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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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To the Anishinaabeg of the Future

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Abstract

A letter written to future generations of Anishinaabeg expressing my desires for what they can accomplish, and how we can help them get there.

Keywords

Indigenous thought, Indigenous futurisms, Indigenous geographies, desirable futures

To the Anishinaabeg of the future,

I'm writing this letter in 2022, in the hopes that one day, you will be able to read this, and be proud of myself, and other Anishinaabeg.

We often talk about reverence for our elders, and how we must honor them and uphold their teachings. It's something that I've learned, something that my elders have learned, something their elders have learned, in a chain that stretches all the way back to when the animals who created Turtle Island remembered and resolved to live by Gichi-Manidoo's instructions that everyone and everything on Earth must live in good relations with one another, and that no one part of the world is more important than the other part. Part of this living in good relation with one another means being open to listening to the wisdom and the stories that previous generations have passed along. To be quite honest with you, I'm not sure that I personally will have a lot of wisdom to impart. Dad jokes, sure. Rambling anecdotes? Of course. Wisdom? I'm not so sure—I imagine there are other Anishinaabeg who will be much better at that than me. But I will try my best all the same.

However, if we simply focus on honoring what has come before us, I think that we miss something important, and that is the main point of the letter that I am writing to you today.

I live in a time when we as human beings are not being in good relation with the environments and more-than-human kin around us. We exploit the environment in violent and greedy ways. We pollute our waters, poison the air that we breathe, desecrate lands, all in the name of 'capital' and 'progress'. Temperatures are rising, sea levels are also rising, wildfires burn out of control, and ecosystems are being irrevocably changed. Even in our homelands, the Great Lakes, our peoples struggle to grapple with the effects of the Anthropocene—the climate crisis—and what this will mean for our cultural lifeways, going forward. It is a time where it can be very, very tough to be positive about where we might be going as humanity—I know I certainly struggle with it every time I hear more news about the ways that our world is potentially ending. People worry about what will come next—what will happen to us—where will we go when the world is no longer safe for us to live in?

It's moments like these when I find comfort in several different things. The first thing happens to lie in the wisdom and teaching of our ancestors. I'm reminded of the words of the Nishinaabe writer Leanne Simpson (2017), when she tells us that sometimes, all we need to do is to remember the way we've always done things in our communities. What she means by this, is that we don't need to reinvent the wheel in order to help bring about potential just futures, but to remember what we've been taught—much as the animals and Nanabozho had to remember when they were creating Turtle Island.

The second thing happens to be in the strength, resilience, and resurgence of Anishinaabeg across Turtle Island. We do not sit and wait for disaster to overwhelm us, but we are taking action at so many different scales in order to help protect our environments and more-than-human kin. Whether its formal, governmental efforts, or grassroots, grounded efforts, we are reminding the world that we are here, and that we will face down this end of the world, much as we've faced down other ends of the world, including the theft of our lands, the attempted physical and cultural genocide that we've faced since colonization, and the ways in which we are often sidelined from conversations surrounding 'desirable futures'—we have them too, and we want to work towards them.

That brings me to the third thing, which is that 'desirable future', or really, you, the Anishinaabeg of the future. As I mentioned at the beginning of this letter, we often place a lot of importance on honoring those who came before us, and upholding their teachings. However, I've come to realize that the work our ancestors are doing, and the work that we are doing now, is all meant to benefit and honor you, our descendants. Rather than demanding respect for ourselves as the elders of the future, we do what we do so that you have a stronger chance of resurgence and resiliency than we do now. We talk a lot about making sure that Anishinaabeg 7 generations down the line from us are still able to live according to Anishinaabeg lifeways, but I think we also do our work so that even the very next generation can enjoy the benefits, and that fills me with a lot of hope and confidence for the work to come.

It will not be easy, but if it means that you will be able to live in a world where we have returned to good relations with the environment and kin around us, then we will have succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. We talk about honoring our ancestors, our elders, but I want to promise you, Anishinaabeg of the future, that we do the work we do because we honor you as well—you are our 'desirable future'—not through the amazing, badass work that you are going to undoubtedly do, but because you are Anishinaabeg—you are our wildest dreams come to life. Because you will be proof that no matter how hard it tries, settler colonialism will never extinguish our presence, our lifeways, our relationships with land and environment, and our hopes and dreams. I hope that we can do work to make you proud of us, because we are already proud of you.

Deondre Smiles

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