

## Building Bridges and Exploring Indigenous Governance Systems

*“In order to understand where we are today, and where we would like to be, we need to understand where we have been.”* --- Nuu-chah-nulth educator John Rampanen.

Last month I reported on Chief Dr. Robert Joseph’s speech to the Association of Vancouver Island Coastal Communities, and as promised, this month I am sharing some highlights from another knowledgeable and inspiring First Nations speaker.

In March, John Rampanen, of the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nation, gave a workshop to the Islands Trust Council entitled **Working Across Cultures: Building Bridges and Exploring Indigenous Governance Systems**. The approximately 450 islands in the Trust Area overlap or border on the traditional territory of over 30 First Nations, so this is not just an academic exercise for us!

Rampanen started at the beginning, with spirit, sky, land and water. These four elements, he explained, form the organizing principles of his people’s spirituality, and their spirituality in turn forms the organizing principle of their communities – including their governance systems.

After giving us a glimpse of how the Nuu-chah-nulth honoured these four elements in their daily lives and social organization prior to first contact, Rampanen led us through a summary of **what happened when Europeans arrived**. Here’s an excerpt:

1778: Captain James Cook is discovered by the Nuu-chah-nulth  
1847 – 1850: measles outbreak, and 1862: smallpox outbreak – up to 90 per cent of First Nations people don’t survive  
1861: first residential school opens  
1900: First Nation population in North America reduced from 15 million to 300,000  
1922: RCMP seize over 600 objects and arrest chiefs and elders in a potlatch raid on Vancouver Island  
1931: 80 residential schools operating in Canada (10,000 children aged six to 15)  
1951: law banning potlatch is dropped; practicing culture becomes legal  
1960: Indigenous people allowed to vote in Canada  
1996: last residential school in Canada is closed

After showing us “where we have been,” Rampanen moved on to “where we are now:” a time of unprecedented opportunity and challenge for indigenous/settler relationships in Canada. Then he offered **tips on how to get to “where we would like to be”** – assuming, as I think all of us in the room were, that the goal is reconciliation. Here are some of his suggestions:

- The most effective way to **get to know another culture** is through immersion. Attend cultural events and celebrations. Make an effort to learn the local language. Simple

phrases and greetings are a great introductory effort that show your willingness to learn.

- **Introductions** are a key part of indigenous culture. Generally, the indigenous custom is to not only introduce yourself by name but also to share your family lineage, place of origin and family connections. This honours the interconnectedness and importance of family, and ultimately demonstrates the connection we share globally as human beings.
- **Learn and share more accurate depictions of indigenous history.** Neglecting the true historical relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous people has been one of the biggest barriers to cross-cultural understanding and unity. These issues can be challenging to discuss, but doing so will help us move forward collectively.
- **Be prepared to make, and learn from, mistakes.** Crossing the divide between cultures involves an element of risk-taking. Mistakes will be made along the way. Let these mistakes turn into lessons learned. Exercise patience and flexibility. Equally important is to celebrate successes and acknowledge that which is working well.
- **Self-care is key!** When you take care of self, you are indirectly caring for all others around you. Find your role in the healing process of the extended, multi-cultural family that we are all part of.

This has been a very brief summary of an almost-three-hour presentation, which covered thousands of years of history and delved into matters that are about as complex as they get – legally, historically, politically, and emotionally. Rampanen assured us that “**developing cultural awareness and competency is a life-long learning experience.**” His workshop provided one step along that life-long path for me; perhaps this article has done the same for you.