

Charlotte Views: For Chief Gidandsa as for Dr. King, authority has roots in respect

Being witness to the potlatch was to see history made.

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After taking on a new name and regalia

At the recent potlatch of the Gakyals KiiGawaay clan, newly recognized Chief Gidandsa spoke first of the difference between authority and power. The hereditary chief has no authority, he said, other than

that granted by the respect he achieves. This is true of everyone. Authority should stem only from respect, or from the human power that we recognize within each of us. Human power expands through trust, sharing, cooperation, creativity, virtue, honour, and co-recognition of everyone's human dignity. The potlatch was certainly a demonstration of human power in all forms.

Some would disagree about how authority is achieved. This is because authority can be achieved through either respect or control. Control, whose lifeblood is fear, opposes respect.

With control, through the twin forces of violence and domination, authority is thrust unto others. But this is not the same authority spoken by Gidansda. Authority based in control is entirely other to authority grounded in respect.

Being witness to the potlatch was to see history made. Not only the history of the Haida, but the history of the world far beyond the territorial bounds of the Haida Nation. All history is lived and we all live out the entirety of the human story. But there are times when the telling of this story is most pronounced, told in ways that call for pause. Listening to the speeches, watching the telling of stories through dance throughout the potlatch, and witnessing the creation and sharing of great wealth reminded me of a great chapter in the American story.

American human rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change." Speaking to an audience of ministers in 1967, King further talked about how power must be embraced by those seeking moral justice. At the time "Black Power" was a force that many feared was out of control, rising up from the African American ghettos like a tinder box fuelled by centuries of racialized segregation and white supremacy. How can power be a force for good when the power of the American government oppressed African Americans? Did force against force work? These questions were before King and the movement he helped lead, requiring an answer for the trajectory of history to be righted.

King called for a movement to build and exercise power, based in love and for the purpose of love. This power, juxtaposed with “power without love,” reckless and abusive, and “love without power,” sentimental and anemic, was power for the purpose of creating history and capable of carrying out the “demands of justice.” To King, justice corrects all that stands against love. When Gidansda speaks of respect he means this in his own way. To me, respect and love are two sides of the same coin. Respect, the recognition of each other’s human power, is like love, the embodiment of human power.

Building power through a culture of love, respect, and honour shapes human history on human terms. Every aspect of the potlatch was a demonstration of power built in this way. It was a powerful testament not only to power and respect of Gakyals KiiGawaay clan and their chief, but also to the universal gift of human creation. Through ceremony, story, connection, tradition, and creation the power of mutual respect was expanded, witnessed, demonstrated, and cultivated for everyone. The impact of the history created at the potlatch will ripple out for generations, across continents, and through all things.



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