
Madeleine Dion Stout

A Survivor Reflects on Resilience

My father holds the reins in his hands while my mother alights from the horse-drawn wagon. I fix my red-rimmed eyes on my mother's red tam—the splash of colour, the statement, the heartbeat, the moment.

Two hours later I am fighting for dear life. The parlour is stone cold; the benches knocked wood; the windows large and paned. I beg my mother and father not to leave me. I cry until my nose bleeds. Then and there colours fade. There is nothing left to say; hearts break and moments die. I surrender the loose change I'm left with to my superiors. I buy jawbreakers and black licorice pipes for a few weeks running. Strange is how they taste.

Colonization, healing, and resilience reveal themselves to me. As Survivors, we ride waves of vulnerability for a lifetime and for generations. We were subjected to real risk factors including hunger, loneliness, ridicule, physical and sexual abuse, untimely and unseemly death. As we struggle to throw off the

shackles of colonization we lean heavily toward healing, and resilience becomes our best friend.

Today, triggers continue to work on my body, mind, and spirit but, ironically, they have given me a shot at life. My mother and father hoped they would; why else would they have loosened my desperate clutch on them in the parlour? Their resilience became mine. It had come from their mothers and fathers and now must spill over to my grandchildren and their grandchildren. If we truly believe the pain of the residential school legacy has had an intergenerational impact, then it necessarily follows that there will be intergenerational Survivors too.

I firmly believe that a lot of the healing began in residential school. I have asked myself and others, did I, did we, suffer uselessly in residential school? Like any hard question I have ever posed to my mother, her answer might have been *ki'ya nitānis*, which roughly translates to “reflect on it, my daughter.” The words spoken at this conference have driven me closer to home and have me reflecting on my good fortune. I have been wearing your messages like the blanket we were gifted with here.

I say that our healing began in residential school when I think of the times I lived second-hand love there. My grade four teacher, Miss Walker, spent as much time watching out the window for her RCMP boyfriend as she did watching over us students. I recall vividly her sparkling, flashing blue eyes and her pretty blue nylon blouse—the splash of colour, the

statement, the heartbeat, the moment. I also well remember looking up to a window and catching an unmistakable aura of affection between a Cree woman who worked at the school and her Dene suitor. She was radiant as she beamed down on us from the window, large and paned, while he, strikingly handsome, beamed at her.

While I was deprived of love in residential school, I lived it second-hand to the fullest. Love literally filled my empty heart and soul, even though it was not rightfully mine. Second-hand love does save lives. Because of it, I can honestly say I began my healing journey in the most ungodly place. Healing is the mid-section of a continuum with colonization marking one end and resilience the other. Knowing what I know now, a large part of my response to being and becoming in an ungodly place was an act of resilience.

In the name of our best friend resilience, we can look forward to the future because we are very, very good at so many things. We are very good at wearing splashes of colour: we wear red tams as a tribute to our beloved ancestors, we display our Sundance flags, and we proudly wear our Métis sashes and our Northern prints, making a statement whether we talk “moose, geese, or fish.” We are very, very good at acting in a heartbeat in the most ordinary way at the most everyday level because as Survivors we help one another do the same. We are very, very good at living the moment while marking time by preserving residential schools as monuments, producing films about them, and working together to keep important healing work going.

In the name of our best friend resilience, we must give fervent thanks to our ancestors, our beloved Elders, and our Brothers and Sisters and for all the work in the service of healing that will surely be transformative when we look back.

Thank you, *Merci, Hai hai!*

Biography

This is an excerpt from Madeleine's remarks on 10 July 2004 to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation's National Gathering in Edmonton, Alberta. Madeleine is an independent scholar, author, researcher, and lecturer whose distinguished career includes serving as president of the Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada and as founding director of the Centre for Aboriginal Culture and Education at Carleton University. She is currently Vice-Chair of the Board of the newly created Mental Health Commission of Canada.

Photo: Courtesy of Janice Longboat

