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Reflections on reconciliation

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An Interdisciplinary Journal

Honouring the Voices, Perspectives and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews

Reflections on reconciliation

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From 2009-2015, it has been my greatest honour to serve as a Commissioner of the historic Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. The TRC's huge job has had three key parts: to research, document and record the facts and impacts of over a hundred years of forced residential schooling for Indigenous children; to preserve all that information, and use it to educate the people of Canada about what we have learned; and to 'inspire reconciliation', so that the individuals affected, and our country as a whole, could recover from the past and live in respectful relationships with each other going forward.

When we first began our work, many of the former residential school students, also known as survivors, asked us about the meaning of reconciliation, and whether it could ever be possible given all the injustice and injury the schools had caused so many thousands of individuals, families, communities and Indigenous nations.

We Commissioners agreed early on that reconciliation was about respect, and about establishing or restoring respectful relations. For me, built into that idea of respect, is that reconciliation is also about creating peace...peace in the heart, the home, the community, and in society as a whole. Hearing Canada say it was sorry for the harms caused by the residential schools is not going to be enough to get us to the place of respectful, peaceful relations. So reconciliation also has to mean change...things need to change for the better, especially for the Indigenous peoples of the country.

My understanding of Reconciliation has continued to evolve as I listened to survivors share the stories of their difficult and sometimes devastating childhoods in the residential schools; as I heard statements of remorse and regret from other Canadians; and as I heard voices of resilience, wisdom, and great hope from all sides:

I think reconciliation is about *who we are*...We are beginning to face up to the truth of who we have been and what we have done as a country. We cannot undo that, but we can never again deny it either. Because of our actions as a country, thousands of Indigenous children grew up in faraway residential schools, afraid, lonely, ashamed, and angry. They have told us that they learned to hate themselves and didn't know how to love anyone else either. They grew up not knowing who they were or where they fit in. Reconciliation, then, is about honestly owning up to who we have been.

I think reconciliation is also about *where we are*...We are living in a time and place of slowly but surely healing. So many survivors spoke to us about their 'healing journey,' and about the very important role that elders and others have played in helping them heal as they reclaim language, cultural and spiritual identity and a sense of belonging. One of them said, *"Once I got my culture back I felt proud again. I felt like I was somebody."* Individuals aren't the only ones trying to heal. Families are doing that healing work. Some churches are doing that work. A growing number of departments of education, professional associations, municipalities, other faith communities and charitable organizations, and individual Canadians are doing that work. Most recently, and potentially most significantly, our newly elected federal government has also committed to doing that work. But beyond the political promises, our country still has a lot of practical work to do to rebuild trust, and to forge new relationships.

Finally, I think reconciliation is about *what we are*...We are a country at a cross-roads. Thanks to the expanding national dialogue that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has helped to make possible, there is much greater public awareness of what happened and what now needs to be done. We are a country faced with the historic opportunity to begin anew; to begin living up to both our legal obligations and our stated national values in dealing with the Indigenous peoples of this country. As one survivor said about reconciliation, *"We do not want a white man's system to trump our indigenous systems and beliefs and cultural practices. We need to look at common spaces, ethical spaces, to look at the parallels between the two, and to find the best practices between the two... to move ahead"*.

Canada's residential school image seems so very different from the picture we paint of ourselves in the world today; about who we say we are and what we stand for as a country....as Canada. We want to believe that we are so different and so much better now, and that all of this is long behind us in the past.

Yet as we contemplate the need for ongoing reconciliation within our country today, here are some things to consider, with rigorous honesty, as we start to change and act. Are Indigenous representatives in the room where policy decisions are made about their children's welfare, and their children's essential need to know who they are and where they come from? Are Indigenous peoples in the rooms where decisions are made about the level of funding for their children's education, which has for so many years been less than for other children in Canada? Are Indigenous peoples in the rooms where curriculum is developed to reflect a more complete history of Canada, to make Indigenous children feel proud of themselves, and to make *all* children feel proud of the rich and shared Indigenous heritage of our country? Are we teaching the honest history of Canada's relations with Indigenous peoples in our professional schools, colleges and universities? Are we preparing our social workers, our lawyers, our doctors, our judges, our teachers and all our public servants with a truthful context for understanding what experiences have affected many of the Indigenous populations they serve? Are we reflecting the three founding peoples of Canada when we design our national symbols, when we name our major roadways and public buildings and spaces, when we sing our national anthem, when we greet each other on traditional Indigenous homelands, when we commemorate our national moments of celebration, remembrance and loss? Are we using the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as a framework for reconciliation?

All of these questions, and others, underlie the 94 Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, released in June 2015. For reconciliation is about all of these things. It is about ongoing healing from devastating personal and collective losses. It is also about building new friendships and new

frameworks for social justice within this country, with an essential role for *all* Canadians; losses and healing; promises and public engagement.

I believe reconciliation means that things can, do, and will get better, but it will take time and we all need to play our part. On an individual level, we are beginning to change how we see, talk to, and talk about each other. On a societal and public policy level, as we change some of *what we do*, we must also change a lot of *how we do it*. Reconciliation means new thinking about who decides; about imagining and convening ethical spaces; about consciously deciding who is present in the decisions rooms of our governments, our policy shops, our social services, our schools, and about who controls the resources that such decisions rely upon.

For reconciliation to take root, spread, and grow, we must not allow ourselves or anyone else to get tired of the subject and the dialogue, for we still have so much to learn *about*, and *from* each other. Above all else, in the recent shadow of more than a century of national negligence under the residential school saga, we all need to keep our hearts and our eyes on the next seven generations of children. They are counting on us, and as our future leaders, we will *all* be counting on them.