

First Nations Drum

News From Canada's Native Communities

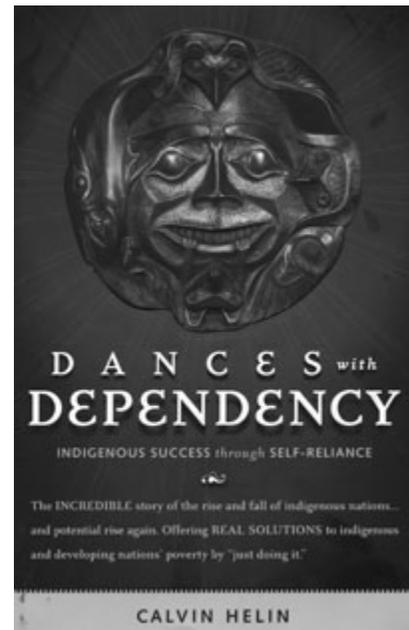
BOOK REVIEW

June 2007

Dances With Dependency

By Morgan O'Neal

A ground breaking Orca Spirit publication, Dances with Dependency: Indigenous Success through Self-Reliance is being hailed as possibly the most important book ever written on how to improve the lives of impoverished indigenous people. The book is printed in full color, with a beautifully embossed dust jacket, and features over twenty dazzling full-page art works by internationally renowned northwest coast artist Bill Helin. The book's author, Calvin Helin, is a member of the Tsimshian Nation from the northern B.C. community of Lax Kwalaams (Port Simpson), and the son of hereditary Chief, Smoogyit Nees Nuugan Noos (Barry Helin), of the Royal House of Gitlan, and Sigyidmhanaa Su Dalx (Verna Helin), matron of the Royal House of Gitachngeek. His credentials on all levels are therefore in order, and it is no surprise that relative to the problem at issue he should offer a solution that has clearly worked well for him. He is a success.



Calvin Helin is President of the Native Investment and Trade Association, former Vice President of the National Aboriginal Business Association, and Founding Director of newly formed B.C. Oil & Gas Association. He was chosen as one of the top 40 Under 40 entrepreneurs in British Columbia by both Business in Vancouver and the Financial Post. In his capacity as a business leader he has fronted international trade missions to China and New Zealand. As a practicing lawyer, he has authored several articles on legal matters, Aboriginal business, and related issues. Add to these achievements the fact that he is also an instructor of Goju-Ryu karate and that he has pledged partial proceeds from sales of his book to a youth martial-arts school, and the result is more than the sum of parts. As a supremely positive role model for a new generation, Helin is apparently living proof of the effectiveness of his philosophy.

The book energetically promotes a business-oriented solution to the ongoing problem of impoverished aboriginal communities. In response to criticisms that such economic integration will result in a corresponding loss of culture, Helin argues that the lack of an economy is just as dangerous. "What culture is there in picking up a welfare check?" he asked during an interview with the Vancouver Sun. "Are Japanese, because they have an economy, less Japanese? The

answer is straightforward: it shouldn't be an issue." His argument can be summed up in the following manner: "the Canadian government's mismanagement of aboriginal affairs is a welfare trap that has enslaved much of the aboriginal population of this part of the planet, stripping it of pride, ambition, and achievement...[with]...the only solution...[being]...to walk away from the soul-destroying grip and return to the self-sufficiency that marked first nations before they had contact with European colonizers, about 400 years ago." (The Vancouver Sun)

According to Helin, he wrote the book "with the simple interest of seeking to make the lives of ordinary indigenous people better. The toll that the current system is taking on indigenous people (particularly children and youth) is horrendous and unacceptable." As the author puts it, "The bottom line for Canada is that this is not an Aboriginal problem, it is a Canadian problem. The impending demographic tsunami will ensure the change of the status quo—rather than a crisis, this can be the biggest opportunity ever presented to move indigenous people forward." Helin stresses that the issues are the result of a history of systemic violence that can apply to any group, regardless of ethnic background. Helin's analysis therefore applies to other marginalized groups around the world, from North American inner-city communities to indigenous groups in developing nations. According to Helin, "At the end of the day, it's not an aboriginal problem, or even a Canadian problem—it's a world problem."

The book's overall goal is nothing less than a paradigm shift. Its subtitle, *Indigenous Success Through Self-Reliance*, neatly summarizes this conviction. Beginning with a history of pre-contact Native communities, Helin outlines how these groups developed sophisticated economies, cultures, and sociopolitical structures long before Europeans arrived in North America. "The answers to our present and our future lie in our past," Helin said. "We created beautiful arts, language, and culture, and had a vibrant economy. How did this come about? Not from laying on the couch, eating potato chips and cashing welfare cheques." According to Kelly A. MacDonald, Aboriginal Lawyer and Senior Adjudicator Indian Residential Schools Adjudications, Helin has indeed "been guided by the Raven" in his honest portrayal of the problems faced by Aboriginal communities. "In the book, I've pulled back the shower curtain to show the naked problems," Helin says. "Some of what I've talked about will make some people feel uncomfortable." Even in this context, he has been guided by "the teachings of his ancestors." As Kathy Louis, respected elder, reminds us, we must "Remember what the Elders tell us—this time in life is a time of truth telling in order to meet the challenges that face us as Aboriginal people."

Renowned Maori Leader Te Taru White comments further that *Dances with Dependency* "is beautifully written with a unique and intuitive analysis that should prove invaluable to indigenous people and developing nation populations." Helin argues that entrenched reliance on externally provided programs—from housing to social assistance—has blocked the development of an independent Native economy. The time for reform is ripe due to two colliding trends: the aging of Canada's population and the growing Native population. If the status quo remains when this "demographic tsunami" hits from 2011 onward, these two groups threaten to put a strain on the Canadian economy it won't be able to sustain. Given Helin's views on the government's role in creating the current problems, he doesn't have kind words for the state—or the band councils created by and accountable to the federal government. Native communities must take ownership

of their problems, although this will not be easy from: a thriving industry of entrenched vested interests will do everything possible to keep the system in place. However, with huge resource development occurring across Canada, especially in the North and the West, Helin thinks that Native groups are well-positioned to participate and use that capital to move forward.

But only a very fine line separates the political slogan from the advertising jingle. When offered as a new solution to a complex problem, a densely packed and pithy phrase can be received by some as an urgent and efficient call to action, but just as easily it may be taken by others as a trite one-liner and opportunistic over-simplification. In reducing to three one syllable words the results of hours of thoughtful reflection, mountains of detailed research, and an intelligent synthesis of historical facts, Helin runs the risk of destroying the credibility he surely deserves. No matter what those 3 words are—"I'm Lovin' It" or "Just Say No" or "Just Do It"—they contain at once too much and too little.

The Tsimshian expression wai wah (meaning "just do it"), although it does fit on a bumper sticker or a t-shirt or a dust jacket, is frankly, at least in translation, inadequate, even if it did take Helin 30 years to articulate. The problem is that the personal success of a specific individual, whether Calvin Helin or Horatio Alger, cannot be generalized as a probable result for the population at large. This is the lie at the center of the myth of the American Dream. If everyone would just pull themselves up by their bootstraps, the fruits of their labors will be wealth and power rather than debt and exhaustion. Dependency is a problem at the base; one particular person's financial success is always dependent upon another's financial failure, one man's profit comes at the expense of another man's loss, corporate economic power is entirely dependent upon the exploitation of someone else's labor.

If the logic of the book's philosophical line is inherently flawed however, this flaw and the author's honest expression of everything which flows from it, is also the reason the book is worth reading so closely and the reason the author is to be congratulated for his attempt. The book is clearly written. The research is broad and meticulous. The argument is intelligently articulated. And Helin's emotional engagement with the issue is honestly expressed. As Joy Kogawa (renowned writer whose novel *Obasan* was named as one of the most important books in Canadian history by the *Literary Review of Canada*) said after reading Helin's book: "Dances with Dependency offers a compelling portrayal and analysis of poverty among Canada's indigenous people. His message of self-reliance as a way forward rests on thoughtful and creative economic strategies and offers hope in cynical times."