

# Nygaard Notes

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## Socioception: Knowing Who We Are

For most of my life I've been very athletic. One of the things I learned by living in that world is the importance of something known as *Proprioception*. Simply put, Proprioception is the awareness of where your body is in space. Physical therapist Brian Cheah explains that proprioception “allows you to know the location, actions, and movements of your body. Proprioception encompasses a complex network of sensations, including perception of joint position and movement, muscle force, and effort. These sensations arise from the information going into and out of the brain. It allows us to perceive our limb position, force, heaviness, and stiffness. It can also be combined with other senses to locate external objects and react to those objects. Proprioception is a key component to how we move and control movement.”

This is important to athletes because better proprioception allows for more efficient changes in direction and landing ability, and your movement becomes more efficient and powerful. It gives you better control over your body so that you can move quickly, accelerate, decelerate, balance, etc.

Athletes work on their proprioception—although I suspect that few know the word—in order to improve their ability to perform physical tasks.

### From Where We Are to Who We Are

Proprioception is the awareness of where our bodies are in space. But, what about our awareness of where our bodies are in society? Who do we think we are? Who do other people think we are? Where do we belong? Where are we not welcome? Where do we stick out, and where do we blend in? Are we perceived by others as high-status, or low status? Are we even conscious of having a “status” that can be perceived by others?

Our bodies are located in a specific point in physical space, which most of us can describe with varying degrees of precision. As I write these words, I am aware of where I am. I can “zoom out” and note that I'm in the

upper watershed of one of the great rivers of one of the great continents on the planet Earth. Or I can “zoom in” and tell you where I am in such detail that I could guide you to the very room in which I am writing.

It's pretty obvious what we mean when we describe our physical location. But it's less obvious to many people what we mean when we use the term Social Location. When I use the term Social Location, I am referring to the combination of factors including gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual identity, and geographic location that make us who we are, that shape our understanding of the world and that bestow upon us both certain privileges and also dictate the degree to which we experience certain forms of oppression.

In the physical world, there is the *fact* of where our bodies are located in space and how we interact with our physical environment. Proprioception refers to our *understanding* of that reality and also our *skill and comfort* as we navigate in that world, the physical world. But there is another world, equally important for human beings but less well-understood. And that is the social/political world, the world of human relations. And our understanding of *that* world—and our skill and comfort navigating in it—is what I call *Socioception*.

Put simply, Proprioception refers to our sense of *where* we are in the world. Socioception refers to our sense of *who* we are in the world.

Socioception is the sense of ourselves in relation to other people around us, in relation to social, political and other social systems, our sense of “where we stand” in a socially-stratified society like the United States. Socioception goes beyond the ability to understand one's social location. It enables us to understand power, privilege, and our very humanity. I hadn't thought of the word Socioception at the time, but I think I explained it pretty well back in 2021 when I said:

Go to page 2 to see what I said →→→

GREETINGS,

THIS ISSUE OF THE NOTES INTRODUCES A NEW WORD: SOCIOCEPTION. I HOPE IT CATCHES ON, AS I THINK IT CAPTURES A WAY OF THINKING (AS MUCH AS A SINGLE WORD CAN CAPTURE A WAY OF THINKING) THAT IS USEFUL IN REMINDING PEOPLE THAT EACH OF US HAS A SOCIAL IDENTITY IN ADDITION TO OUR INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY.

THE SECOND ESSAY IS A FOLLOWUP TO SOME WRITING I DID 6 YEARS AGO ON THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY. IF I HAD A LARGE STAFF, WE WOULD ROUTINELY FOLLOW UP ON STUFF LIKE THIS, AS THERE ARE ALWAYS NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN OLD STORIES THAT BEAR REPORTING. IN THIS CASE, THE OLD STORY IS REALLY OLD, WITH THE CHURCH'S FIRST ENUNCIATION OF THE DOCTRINE TAKING PLACE IN 1452! AND THE VATICAN IS STILL DEALING WITH THE CONSEQUENCES. AS ARE WE ALL. I LOVE THIS STUFF!

HAPPY SUMMER, THOSE OF YOU IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE! I'M OFF TO WATER THE GARDEN.

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### Socioception from page 1

The higher one sits in the social hierarchy, the more important it is to develop our ability to understand our social location. And that's because people, in general, tend to be most aware of the people above them in the hierarchy, since they pose a greater threat than those below. This is partly why so many white people are so oblivious; in a white supremacist culture, white people are given the message that they don't need to empathize, they don't need to struggle, they don't need to do anything at all in order to be safe, in order to belong. The System, after all, works in their favor. And it is this very lack of empathy, this obliviousness, this narcissistic dwelling in an emotional and cognitive shelter not of their making but operating to their benefit, that in the end

dehumanizes those at the top of our caste system just as surely—if not as obviously—as the system dehumanizes those whom it was designed to dehumanize.

Each of us has a unique contribution to make in maintaining—or helping us to evolve beyond—the highly-unequal and always-violent social system that we call the United States of America. To determine where we stand in relation to the future, we start with some basic questions: Who am I? Where do I stand? What do I stand for?

The more we develop our Socioception, the better able we will be to answer such questions, and the more graceful and skillful we will be as we work to build the future we want to see. ◆

## Discrediting the Doctrine of Discovery

Back in 2017 I wrote about the Doctrine of Discovery, which refers to the official blessing given by the Vatican hundreds of years ago to the European conquest of the lands populated by non-Christians who were deemed “enemies of Christ” in Africa and the Americas. The blessing was based on the principle that any lands that European Christians “discovered” belonged to them, because that's how God wanted it.

According to the Indigenous Values Initiative, the whole process came together to “create a unified Christendom, which became the opposing force against the great global plurality of cultures.” The Doctrine is still with us today. I wrote about this back in 2017 in my essays *Origins of the Doctrine of Discovery* and *The Doctrine of Discovery in the United States*.

Well, it only took 572 years, but at the end of March 2023, one could turn to page 7 in the New York Times

and read this: “The Vatican formally repudiated on Thursday the ‘Doctrine of Discovery,’ a legal concept based on 15th-century papal documents that European colonial powers used to legitimize the seizure and exploitation of Indigenous lands in Africa and the Americas, among other places.” [Among other places! About 80 percent of the planet, that is.]

This official repudiation didn't come from nowhere. *Native News Online* reminds us that “The statement comes after decades of advocacy from Indigenous communities for the church to formally retract the numerous papal bulls that backed the expansion of Christianity at the cost of Native land and lives.”

### What Does it Say?

It's a short statement—less than two pages long—but some of the things it says I found startling. ↗↗↗

Maybe it's because I was subject to some indoctrination in the Roman Catholic Church as a child and, in the days before the Second Vatican Council, I was told that the Pope was infallible. And now the Vatican is officially saying that a doctrine affirmed by more than a couple of Popes is not true?! Here are a few comments in the statement that surprised me:

“Respect for the facts of history demands an acknowledgment of the human weakness and failings of Christ’s disciples in every generation. Many Christians have committed evil acts against indigenous peoples for which recent Popes have asked forgiveness on numerous occasions.”

“Pope Francis has urged: ‘Never again can the Christian community allow itself to be infected by the idea that one culture is superior to others, or that it is legitimate to employ ways of coercing others.’”

“The Catholic Church therefore repudiates those concepts that fail to recognize the inherent human rights of indigenous peoples, including what has become known as the legal and political ‘doctrine of discovery’.”

### From Words to Deeds

This official repudiation by the Vatican is worth celebrating, but it will be much more important if it leads to action. I always say that social change occurs as a result of a combination of changes in Policy, Systems, and Consciousness. A strong statement by a powerful global institution like The Vatican has the potential to affect consciousness around the world. (More so if it is widely reported, discussed, and understood, which I fear is not the case here. Hence this essay.)

It will require a very large consciousness change indeed to bring about system changes like the ones found in the “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” which was passed back in 2007. 143 nations voted in favor, with only 4—Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA—voting against.

Imagine the changes that would be required to implement Article 28, for example:

*Article 28 Section 1. Indigenous peoples have the right to redress, by means that can include restitution or, when this is not possible, just, fair and equitable compensation, for the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned or otherwise occupied or used, and which have been confiscated, taken, occupied, used or damaged without their free, prior and informed consent.*

How about Article 37? *Indigenous peoples have the right to the recognition, observance and enforcement of treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements concluded with States or their successors and to have States honour and respect such treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements.*

It all starts with consciousness, and here I’ll give the last word to the Rev. David McCallum, a Jesuit priest who has been working with Indigenous people in the United States. Speaking about the Vatican’s statement, he said,

“It’s not so much about the legal implications, which scholars understand are very complex. But it’s about the rejection of the mind-set that gave rise to the colonial impulse and even to the missionary impulse of those times. That’s really what’s being repudiated, and it’s a big step, it acknowledges that Indigenous voices have been heard, it acknowledges the evil that was done.” ♦

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## “Quote” of the Week: “*Equality Movements Are Always Divisive*”

I’ve written a lot lately about the period after the U.S. Civil War, paying particular attention to the attempt to create a true multi-racial democracy in the years after the war, the period known as Reconstruction, and the white-supremacist efforts to destroy that project, which became known as Redemption.

This past March the History News Network interviewed Kermit Roosevelt III, author of the 2022 book “The Nation That Never Was: Reconstructing America’s Story.” It’s a fascinating book, about which I suspect I will have a lot to say in future issues of Nygaard Notes. But, for now, just a quotation.

[Editor’s note: This quotation is so long it has to jump to page 4. That’s never happened before!]

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**“Quote” of the Week from page 3**

Interviewer Robin Lindley said to Roosevelt that “you write of a Second Reconstruction [the Civil Rights era] and then a Second Redemption [the attempt to undo or roll back the Second Reconstruction]. How do you see those periods?” Since Roosevelt’s answer very closely echoes a point I intended to make, but never did make, in my recent series “The New Reconstruction,” I quote it here. Roosevelt said:

*The Second Reconstruction is the Civil Rights movement that Martin Luther King Jr. was a part of, when the Reconstruction amendments are brought back to life and Congress passes antidiscrimination laws and maybe most crucially the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It’s a real step forward for equality. But equality movements are always divisive—that’s part of what King learned—and there’s a backlash. I date that backlash to 1980, with the election of Ronald Reagan. Reagan famously endorsed states’ rights and promised to shrink the federal government. He promised to appoint Supreme Court Justices who would read the constitution the way the Founders intended and undo the Second Reconstruction decisions of the Warren Court. This is what I call the Second Redemption, because it’s an attempt to undo or roll back the Second Reconstruction. And that’s the era we’re living in now.*

**“Quote” of the Week Part 2: Backlash = Success?**

Later on the interviewer asked, “Where do you find hope now, particularly in view of our divided political landscape and a majority rightwing Supreme Court?”

Roosevelt responded by obliquely referring to, and re-framing, the subject of the previous Nygaard Notes: The Great Replacement Theory. He said:

*I like the generation that’s coming into adulthood now quite a lot. I think that generational replacement is moving us in the right direction, because it looks as though these younger people are staying progressive as they age. I think that demographic change is generally positive—as the white percentage of the population declines, I think we’ll see greater racial equality. In some ways conflict is a positive sign: sometimes conflict means that a hierarchy is being challenged, and that those in power feel a threat. The easiest way to see if an equality movement is making headway, maybe, is to see if it inspires a backlash.*

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