

Truth and Reconciliation— Open Hearts (Part 1)

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.

There is a true story of a little girl, her name is Jeannie Mianscum. At 7 years old, this girl was forcibly taken from her home and transported 800 kilometres away to a residential school. She was forbidden to speak her own language or have any contact with her family. She didn't understand what was happening or why and she didn't know if she'd ever see her family again.

Can you even imagine strangers coming into your community and taking your children away from you?

Prime Minister John A. McDonald called the children and parents “savages” and encouraged that the children be:

“...withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence...”

The Canadian government operated Indian residential schools in partnership with Anglican, Catholic, and many other churches. The last residential school wasn't closed until 1996, only 24 years ago.

The residential schools intentionally severed the children from their parents, but also physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually from their language, culture and their communities, in what Beverley McLachlin, chief justice of the Supreme Court, stated was the attempt by Canada to commit "cultural genocide" against the Indigenous people.

This was a horrible human rights violation. I have seen first-hand the intergenerational effects of this dehumanizing treatment of Indigenous people because they are my family, my people.

The little girl is my mother, she is a residential school survivor. She was one of over 150,000 Indigenous children that were taken from their families and communities and forced to attend residential schools. My Mom is Cree from Waswanipi First Nation in Quebec.

At a conference I attended called “Our Stories Shape Us” an Indigenous speaker mentioned to us that we should have three types of postures to help us better understand reconciliation and our Indigenous neighbors: open hearts, open minds, open hands.

What does that look like for you and me?

First, we should open our hearts to build a shared understanding and increased empathy for our Indigenous neighbors.

Our relationships with the Indigenous peoples of our land have been historically broken. We need to take a couple of steps back and reflect on what has actually happened.

David John Smith says:

“Native people are acquainted with historic injustices over the past five hundred years: broken treaties, stolen land, racial discrimination, cultural genocide, tribal extermination, language suppression, economic exploitation, political oppression, forced reservations, and social travesties...the list of abuses could include oppressive missionizing, religious prejudice and hypocrisy, colonial imperialism, residential schools, family separation, and physical and sexual abuse.”

Healing from the devastating effects of historical injustices, abuses, loss of cultural identity that the government and church imposed on Indigenous peoples has only been recently addressed in a deeper way following the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

The TRC established in 2008 was tasked with discovering the truth of past wrongdoing. The goal of the commission was to bring restorative justice to reveal and document the history of residential schools and to guide and inspire a process of truth and healing.

In December 2015 the TRC released a final report, titled "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling the Future." Five years have passed since this multi-volume report of over 6,750 stories and recorded statements and the 94 calls to action was released.

How do we respond to the truth and reconciliation process? What is reconciliation?

The document starts off by stating:

“To the Commission, reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.”

As we begin to learn what the TRC was created for, we understand the personal stories of the Indigenous people and we understand how we might build respectful relationships and help restore the lives affected by these atrocities.

But I think many of us have not heard about it or have not engaged in the process.

As we learn more about the truth and reconciliation process, I think we need to ask:

How can I demonstrate an open heart and encourage reconciliation?

Opening your hearts to understanding the atrocities of the historical past and engaging with the reconciliation process of the Indigenous peoples should be the first step forward.

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

by Terry Crosby, Sashbear Board Director of Indigenous Relations

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

Sashbear Board Director of Indigenous Relations

Truth and Reconciliation— Open Hands (Part 3):

Reaching Out Through Relationships

As an organization and board members, we have committed ourselves to be active participants in 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 and looking to the future with hope.

The word Eyē? Sqâ'lewen – pronounced Eye. Sh-KWAW-leh-win in the west coast Hul'q'umin'um' language refers to having a 'good heart, good mind, and good feelings.' This notion has essential meaning for Indigenous people of the west coast when they meet together, in groups, longhouses, and as a community. This reflects an inherent understanding of listening and learning.

Do this mindful exercise: take a minute and look at your hands. Put your palms down, now clench your hands into fists. Pause for a moment to take in what you are feeling and experiencing. Now open your hands and turn your palms up. Keep them open. Look at the posture of your hands. What is the difference between the two postures?

Our hands contain twenty-nine bones, twenty-nine joints, thirty arteries, thirty-four muscles, forty-eight nerves and at least one-hundred-twenty-three ligaments. While hands are intricate, they're also efficient. Hands allow us to type more than sixty words a minute, swing an axe, and pick up pennies that have fallen on the ground.

Remarkably, our hands do all these things by performing two simple acts: closing and opening. So, if hands reveal character, they do so through the simple act of closing and opening.

The open hand image represents being open to give and open to receive. **By living with open hands, we create space for engagement with others.** Opening our hearts shows understanding and empathy, whereas opening our minds is about new learning and growth, as discussed in parts 1 and 2 of this series.

I don't think it is enough to click "like" or share an article on social media.

Living with a posture of open hands expresses our understanding of an open heart and mind. This allows us to move physically and emotionally toward people in need and empathize with where they are at and their circumstances.

To respond to the injustices that people have felt, you've got to have personal relationships with hurting people. Our relational presence changes us and others.

Brander "Raven" McDonald, a friend and a Cree First Nations, stresses that the fractured relationships that resulted from the early approach to the Indigenous peoples occurred because of a lack of understanding about Indigenous people and their culture.

"Everything happens by relationships," Brander states. "Indigenous peoples, by nature, are group-oriented and traditionally hunted and gathered in groups and then came back to the larger group of families and extended families."

Brander believes that the bond of relationship is paramount to the reconciliation process today. We need to think long-term and relational to promote healing with the Indigenous people.

If you have a brother or sister, hurt somehow, what is the best way to respond to the hurt? Listening, reaching out a hand on the shoulder, and you do not even need to speak.

The residential schools dismantled Indigenous communities and relationships. We need to reach out, learn and listen. We need to recognize that relationships are the primary means of interaction with the Indigenous peoples.

Opening our hands is, in part, the practice of Eyē? Sqâ'lewen, having a good heart, good mind, and good feelings. It is also the practice of creating space for engagement with Indigenous people, our fellow human beings.

Thank you for joining us on this three part journey. We have important work to do in the Truth and Reconciliation process to understand and to take action.

Justice Murray Sinclair who headed the Truth and Reconciliation report concluded the presentation of the final report with these words:

“Achieving reconciliation is like climbing a mountain — we must proceed a step at a time. It will not always be easy. There will be storms, there will be obstacles, but we cannot allow ourselves to be daunted by the task because our goal is just and it is also necessary.”

May we take those first steps in our own lives to help in this healing process.

Here is an opportunity to be a part of the journey of healing. Visit the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation website at <https://nctr.ca>. It is full of literature, events, reports, news and so much more. Dive in with an open heart, an open mind, and open hands.

Terry Crosby

Sashbear Director of Indigenous Relations