



**MARCH 2019**

**Richard Wagamese, *One Drum: Stories and Ceremonies for a Planet* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2019)**

[This book note is a review done in Jan, 2020, for a wonderful online book review journal in British Columbia called *The Ormsby Review* – [www.ormsbyreview.com](http://www.ormsbyreview.com). It reflects a bit on my dialogue with Indigenous spiritualities in seeking to dig more deeply into the dynamics of forgiveness and reconciliation that the Holy Trinity desires and is developing for their creation.]

My journey of communal and personal healing is very different from that of Richard Wagamese. We find our wisdom from different spiritual traditions, with different mentors, in different languages. But listening to the stories told and considering the ceremonies described in this book published after Wagamese's death in 2017, so beautifully edited and published by the team at Douglas & McIntyre, has greatly enriched my ways of seeing my own tradition.

I suggest that you read this book to listen and consider. Develop your own appropriation of the Sacred Breath ceremony as you savour the writing and the wisdom. It will ground your learning at a deeper level of your being and integrate your instincts, emotions, and intellect at a deeper level of awareness.

As Wagamese summarized his life, it was "a constant mess of bad choices, mangled opportunities, broken relationships, new cities and towns, and repeatedly building a life from the ground up." At one point, he had simply resigned himself to that. He used his people's ceremonies as "Band-Aids," expecting them to magically make all the pain going away. It didn't work. He became more and more depressed. As he came to see it, he "was choosing to allow myself to block the healing flow of energy."

The healing that led to this book took a long time. Wagamese did not walk it alone. Among the elders who opened up the Seven Grandfather Teachings (humility, courage, respect, love, honesty, truth, and wisdom) to him after he "rejoined" his people in 1978, Jack Kakakaway played a seminal role. Wagamese once introduced Kakakaway with these words, "Jack was a Plains Ojibway from Manitoba, a veteran, a recovering alcoholic, a father, powwow dancer and traditional teacher. He was possessed of a marvelous rolling laugh, loved to hear a good story, tell a joke and played a great mandolin. He was quiet, solemn but open and engaging as well. He was an Elder in the truest sense." This book, along with *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations* (2016), an earlier volume of his reflections on his spiritual journey beautifully published by Douglas & McIntyre, shows that Wagamese healed deeply from the multiple traumas of his life.

*One Drum* focuses on three of the Grandfather's Teachings – humility, courage, and respect. Humility, according to Wagamese, is the energy that binds all things together. It's the glue, he suggests. In the

face the pressures Settler society places on us to achieve, to do, to become, to control, and to have, he finds that walking together to the beat of one drum, aligning with one song, brings us together in a common purpose. The harmony that flows through humility has its source in the "Sacred Breath" and manifests itself in sharing. Courage is the walking the faith that we are not separate and distinct, but part of Creator. Walls, barriers, and distinctions generated by fear are replaced by confidence that we are all part of the eternal energy. Respect is something that you offer and carry within you. It is the ability to honour all of Creation. Without this sense of the inherent value of all things, Wagamese concludes, our lives drift into directionless wandering. He's been there. He's journeyed through that. He's appropriated the teachings of the Grandfathers and let them shape him into healing.

Much of the shaping has taken place in ceremonies that Wagamese has learned from elders. In those ceremonies, "our energy is brought into the great flow of the creative energy that is the universe." He describes four in this book. The Sacred Breath ceremony best happens at the beginning of the day to recognize that Creation is within you and carried by you throughout the day. The Tobacco Offering is an expression of gratitude for the kindness of Creation, the ways Mother Earth cares for us. In the Vision Quest, we rediscover harmony and connectedness, learning "that separation is a myth and an ungrounded fear." Through Acting Outwardly, we allow the spiritual energy of choice to flow through us with courage to transform the planet.

This review by a white male Presbyterian settler in his early 70s does not come anywhere close to the eloquence of this spiritual sage in the stories, remembrances, descriptions, and reflections in his writing. I do hope it has whetted your appetite for listening to and considering this book yourself. Whatever your culture and situation, you will be enriched and transformed.