

Truth and Reconciliation— Open Minds (Part 2)

Challenging Preconceptions and a New Way of Thinking

As an organization and board members of The Sashbear Foundation, we have committed ourselves to being active participants in the process of Truth and Reconciliation for the Indigenous peoples of Canada. I want to invite our readers to join us in this journey of understanding the past wrongs, looking to the future with hope and contributing to the healing of relationships.

I have had to do a bit of mindfulness and self-care this week for myself.

I am writing at the beginning of June at a time when, just over a week ago, it was announced the devastating news of 215 Indigenous children un-counted for were located on the grounds of what was once the site of Canada's largest residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia.

Just prior to joining in on the Sashbear Web-Walk on May 30th, I got a voice message from my mom who was sobbing about the news of the recent discovery. The reason it affected my mom so deeply is because she is a residential school survivor. It has only been in the last five years that my mom has begun to express her experience of what happened at residential schools. It is brave and takes courage to share stories of pain and trauma. We need to listen and honour the people who share their stories because it is a difficult thing to open up about abuse, but it gives a voice to their experience. There will not be true reconciliation and healing if we are not willing to reflect on and understand the past harm that has been inflicted on Indigenous people and their communities. Opening our hearts is showing understanding and empathy whereas opening our minds is about new learning and growth.

This past week has been one of reflection, grief, and heartbreak for so many Indigenous people, for those who attended residential schools, and for those who are related to those who have attended. I work with Indigenous students from elementary to middle school and half of the students in my class are related to a loved one who attended a

residential school. In the last week, a group of Indigenous people from a nearby community in Chilliwack, BC were given special permission to travel to Kamloops to find out if any of the kids were relatives. All across Canada, there is a cry for justice. There were more than 4100 confirmed deaths at residential schools, but that number could be more than double. With the discovery of the 215 children who were never accounted for it is likely that we will find more remains at other residential schools. **Did your school have a graveyard?**

Opening our minds is finding a new way of thinking. We want to be humble to learn and readjust our misunderstandings and ways of thinking. Most people have a perception of what Indigenous people are like. We see them homeless on the streets and struggling with addiction, we have heard that Indigenous representation in the penitentiaries is more than 30% of the inmate population, we drive by their communities and ridicule the living conditions we might see. **What are your own perceptions toward Indigenous people? Have you ever asked yourself why, and really thought about and related the connection of the residential schools to their devastated lives?**

From 2008 to 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada witnessed and collected testimony from over 6750 survivors of residential schools. It hosted 7 national truth and reconciliation events and 17 community or regional hearings where survivors and their families shared their truths in public or through private statements. We are five years past the completion of the TRC. As reported recently, the Canadian government, although committing to addressing all 94 Calls to Action have not fully addressed the need for change. Out of the list of the recommendations (94 Calls to Action) by the TRC, thirteen (13) have been completely enacted, those which the government has taken some steps toward are sixty (60) and those that have no real steps have been made is twenty-one (21) (National Post, *Much work remains on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action* - June 5, 2021). **Have you ever looked at the findings and calls to action of the TRC?**

For more than 100 years, the Canadian government supported residential school programs that isolated Indigenous children from their families and communities. Assimilation of Indigenous children was educating and preparing the children for their integration into the colonial order of Canada. Children experienced emotional, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of priests and nuns in the residential school system and had their language, spirituality, and culture stripped away in what has since been

described as an act of cultural genocide. **Did you know that there were 139 operating residential schools and 150,000 children who attended those schools?**

On an individual level, the long-term impact of the deeply painful event of residential schools has overwhelmed many individuals' ability to cope and has caused feelings of helplessness that diminished their sense of self and led to mental health challenges which have affected family dynamics. Understanding what the effects of intergenerational trauma are is a good starting point to realigning our past perceptions to a new way of thinking. **Do you know the true nature of Canada's history?**

There are an abundance of stories, findings, and information, yet many who live in Canada today continue to dismiss the kind and extent of the harms of residential schools and deny the historic and ongoing colonialism that hinders the process of reconciliation. The last residential school was closed in Punnichy, Saskatchewan in 1996. **Did you know how recent the last residential school closing was?**

The TRC created a report called *The Survivors Speak* that documents the stories and experience of residential school survivors:

For many residential school students, the school year started in a long ride in the back of a school-owned farm truck. Shirley Leon attended the Kamloops, British Columbia, school in the 1940s. She described her first memory of residential school as:

“...seeing the cattle trucks come onto the reserve, and scoop up the kids to go, and seeing my cousins cry, and then, and they were put on these trucks, and hauled off, and we didn't know where, and my grandmother and mother hiding us under the bed. And when the, the federal health nurse or the Indian agent would try to come into the house, my grandmother would club them with her cane.”

There are thousands of impactful stories like this one that were documented by the TRC that can be read [here](#).

June is National Indigenous History Month in Canada and June 21st is Indigenous Peoples Day. This gives you a good opportunity to learn about Indigenous culture and history and understand and reflect on the shared history we have with the Indigenous people who live in Canada.

Knowledge, awareness, and respect will increase over time as we create a new way of thinking that helps build empathetic relationships. Bring an open mind and an open heart and be ready to challenge yourself and your preconceptions.

In the next newsletter we will talk about what it means for us to have open hands.

By Terry Crosby

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