
Richard Wagamese

Returning to Harmony

I am a victim of Canada's residential school system. When I say victim, I mean something substantially different than "Survivor." I never attended a residential school, so I cannot say that I survived one. However, my parents and my extended family members did. The pain they endured became my pain, and I became a victim.

When I was born, my family still lived the seasonal nomadic life of traditional Ojibwa people. In the great rolling territories surrounding the Winnipeg River in Northwestern Ontario, they fished, hunted, and trapped. Their years were marked by the peregrinations of a people guided by the motions and turns of the land. I came into the world and lived in a canvas army tent hung from a spruce bough frame as my first home. The first sounds I heard were the calls of loon, the snap and crackle of a fire, and the low, rolling undulation of Ojibwa talk.

We lived communally. Along with my mother and siblings, there were my matriarchal grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Surrounded by the rough and tangle of the Canadian Shield, we

moved through the seasons. Time was irrelevant in the face of ancient cultural ways that we followed.

But there was a spectre in our midst.

All the members of my family attended residential school. They returned to the land bearing psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical burdens that haunted them. Even my mother, despite staunch declarations that she had learned good things there (finding Jesus, learning to keep a house, the gospel), carried wounds she could not voice. Each of them had experienced an institution that tried to scrape the Indian off of their insides, and they came back to the bush and river raw, sore, and aching. The pain they bore was invisible and unspoken. It seeped into their spirit, oozing its poison and blinding them from the incredible healing properties within their Indian ways.

For a time, the proximity to family and the land acted as a balm. Then, slowly and irrevocably, the spectre that followed them back from the schools began to assert its presence and shunt for space around our communal fire. When the vitriolic stew of unspoken words, feelings, and memories of their great dislocation, hurt, and isolation began to bubble and churn within them, they discovered that alcohol could numb them from it. And we ceased to be a family.

Instead, the adults of my Ojibwa family became frightened children. The trauma that had been visited upon them reduced them to that. They huddled against a darkness from where

vague shapes whispered threats and from where invasions of their minds, spirits, and bodies roared through the blackness to envelope and smother them again. They forgot who they were. They struck back vengefully, bitterly, and blindly as only hurt and frightened children could do.

When I was a toddler, my left arm and shoulder were smashed. Left untreated, my arm hung backwards in its joint and, over time, it atrophied and withered. My siblings and I endured great tides of violence and abuse from the drunken adults. We were beaten, nearly drowned, and terrorized. We took to hiding in the bush and waited until the shouting, cursing, and drinking died away. Those nights were cold and terrifying. In the dim light of dawn, the eldest of us would sneak back into camp to get food and blankets.

In the mid-winter of 1958, when I was almost three, the adults left my two brothers, sister, and me alone in the bush camp across the bay from the tiny railroad town of Minaki. It was February. The wind was blowing bitterly and the firewood ran out at the same time as the food. They were gone for days, drinking in Kenora sixty miles away. When it became apparent that we would freeze to death without wood, my eldest sister and brother hauled my brother, Charles, and me across the bay on a sled piled with furs.

They pulled us across that ice in a raging snowstorm. We huddled in the furs on the leeward side of the railroad depot cold, hungry, and crying. A passing Ontario provincial policeman

found us and took us to the Children's Aid Society. I would not see my mother or my extended family again for twenty-one years.

I lived in two foster homes until I was adopted at age nine. I left that home at age sixteen; I ran for my safety, my security, and my sanity. The seven years I spent in that adopted home were filled with beatings, mental and emotional abuse, and a complete dislocation and disassociation from anything Indian or Ojibwa. I was permitted only the strict Presbyterian ethic of that household. It was as much an institutional kidnapping as a residential school.

For years after, I lived on the street or in prison. I became a drug user and an alcoholic. I drifted through unfulfilled relationships. I was haunted by fears and memories. I carried the residual trauma of my toddler years and the seven years in my adopted home. This caused me to experience post-traumatic stress disorder, which severely affected the way I lived my life and the choices I would make.

The truth of my life is that I am an intergenerational victim of residential schools. Everything I endured until I found healing was a result of the effects of those schools. I did not hug my mother until I was twenty-five. I did not speak my first Ojibwa word or set foot on my traditional territory until I was twenty-six. I did not know that I had a family, a history, a culture, a source for spirituality, a cosmology, or a traditional way of living. I had no awareness that I belonged somewhere. I grew up ashamed of my Native identity and the fact that I knew

nothing about it. I was angry that there was no one to tell me who I was or where I had come from.

My brother Charles tracked me down with the help of a social worker friend when I was twenty-five. From there, I returned to the land of my people as a stranger knowing nothing of their experience or their pain. When I rejoined my people and learned about Canada's residential school policy, I was enraged. Their political and social history impelled me to find work as a reporter with a Native newspaper. As a writer and a journalist, I spoke to hundreds of residential school Survivors. The stories they told, coupled with my family's complete and utter reticence, told me a great deal about how my family had suffered. I knew that those schools were responsible for my displacement, my angst, and my cultural *lostness*.

For years I carried simmering anger and resentment. The more I learned about the implementation of that policy and how it affected Aboriginal people across the country, the more anger I felt. I ascribed all my pain to residential schools and to those responsible. I blamed churches for my alcoholism, loneliness, shame, fear, inadequacy, and failures. In my mind I envisaged a world where I had grown up as a fully functioning Ojibwa, and it glittered in comparison to the pain-wracked life I had lived.

But when I was in my late forties, I had enough of the anger. I was tired of being drunk and blaming the residential schools and those responsible. I was tired of fighting against something that could not be touched, addressed, or confronted. My

life was slipping away on me and I did not want to become an older person still clinging to a disempowering emotion like the anger I carried.

So one day I decided that I would visit a church. Churches had been the seed of my anger. I had religion forced on me in my adopted home and it was the churches that had run the residential schools that shredded the spirit of my family. If I were to lose my anger, I needed to face the root of it squarely. I was determined that I would take myself there and sit and listen to the service. As much as I knew that I would want to walk out and as much as my anger would direct me to reject it all, I would force myself to sit and listen and try to find something that I could relate to. I chose a United Church because they had been the first to issue an apology for their role in the residential school debacle. They had been the first to publicly state their responsibility for the hurt that crippled generations. They were the first to show the courage to address wrongdoing, abuse, forced removal, and shaming. They had been the first to make tangible motions toward reconciliation. It put them in a more favourable light with me.

I was uncomfortable at first. No one spoke to me as I took my seat in a pew near the back. There were no other Native people there and I used that fact as a denunciation. When the service began, I heard everything through the tough screen of my rage. Then I noticed the old woman beside me sitting with her eyes closed as the minister spoke. She looked calm and peaceful, and there was a glow on her features that I coveted. So I closed my eyes too and tilted my head back and listened.

I ceased to hear the liturgy that day. I could not hear doctrine, semantics, proselytizations, or judgment. Instead, with my eyes closed, all I could hear was the small voice of the minister telling a story about helping a poor, drug-addicted woman on the street despite his fear and doubt. All I heard was the voice of compassion. All I heard was a spiritual, very human person talking about life and confronting its mysteries.

So I went back the next week. I went back and took my seat, and I listened with my eyes closed. After the scriptural text was read, the minister analyzed it by placing it in the context of his impatience and the lessons he had learned in the grocery line and in the freeway traffic. Here was a man responsible for directing the lives of a congregation talking about facing his own spiritual shortcomings. There was no self-aggrandization, no inferred superiority. There was only a man telling us how hard it was to behave like a spiritual being.

I went back to that church for many weeks. The messages I heard were all about humanity and about the search for innocence, comfort, and belonging. I do not know just exactly when my anger and resentment disappeared. I only know that there came a time when I could see that there was nothing in the message that was not about healing. I heard about compassion, love, kindness, trust, courage, truth, and loyalty and an abiding faith that there is a God, a Creator. There was nothing to be angry about in any of that; in fact, there was nothing different from what Native spirituality talks about. After I came home to my people I sought out teachers and healers and

ceremonies. I had committed myself to learning the spiritual principles that allowed our peoples to sustain, define, and perpetuate themselves through incredible changes. I had adopted many of those teachings into my daily life, and every ceremony I attended taught me more and more about the essence of our spiritual lives. What I heard from that minister those Sunday mornings was not any different from the root message of humanity in our teachings. With my eyes closed there was no white, no Indian, no difference at all; the absence of anger happened quietly without fanfare.

It has been a few years now since I sat in that church. I have not receded back into the dark seas of resentment, rage, or old hurt. Instead, I have found a peace with churches and, in turn, with residential schools, with Canada. See, that church changed my personal politics. Sure, there are genuine reasons to be angry. The hurt caused by the residential school experience, both of the Survivors and of those like me who were victimized a generation or more later, are huge, real, and overwhelming. But healing happens if you want it bad enough, and that is the trick of it, really. Every spiritually enhancing experience asks a sacrifice of us and, in this, the price of admission is a keen desire to be rid of the block of anger.

When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission makes its tour of the country and hears the stories of people who endured the pain of residential schools, I hope it hears more stories like mine—of people who fought against the resentment, hatred, and anger and found a sense of peace. Both the Commission

and Canada need to hear stories of healing instead of a relentless retelling and re-experiencing of pain. They need to hear that, despite everything, every horror, it is possible to move forward and to learn how to leave hurt behind. Our neighbours in this country need to hear stories about our capacity for forgiveness, for self-examination, for compassion, and for our yearning for peace because they speak to our resiliency as a people. That is how reconciliation happens.

It is a big word, *reconciliation*. Quite simply, it means to create harmony. You create harmony with truth and you build truth out of humility. That is spiritual. That is truth. That is Indian. Within us, as nations of Aboriginal people and as individual members of those nations, we have an incredible capacity for survival, endurance, and forgiveness. In the reconciliation with ourselves first, we find the ability to create harmony with others, and that is where it has to start—in the fertile soil of our own hearts, minds, and spirits.

That, too, is Indian.

Biography

Richard Wagemese is an Ojibway from the Wabasseemoong First Nation in northwestern Ontario. He has been a lecturer in creative writing with the University of Regina's Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, a writer for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, a faculty advisor on journalism for Grant MacEwen Community College and the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), and

a scriptwriter for the CBC-Alliance production *North of 60*. Recognized for his free-flowing style, Richard has been a book, film, and music reviewer, general reporter, and feature writer for numerous newspapers and journals across Canada. He has also worked extensively in both radio and television news and documentary.

Following a distinguished journalism career in which he became the first Aboriginal in Canada to win a National Newspaper Award for column writing, he moved into the realm of fiction writing. The result was the award-winning bestseller *Keeper'n Me* (1994), followed by an anthology of his newspaper columns, *The Terrible Summer* (1996), his second novel, *A Quality of Light* (1997), a memoir entitled *For Joshua: An Ojibway Father Teaches His Son* (2002), his third novel *Dream Wheels* (2006), his fourth, *Ragged Company* (2007), and finally his latest book, his second memoir, *One Native Life* (2008). Richard has been listed in *Canadian Who's Who*.

New arrivals at Moose Fort Indian Residential School
Moose Factory, Ontario
Courtesy of Janice Longboat

