

# The Tribe

by Jay Connolly

I have a confession to make. When Ms Ferris asked me to speak to you, I had trouble choosing a subject. I am not particularly international. Of the 196 countries in the world, I have visited only five, which makes me a great deal less international than many of you.

In fact, I've always been a little uncomfortable about International Week. My family has lived within the present geographical borders of Canada longer than Canada has existed as a nation. And the circumstances of my parents' and grandparents' early lives forced them always to look forward, never back. During my own childhood, I occasionally asked my parents, "So, what are we?" They always responded the same way: "You're Canadian." I am profoundly proud to be a Canadian, but even back then, "Canadian" sounded to me like an incomplete answer. With a name like Connolly, my Irish roots are certain, but there's Scottish blood on both sides, and some English, too, and who knows what else.

When I was a kid kicking around the red-dust roads of my Northern BC town, I dreamt of being something far more definite and visible than Canadian. I had two First Nations friends, and to me they looked like royalty. I wanted to say that I was Cree or from the Blood Tribes, or a Cherokee. For a while in grade one, I wanted to be Mexican because a Mexican family came with their son Carlos to live in our small town, and I was fascinated by the music of their speech.

Unfortunately, my complexion does not suggest that I have either First Nations or Mexican heritage.

In cultural terms, I sometimes feel like the human equivalent of a stray dog. I know virtually nothing about my ancestral past. My father downloaded some genealogy software ten years ago and started plugging in birth dates and death days. The printout he gave me puts the family in a line that left Ireland two generations before Canada was born. As result, I feel about as much connection to the Emerald Isle as I do to the Leprechauns on a box of Lucky Charms. And when the gears of International Week start turning, I wander around feeling a little lost and a little envious of people who enjoy a passionate sense of family history.

That feeling, however, disappears once the week gets underway, because then I move among the tribes of the world. On every continent of the earth, the tribe is second only to the family in supporting the growth of individuals and the development of culture. Tribes are called clans or houses in some places, but these are just different words for the same thing: communities united by a common sense of the past and a shared dream for the future. I have nothing against nations, but tribes represent our most specific points of origin.

Mr. Robertson, for example, came to Canada from Scotland. Scotland is also home to the Weegies, but Mr Robertson hails from Edinburgh and would not wish to be mistaken for a Weegie. The Bayou Creoles of Louisiana aren't much like the Quebecers, Africans or Native Americans from whom they descend. The point is that our identity is fostered in regions as much as nations, and we are raised, as the ancient African saying goes, by the village.

As soon as we're old enough to escape our families, we go looking for a tribe. If you are one of those rare people graced with an abundance of attractive qualities, then a tribe may have gathered around you at your first recess in elementary school. Finding a tribe is one of the most important things we do in school.

Many years ago, a psychologist named Abraham Maslow devised a six-point hierarchy of human needs. In diagrams, it looks like a pyramid. In the wide base at the bottom he placed the necessities for physical survival -- food, water, and shelter. At the top of the pyramid sits what Maslow called self-actualization. That's just a fancy way of referring to joy, contentment, and success. My friend Drew Morton would call self-actualized people "sick." If you pointed to a happy person with a string of achievements, Drew would say, "That guy is so sick." He would shake his head like this might be a bad thing, but he would mean it as a compliment.

Anyway . . . Maslow found that successful people all shared something he called peak experiences. A peak experience is the kind of achievement that gives life meaning. At Shawnigan, this might involve earning the grades you want, or making the teams you care about, or creating a body of artistic work you are proud of. Maslow discovered that in the vast majority of cases, peak experiences are built on a powerful sense of belonging. In other words, happy people have a tribe.

The students who thrive at Shawnigan are often the ones who belong to the most tribes within our little nation. At the track meet in September, house tribes swarm the fields in ceremonial dress and paint. You sing the hymns of your people and battle for the honor of your house. If you let the electricity of that day charge you, then you have found a tribe.

The threads of common passion and purpose at this school link tribes of volleyball players and rowers, rugby teams and squash enthusiasts, runners and soccer aficionados, and hockey players and basketball teams. We have tribes of artists and craftspeople and dancers and actors and singers. On a more personal level, you belong to tribes that link your hearts with laughter and your spirits in prayer.

I would go as far as to say that without a tribe, you will struggle to achieve your dreams here or anywhere else. The rebels among you may be thinking, "Yeah, wull . . . that's only true if you support the status quo. It's only true if you submit to *The Man!*" But the opposite is also true. Revolutionaries succeed only where they assemble an adequate tribe of believers.

The blessing of international week is the opportunity for people like you to celebrate your tribes and for people like me to join in. Last night at the food fair, we all broke bread together in peace. The food was amazing, but the symbolic value was truly extraordinary.

I would like to end by returning to the issue of Canada. You may have noticed that there's no official Canadian group this week. I can think of at least two reasons for this. The first is that 200 people might try to join, which would make it difficult to work out the dance moves for the stage show. It might also allow people to give up on the important task of tracing their origins to the root.

The decision not to include a Canadian group probably goes back to the first International Week 25 years ago. The pioneer organizers may well have asked themselves, "What would a Canadian group *do*?" Shawnigan was an all-boys school in those days. Perhaps the staff feared a rowdy procession in which the Canadians abandoned the flag and embraced the twin cliches of hockey sticks and beer bottles.

I know exactly what the Canadian group does. Canada is the invisible superpower of International Week. Canada welcomes you. We want you to display your colours proudly and to share with us the stories and customs of your people; we ask only that you carry your flag in peace. We know we are not the cradle of civilization, but we aspire to be the nursery of the future.

Thank you.