?

ch. 19-20: the critique continues: sedated despair, loss of confidence, love of death, garrison mentality, functional illiteracy.

- Does Saul overreach in his psychologizing of the elite mind-set?
- Throughout the book, Saul puts Canada “on the couch.” Does this help/hinder his analysis?
- Saul claims there was a golden age of leadership in Canada? When did this era take place? What were its achievements? Has it been downhill, in fact, ever since?
- Is there an alternative role for a middle power to play, other than to “have its interests defined by the empire of the day”? What would that role look like? What resources do we have to draw from to assert a middle way of a middle power?

(In chapter 20, Saul calls Stephan Stephansson Canada’s “greatest” writer of “war poetry.” Stephansson was very close to Icelandic Unitarians in Manitoba. It’s worth looking him up.)

ch. 21: how Ottawa became our capital and the meaning of Dominion. This was a favourite chapter for many: a seemingly simple, yet unconventional look at conventional notions. A good example of taking largely forgotten, misunderstood events of the past and re-framing and re-presenting them.

- What is the meaning of Dominion, and how did it get degraded? (has anyone heard of Leonard Tilley?)

ch. 22: wherein the RCMP threw the election in 2005 (and other subversions of democracy in Canada), a Prime Minister gets bought off, and private money trumps the public good in our cities. This is one of the most incendiary chapters in the book. Some of us found eerie similarities between the 2005 election in Canada with the US Supreme Court’s 2000 ruling that overturned Gore’s election for the US Presidency by a majority vote of the US electorate.

- Are these examples (in ch.22) compelling enough to argue that democracy is under assault in Canada? Why don't we hear more opposition from the media and civil society?
- Can we think of additional examples of how democracy in Canada is currently threatened?
- pp. 273-76 Saul restates his case prior to moving into the final section.

**Session 5:** If not now, when?: Action, the North, and A Fair Country? (read: chs. 23-25; pp 279-323)

We enter the fourth and final section of *A Fair Country*... Saul claims that how we imagine and name ourselves, our country has enormous consequences for how we achieve (or fail to achieve) our nation; how we continue to the work of building a nation “half-built.” In this section he considers the Confucian principle of “rectification of names”, of listening to the North, and of re-imagining and redrawing Canada’s “Circle of Fairness.”

*Sample questions:*

ch.23: from naming things correctly, to acting effectively and well

- What is meant by “the rectification of names?”
- consider the impact of a mis-diagnosis of a patient vs an accurate one. Saul is arguing, in fact that we are misdiagnosing ourselves by resorting to the wrong diagnostic tools. Compare “Western”/Judeo-Christian understanding of selves, land, society vs. Aboriginal/Metis/“Canadian”.
- If we arrived at the right diagnosis, what would an effective treatment look like?

ch. 24: looking and listening to the North

- When you think of Canada’s North—what comes to mind?
- How do we persist in getting the North “wrong”? How can we re-imagine and act in ways congruent with the reality of the North?
- On p 286, Saul compares “economic theory” with pressing civic choices/needs. What economic theory is he referring to, and why isn’t working for Canada?

ch. 25: a fair country? Fairness and inclusion lie at the heart of our civilization; and yet, our “society is weakest now” in the area of “strategy.”

- What is the difference between tactical and strategic thinking and acting?
- What are the four civic virtues?
- If our elites are failing us, how do we get Canada back on track?
- Look at Saul’s strategic proposals? What do you think of his list? How would you subtract or add to them?

**Session 6:** If so, what of us?: *A Fair Country...* and Canadian Unitarians

You have now read *A Fair Country...* For five weeks, you have met, explored, argued, and learned new things about Canada's past and present through the pages of this provocative, polemical book. Whether you have agreed with Saul or not, you may have discovered, as the Adult RE class at UCV did in the Fall of 2009, that he certainly got you to think and talk ideas, history, theory, and current affairs with fellow members of the class. We all appreciated this immensely. Through reading this book, we saw our nation in a new, fascinating, and sometimes infuriating light. Many of our senior members deeply appreciated revisiting Canada's history. They are living witnesses that much of what Saul had to say about the denial of Canada's past, and its "revision" by historians and interests pushing a British imperial myth, were true. We were all fascinated and provoked by his attempt to re-imagine our origins and our almost underground "aboriginal" identity. Many of us hoped that it was "true," and resonated deeply to the inversion of attitudes that Saul is attempting to pull off through is reconfiguration of our history.

Does any or all of this have anything to say about our identity as Canadian Unitarians?

*Suggestions about the last session.*

- On a blackboard, etc. draw up two lists: 1) *the negatives* class members experienced in the book, e.g. problems with style, romanticizing First Nations peoples, inflammatory language, weak on understanding of jurisprudence, etc. (It's nice to get this off our chests.) 2) *the positives*: 3 foundational pillars—Aboriginal, English, French, idea of fairness, a stronger idea of what it means to be Canadian, seeing how colonized our institutions are in fact, a lot of problems—but came away feeling hopeful, etc. This exercise functioned as a good, class-driven review of the book.
- On the blackboard, etc. write "Consequences for us—How to Go From Here?" The members of the UCV Adult RE class came up with ideas that are locally and regionally specific, as well as ones national scope.

We'll hold on to and work on our own responses at UCV. We look forward to comparing notes, ideas and action with other Canadian Unitarian congregations/fellowships and their ministers, as well as the CUC Board and staff down the road in order to achieve a "Fair Country."