

# Reconciliation—Why does it matter? What can we do?

Originally published in the April 2016 edition of The Chalice

*(excerpted and paraphrased from TRC reports by Jane Knox)*

For 170 years, (1830s until almost 2000), Aboriginal children in Canada were taken from their homes and communities and put into poorly funded institutions (residential schools) run by religious orders in collaboration with the federal government. Children (age four to teenagers) were separated from their families, and did not receive a parent's love or know a caring adult. They were prohibited from speaking their native languages, and did not hear traditional teachings or learn traditional skills (e.g., trapping). Over 150,000 children suffered active abuse as well as hunger, cold, and neglect of basic needs. They were taught that their lives and traditions were worth little. Most lost the comfortable feeling of belonging to a family and a community; they had no *home*.

The impact of deprivation, abuse, shame and lonely isolation endured in residential schools continues to affect generations of survivors, and their families today. Over half of Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan now live in urban centres, but many do not feel quite "at home" either in the city or with their original reserve communities. Remarkably, in the face of this tremendous adversity, many survivors and their descendants have retained their language and their culture and continue to work toward healing and reconciliation.

A descendant of residential school survivors, Daniel Elliot, told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "*I think all Canadians need to stop and take a look and not look away. Yeah, it's embarrassing, yeah, it's an ugly part of our history. We don't want to know about it. What I want to see from the Commission is to rewrite the history books so that other generations will understand and not go through the same thing that we're going through now, like it never happened.*" ... p.20 TRC Executive Summary

*Why is this important for all Canadians?*

*Why should it matter to us all? Why now?*

## IT MATTERS

because deprivation and cultural loss continue to affect First Nations, Inuit and Métis families—people from vibrant cultures who are vital contributors to Canadian society.

## IT MATTERS

because it happened here, in our country—a land some considered to be a world leader in democracy and human rights.

## IT MATTERS

because the residential school system is a major cause of poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, and violence among Aboriginal people—devastating conditions that are felt and experienced by our neighbours, friends, and community members.

## IT MATTERS

because Aboriginal communities suffer levels of illiteracy, poverty, and illness comparable to those in developing nations—and these are perpetuated through inaction.

## IT MATTERS

because we share this land. We may not be responsible for what happened in the past, but we all benefit from what First Nations, Inuit, and Métis have had to relinquish. We are responsible for our previous inaction and for our actions today.

Michael Redhead Champagne (Winnipeg): "*I think it's important for indigenous and non-indigenous folks to be working together because we all share the same water, the same air, the same space, and right now ... people are looking for solutions*".

### *What can we do as individuals?*

*Learn*—the realities of Canada's past with a focus on the prairies and Indigenous history

*Listen*—with a willing heart and an open mind to Aboriginal beliefs, stories, poetry, songs

*Look*—at the world around you and the people you meet with greater insight

*Explore*—the recommended actions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

*Decide to take action*—find something you care about and work on it with passion

*Act*—do something, however small; set a date, get going, *keep on moving forward*

### *What can we do together?*

1. Move forward together
  - a. Keep on learning about our documented, unabridged history
  - b. Move toward accepting the facts and how they impact people today
  - c. Continue to build our capacity to recognize, name, and speak out about racism and religious intolerance
2. Recognize our connection to the land. It is part of the interconnected web of life
3. Seek opportunities to work with First Nations people as partners
  - a. Learn more about human rights and the rights of Indigenous people
  - b. Host a blanket exercise—it is an interesting and useful learning tool
  - c. Share our space (sometimes without charge) towards building historical understanding and healing

## *Understanding our reactions and supporting each other to move forward*

As I continue my learning journey, I notice that others have reactions similar to my own. Asking questions and reaching out helps me to move along, little by little. Sometimes I take a step back, pause and adjust to a new world view. I still have a long way to go.

Here are some of the reactions I have observed in myself and others. What about you? *Where are you on your journey toward a better Canada for all people?*

*Denial*—lack of knowledge, simple ignorance (we have all been there)

- ... surely that did not happen in Canada!
- ... you mean our school history books had big gaps and sometimes were *wrong*? ... that was long ago, it's not happening now ... is it?
- ... that has nothing to do with me and my future ... does it?

*Delay*—someday I will think about it

- ... someday I will try to understand why Canada does not treat all people equally
- ... maybe later I will try to grasp how Canada's history and laws resulted in today's harsh realities for Indigenous people in Canada
- ... I feel so sorry for those people, but what can one person do?
- ... there is no urgency, it all happened long ago ... didn't it?

*Maybe but*—beginning awareness of our history

- ... maybe some people suffered, but isn't that normal? Settlers suffered too?
- ... maybe some people were harsh but Government was not dishonest ... was it?
- ... well, perhaps there were some inhumane decisions, but not any more?

*Shock*—dismay and even horror as facts become known

- ... Canada's past contains deliberate acts causing the death of thousands
- ... facts revealed in old photos, Parliamentary transcripts, written reports of government employees, and most importantly, the memories of those who experienced the violence and racism of Canadian policies, then and now.
- ... the suppression and destruction of evidence is also shocking

*Reach out to others*—silence is NOT golden, it conceals truths and limits progress

- ... listen, talk to others, share what you are learning
- ... take a class, learn more about Canada's history and present policies
- ... speak out; don't be afraid of mistakes, they help us learn, change, and grow
- ... do apologize when you mis-step (it's OK, we are all human)
- ... ask for support on this painful journey, being mindful of the pain of others
- ... be respectful—others might have needs greater than your own

*Acceptance*—building knowledge

- ... yes, I see solid evidence that elected officials and Canadian laws actively removed the cultural heritage of Indigenous people
- ... yes, I acknowledge our elected officials and government employees withheld resources that Canada was legally obligated to provide to Indigenous people, ... starved them, failed to provide education in a safe environment, caused illness, bickered over essential health services
- ... yes, I understand that the Government directed Indian Agents to implement (without any legal basis), a Pass System that severely limited Indigenous people's ability to leave the reserve and thus greatly reduced their ability to hunt, fish, sell farm produce, obtain employment, visit children or friends
- ... yes, I know that Canadian government policies *today* continue to withhold legally prescribed resources from Indigenous people, apprehend children and separate families, delay access to advanced education
- ... in 2016, many Saskatchewan reserves still lack clean, running water; housing is often minimal; and for some, health services inadequate to meet basic needs
- ... in 2016, the federal government provides about 1/3 less resources per child to educate children on reserves than provincial school systems provide
- ... in 2016, children are still apprehended and placed in multiple foster care situations (or hotels for teenagers)
  - ... in many cases, without first attempting family counselling or community solutions
- ... in 2016, our Saskatchewan judicial system still makes race-based rulings in spite of directives from Canada's Supreme Court. We deliberately incarcerate Indigenous people, including women and youth, in overcrowded jails
- ... in spite of systemic racism, many Indigenous people show tremendous strength, resilience, and humbling generosity in the face of our ignorance

## Moving Forward Together: Further Reading and Inspiration to Action

National Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (2015). *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*. In *Final Report: Executive Summary* (535 pages; recommendations pages 326-344).

[http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive\\_Summary\\_English\\_Web.pdf](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf).

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). *Calls to Action*. (20 pages of recommendations, by sector)

[http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth\\_and\\_Reconciliation\\_Commission\\_%28Canada%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_and_Reconciliation_Commission_%28Canada%29) (presents shorter summary of 94 recommendations, grouped by sector)

-----

Blackstock, Cindy. (2007). If reindeer could fly—Dreams and real solutions for Aboriginal children. In *Education Canada*, 47(1). (comments on child welfare system)

<http://www.cea-ace.ca/sites/cea-ace.ca/files/EdCan-2007-v47-n1-Blackstock.pdf>

CBC'S MARKETPLACE: "ARE WE RACIST?" A SPECIAL 1-HOUR INVESTIGATION – Of the five Canadian cities investigated, Regina was the most racist: <http://www.cbc.ca/marketplace/episodes/2015-2016/are-we-racist>

MACLEAN'S ARTICLE ON PRISONS.

Macdonald, Nancy. (18 February, 2016). *Canada's Prisons are the New Residential Schools*. (With lower crime rates, why are incarcerations higher than ever? Article includes comments on Saskatchewan).

<http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/canadas-prisons-are-the-new-residential-schools/>

United Nations. (2007). *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*—in brief.

[https://fncaringsociety.com/sites/default/files/HRBAP\\_UN\\_Rights\\_Indig\\_Peoples.pdf](https://fncaringsociety.com/sites/default/files/HRBAP_UN_Rights_Indig_Peoples.pdf)