

## Conclusion

### The Journey

The papers in this collection, taken together, trace a path from truth to reconciliation. They record the origins of false assumptions that devalued the humanity of Aboriginal people and led to oppressive policies that did immeasurable harm to successive generations of children. As Survivors revisit their individual journeys to wholeness, we see their struggle and their resilience, and we share with them momentarily the waves of vulnerability that surge under the surface of even the most accomplished lives. We applaud the dedication, the energy, and the anger of colleagues who encounter daily the devastating impacts of historic trauma and labour to create safety for women, nurturing environments and protection for children, and justice interventions that heal.

The exploration of reconciliation processes that have had some success in South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and here at home gives cause for optimism, but the studies and narratives show that there is no perfect formula and certainly none that can be transferred directly to healing the legacy of residential schools in Canada. People set their foot on the path to reconciliation with different burdens, different strengths, and different goals, and some hesitate to set out at all, uncertain that reconciliation is either possible or desirable.

Reconciliation has to create trust between individuals who harbour stereotypes of each other, animate collaboration between communities that perceive themselves to have different interests, infuse professional and institutional practices that are often ill-conceived and misdirected, and eventually change the perception of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada of who we are and how we came to be neighbors and relations in this land.

Fostering reconciliation in those terms is an awesome responsibility to place on three Commissioners with a maximum five-year mandate. Yet, the roots of the residential school system run deep in our history, and the effects ripple through the whole of the Aboriginal community whether or not individuals were personally exposed to the system. A narrow focus on cause and effect of defined harms will not suffice, as the diverse contributors to this collection make clear.

What assurance can be drawn from the papers that worthwhile progress on the path to reconciliation is achievable? There is much to be learned from the wisdom of our contributors that we will not attempt to summarize here. However, evidence from their experience and insights gives us confidence that a reconciliation process that effectively addresses the impact of residential schooling can become a major turning point in the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and all Canadians. Our cautious optimism is based on some specific features of the process now underway: the symbolic importance of residential schools; a long-awaited government apology; the transformative power of bearing witness; and the opportunities for citizen involvement in healing and reconciliation.

### **Residential Schooling as a Focus for Reconciliation**

The residential school system is powerfully symbolic of the flawed relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada, probably second only to struggles around land in its ability to mobilize involvement in Aboriginal communities. Residential schooling did violence to children not only physically but spiritually. Their inherent resilience was often overwhelmed and many sought refuge in non-feeling, passive compliance, or becoming aggressors themselves. The moral confusion seen in many communities today is linked directly to the detachment of children from their cultural moorings and the deprivation that they experienced and later replicated in the rearing of their own children.

At the same time, the very pervasiveness of residential school trauma has proven to be a resource. When the creation of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation presented opportunities for community-led healing initiatives, tens of thousands of Survivors, their relations, and community members came together to support one another on their healing journeys by working, learning, and volunteering in record numbers. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people have demonstrated that even in the most troubled communities there are healthy individuals who have the motivation and the capacity to effect change. Similarly, the realization that children were harmed and that children continue to be harmed by intergenerational impacts has the potential to move Canadians in society at large toward meeting the first requirement for reconciliation—acknowledgement of the need for repairing relationships.

### **Apology**

Abuse of children was the issue that moved government to its first guarded effort at apology and reconciliation in 1998. The Prime Minister announced in the Speech from the Throne in October 2007 that an apology would be

associated with the launch of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The content of the apology is unknown as this is being written. We can hope that the Prime Minister will be guided by advice such as that presented in articles in this collection on the qualities of an authentic, effective apology. The gestures toward redress in the common experience payments now being distributed and the independent assessment process for instances of serious physical abuse and sexual abuse, administered separately from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, can be seen as evidence of the sincerity of apology.

A public, ceremonial statement from the highest political authority in the land has huge symbolic value. Such an apology acknowledges the enormity of the wrongful action by government, the responsibility of the Canadian citizenry in whose name the harm was inflicted, and it implicitly or explicitly promises that the wrong will not be repeated. A public apology establishes a new standard of behaviour toward Aboriginal people whose human rights have been trampled upon. But as Robert Joseph points out in his article, even a highly symbolic apology is only a speech act. It seeks to rectify a situation for which true restitution is impossible. Any positive effect is dependent on acceptance of the apology by the injured parties and adherence to the new standard in everyday transactions.

The challenge for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be to explore what hurts at the local level need to be healed, what actions would serve to translate public apology into local dialogue, and who in diverse Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities has the will and the stature to lead the building of mutual trust. Commissions and task forces in the past have been assigned responsibility for analyzing problems and coming up with solutions that are presented to governments. Public apology can have significant impact, and the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission can focus and highlight the ongoing public commitment that is required, but reconciliation has to take place at a thousand points of encounter, and it has to be reaffirmed when clashes of personalities, interests and cultures trigger old animosities.

### **Bearing Witness**

The most visible component of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work in the first two-and-a-half years of its mandate will be public events at which testimony of Survivors and community members is heard, and the responsiveness of the non-Aboriginal community is given expression. Care has been taken in defining the Commission's mandate to ensure that such events do not turn into trials that attribute blame to individuals. Evidence

from truth and reconciliation processes in other countries and reports that have circulated in Canada over the past twenty-five years prepare us for angry denunciations of treatment in residential schools and revelations of abuse that will be shocking and heart-rending. The physical and emotional toll on commissioners elsewhere as they listened with compassion to such accounts has been extreme. What does truth-telling in this public manner accomplish?

Speaking one's painful truth in a safe environment can be a healing experience, bringing nightmarish moments and images out of the recesses of suppressed memory and seeing them for what they are—pieces of personal history that can be framed in a larger story of survival and resilience. Laurence Kirmayer, a Canadian psychiatrist who has done extensive research on Aboriginal mental health, explains that what one remembers and what one forgets are strongly affected by rehearsing privately and telling in company what one has experienced: "If a family or community agrees that a trauma did not happen, then it vanishes from collective memory and the possibility for individual memory is severely strained."<sup>1</sup>

With reference to large-scale atrocities Kirmayer writes: "Each collective act of remembering makes it more possible for individuals to recollect and tell their personal stories .... We do not see their failure to surpass their traumas and move on as a consequence of personal weakness but as the inhuman force of the evil they have endured."<sup>2</sup>

Public testimony and results of documentary research will form part of the archive that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will establish. The stories of individuals and impacts on communities will thus be validated, that is, given recognition in the public record. But will they make a difference in public consciousness? There have been horrific stories brought into public view before now: Helen Betty Osborne, whose murder was the subject of a provincial inquiry; the self-destructive behaviour of despairing, gas-sniffing children in Davis Inlet; and the mob aggression of townspeople against women, children, and Elders from Kanawake during the Oka crisis. Awareness of violations and trauma is raised briefly by media coverage and then subsides.

Kirmayer observes that "accounts of the terrible things that happen to people... are warded off because of their capacity to create vicarious fear and pain [and] because they constitute a threat to current social and political arrangements."<sup>3</sup> The current social and political arrangements in Canada place on-reserve Indians 79<sup>th</sup> on the United Nations Human Development Index, which is based on measurements of life expectancy, education, and income. While Canada consistently ranks among the top three countries

in the world, the quality of life of the on-reserve population ranks on a par with Brazil and Peru.<sup>4</sup> We suggest that the capacity of Canadians to tolerate such disparities and to dismiss the suffering they entail is reinforced by the residue of colonialist notions and by despair that anything can be done to bring about change.

The colonial views that gave rise to residential schools held that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis were the “Others” who would benefit from aggressive measures to civilize them. The divide between the social worlds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada persists. It contributes to assumptions that the work of civilizing natives is incomplete, that poverty is caused by failure to catch up with the times rather than by dispossession, that brutalization of Aboriginal women is perpetrated by a few deviant individuals, not because they are devalued by society. If parents have difficulty providing for their children, “That’s the way it is with them.” Some authors in this collection, who have worked to bridge the chasm between peoples, question whether Canada is ready for either conciliation or reconciliation.

When we hear or see things that are dissonant with our inner sense of reality, the normal response is to deny that they are true, put them at a distance, or reinterpret them to make sense. Witnessing, whether by Truth and Reconciliation Commissioners or by ordinary Canadians, involves listening to painful, sometimes harsh, words without flinching or resorting to denial. Compassionate listeners need to hear that the ruptures of relationship and the trauma of victimization can be resolved and that they can do something to make a difference. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people each need to recognize the humanity of the other and own the responsibility for becoming “repairers of the breach.” This portion of the path to reconciliation has been traversed before by some individuals, small-scale groups, and nation-wide church communities—never at a societal level in Canada.

### **Citizen Involvement in Reconciliation**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission will have an important role to play in disseminating the truths revealed in its meetings and associated events to the broader public. The Commission, its records and archive, will become the steward of a repertoire of stories about residential schools.

Thomas King, an author and humorist who became the first Aboriginal person to deliver the prestigious Massey Lectures, titled his talks “The Truth About Stories.”<sup>5</sup> King ended each round of his own storytelling with the words: “Do with it what you will... But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.”<sup>6</sup> One of

our authors, when pressed to be more explicit about the meaning he wanted readers to take from a part of his story, commented that readers would take away different understandings and that was as it should be. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission cannot determine how the stories it tells will be received or whether they will lead people to live their lives differently.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission may find that there is a pent-up need among residential school Survivors and their families to be heard and validated, but if the discourse is only about pain and shame, it will have limited effect in moving people toward reconciliation. The experience of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) as recorded in the *Final Report* (2006) may have some useful lessons in facilitating goal-oriented community participation.

The AHF, like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, began its work without precedents to guide the processes to fulfill its mission. The AHF did see itself as stepping into an ongoing stream of community-building, drawing particularly on the experience of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. The AHF sought to recognize community strengths, introduce measures to enhance them, and leave its own legacy of skilled and ethically informed people who would carry on the work when the limited-term organization wound down. One of the significant insights drawn from program and project evaluations was the extent to which communities were successful in mobilizing local resources to plan, implement, and evolve healing initiatives.

The AHF recognized that documentary communications were insufficient to engage grassroots Aboriginal communities that rely heavily on oral and personal communications and that are widely scattered, often in small, rural, and remote locations. It implemented various modes of communicating its mission and activities, including: hosting regional meetings where AHF leaders opened themselves to questioning and comment from the community; providing toll-free telephone service; writing the quarterly newsletter *Healing Words*; liaising with public media; and placing community support coordinators in the regions. The secretiveness and isolation of effort that is often fostered by competition for scarce funds was countered by vigorous efforts to inform communities of successful initiatives and regional workshops on proposal development where community-to-community learning became the norm.<sup>7</sup> The feedback loop of research and development that drives innovation in business was applied to identifying and promoting promising practices in community healing, recognizing that Aboriginal communities themselves were the primary resources for problem solving.

## A National Project of Reconciliation

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been created pursuant to the court-mandated *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*. Its mission will naturally be perceived by many as a project involving Survivors and their communities and the parties to the *Agreement*, that is, the federal government and the church entities that administered residential schools. The articles in this collection, written by Survivors, community workers, social justice activists, lawyers, church leaders, researchers and academics assert a different view: reconciliation must become a national project that involves the widest spectrum of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens to effect fundamental change in the lives of Aboriginal people and their relationship with Canadian society.

In 1996 the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples wrote:

We believe firmly that the time has come to resolve a fundamental contradiction at the heart of Canada: that while we assume the role of defender of human rights in the international community, we retain, in our conception of Canada's origins and make-up, the remnants of colonial attitudes of cultural superiority that do violence to the Aboriginal peoples to whom they are directed.<sup>8</sup>

Until now, the injustice visited on Aboriginal children, families, communities, and nations in the residential school system and the denial of responsibility that has impeded resolution of Survivor claims for redress have stood among the most grievous contradictions at the heart of Canada.

We believe, we want to believe, that Canada is the best country in the world in which to live. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has the task of helping to ensure that this assertion becomes valid equally for Aboriginal citizens in Canada. Stories that tell harsh truths without flinching, that honour the resilience of individuals and communities who are restoring balance in their lives, and that give evidence of a commitment on all sides to transforming relationships, have a chance of becoming a part of the grand narrative of Canada, shaping our understanding of who we are as a people and enabling us to live our lives differently.

This book is presented to Commissioners with hope for what you can accomplish and assurance that you have many allies as you undertake a five-year journey to affirm truth and advance reconciliation that will serve all peoples in Canada.

## Notes

- 1 Kirmayer, Laurence J. (1996:190). Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation. In P. Antze and M. Lambek (eds.), *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*. London, UK: Routledge.
- 2 Kirmayer (1996:189-190).
- 3 Kirmayer (1996:192).
- 4 Beavon, Dan and Martin Cooke (2003). An Application of the United Nations Human Development Index to Registered Indians in Canada. In Jerry P. White, Paul S. Maxim, and Dan Beavon (eds.), *Aboriginal Conditions, Research as a Foundation for Public Policy*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press: 201-221.
- 5 King, Thomas (2003). *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press.
- 6 King (2003:29). King ends each lecture and chapter in the same way, thus it is repeated on pages 60, 89, 119, 151, and 167.
- 7 Administrative strategies adopted by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation are highlighted in: DeGagne, Mike (2007). Administration in a National Aboriginal Organization: impacts of cultural adaptations. [Unpublished; available from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.]
- 8 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996:5). *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 1: Looking Forward, Looking Back*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.