

Telling Our Own Stories:

Kevin Van Tighem's Martha Kostuch Lecture

By Ian Urquhart

Albertans are victims of gaslighting. This was the powerful message Kevin Van Tighem delivered in his Martha Kostuch Annual Lecture on September 15th. Kevin entitled his talk "Telling Our Own Stories." The stories that are told about Alberta and the stories that could be told about this place was the theme of his remarks.

Gaslighting is psychological manipulation. A British management consulting firm describes it as when an individual or organization "puts out information with the intent of sowing

seeds of doubt in individuals or the population as a whole, making people doubt themselves and even their own sanity." It's a technique for gaining and maintaining power. Stories may be used to this end.

With respect to most of the stories told about Alberta, Kevin's blunt message was that they are lies. These lies are essentially minor variations of one story, a story of conquest and conflict. White Alberta men fight Indians, Ottawa, and tree hugging environmentalists to attain the heroic goal of industrializing the

landscape. It's a story of anger, alienation, and entitlement. It's a story where environmentalists are marginalized and demonized as outsiders. Environmentalists, and their organizations like AWA, don't represent mainstream society. "We've been told stories about ourselves," he said, "that give an image of this province that makes us outsiders to the province." We don't belong; we have no place here.

The stories that could be told are ones that challenge this dominant narrative. They are stories of goodness and caring, stories that in



The Whaleback, one of the Alberta landscapes that is very special to Kevin. PHOTO: © C. WEARMOUTH

Kevin's opinion are truer to this place and Alberta's peoples. This alternative narrative sees the land as much more than "just being a bundle of resources" that demand to be exploited.

The dominance of the first narrative matters importantly to our future because stories transmit culture and affect how we see and define ourselves. They are important socialization mechanisms that help to establish what is normal and what is abnormal. Stories offer answers to questions about what we should value and what we should shun. They deliver power and legitimacy.

Kevin urged his audience to tell more of the "could be told" stories. Through much of his writing Kevin does exactly that (Heinz Unger reviewed Kevin's most recent book, *Our Place: Changing the Nature of Alberta*, in the September 2017 issue of *Wild Lands Advocate*). During his talk Kevin offered powerful, moving examples of both types of stories and the political resources he feels they provide to those who tell them.

The first narrative is found on a place on the road from Beaver Mines to the Castle. On one side of the road stands a young, monoculture lodgepole pine forest. On the other side of the road is a two-hectare patch of mixed forest – its patchwork of conifers and deciduous trees is interspersed with dead lodgepole pines.

A sign on the road is the story and explains why the two forests look so different. Mountain pine beetle went through this part of the Castle in the late 1970s/early 1980s.

Government responded by letting the forest industry clearcut the forest, "treat" the site, and replant it with lodgepole pine. Industrial logging saved us; our savior cut down sick trees

and replanted healthy trees.

The language on the sign makes it very clear that this is "the" story. The clearcut logging practiced here is instead called "salvage logging" and when you salvage something you save it. The pine beetle is plague: "By 1990 they reached epidemic numbers killing millions of trees." What normal person then wouldn't want to salvage log the forest to rescue Alberta from the epidemic? In this story natural events demand the type of logging that occurred here; some outsiders might suggest it's a story that is very good a privileging a special interest that profited from this intervention.

Kevin sees a very different story here. The unsalvaged/unsaved two-hectare patch of forest is the healthy forest. Its health rests in its diversity, resilience, and dynamism. The health of this patch of forest is heard in the bedlam of bird song from within it in June. The beetles were the rescuers in this story. Their impact is "probably one of the best things that has happened to Foothills' forests in the last 50 years."

The designation of the Whaleback as a protected area was offered as a more positive example of how stories may be empowering. Unlike areas like the Little Smoky River that have been sacrificed to industrialization, many more people had connections to the Whaleback. They had stories about special times there and they weren't going to stand by and let their special place taste the steel of drill bits and hear the whirring of compressors. This is what Kevin said about the government's decision to establish two protected areas in the Whaleback:

It happened because people knew it, people had a different story about it than

it just being a bundle of resources and they refused to surrender their stories, and their culture, and their beliefs, and their love to a future that was not going to respect them.

Through his encouragement to challenge the dominant narrative with our own stories, Kevin delivered remarks that complement Mark Lisac's message about Alberta politics. In his 2004 book *Alberta Politics Uncovered: Taking Back Our Province*, Lisac argued that Albertans lived in a mythical world resting on stereotypes that are less and less germane to who Albertans really are. That myth saw the population as monolithic in its views, as a place of mavericks and victims (Kevin's white men). Lisac showed that the opinions and interests of Albertans were much more diverse than you would conclude if you only listened to the sirens of Western alienation (today's Wexiteers). Lisac certainly wouldn't have been surprised when the New Democrats came to power; what might have surprised him is that it didn't happen until 2015. Neither Lisac nor Van Tighem believe that the best future for Alberta is the one we see by looking in the rearview mirror.

Kevin's lecture was insightful and moving. Telling better, different stories certainly should be part of our search for healthy livelihoods in this place. So too should be the advice he offered early on in his remarks about the importance of getting our children and grandchildren out into nature. Those experiences are formative ones. As he said: "If there is one gift that we can give to the future of Alberta that might give it hope it's children that we put into nature as soon as possible and as frequently as possible." 🌲

Featured Artist Tyler Los-Jones

Being with fictions no.7
Archival inkjet print on rag paper
45.7cm x 152.4cm, 2015 PHOTO: © T. LOS-JONES

