

Aboriginal Justice: Truth and the generations-long path to reconciliation

Written by Chris Sabas

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“It takes a village to raise a child.” Many mistakenly credit US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton with coining this phrase, the title of her popular book. But the Nigerian Igbo proverb is centuries old. The Igbo word for child means child of the community.

Indigenous communities within what is known today as Canada view children similarly. According to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996, “Children hold a special place in Aboriginal cultures. According to tradition, they are gifts from the spirit world... They carry within them the gifts that manifest themselves as they become teachers, mothers, hunters, councilors, artisans, and visionaries. They renew the strength of the family, clan and village and make the elders young again with their joyful presence.”

Imagine ripping these spirit-world gifts from the families and villages geared to raising them. Canadian government and society, aided by mainline churches, did just that, in addition setting out deliberately to destroy their villages. The Indian Act of 1876, still in effect, controls every aspect of indigenous life. Numerous amendments have not fundamentally altered its original form. The act destroyed traditional forms of governance, creating Indian agents with absolute power over every status Indian (such as the power to grant a person a “pass” to leave the Reserve). Indigenous people were formally denied access to courts, lawyers and legal education.

And children were placed in government-funded, church-run residential schools.

At a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) national event held in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 21-24 June, some 15,000 survivors of the schools shared laughter, tears, songs and stories with thousands of other attendees. Over 5,000 joined via webcast. It was the largest event of its kind to date. About half of all residential school survivors live in Saskatchewan.

The survivors’ message is simple: we must never forget or deny what happened. TRC Chair Justice Murray Sinclair has termed removing indigenous children from their communities and placing them with another segment of society for spiritual and racial indoctrination cultural genocide.

Throughout the event, survivors stated that reconciliation is impossible without “the truth.” What

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then is truth? Truth is understanding, coming to terms with the past, humility, knowledge, acceptance. Truth can be factual – a school's location, a classroom's dimensions – or subjective – past and present impacts, feelings, and ways of relating to others.

Historical truth speaks through the emotional distress stirred by the sight of a clerical collar, through violence children suffer at the hands of residential school survivors, or of survivors' adult children, and through the devastation of addictions.

Shame and exclusion take the place of the dignity pillaged through language destruction. Generations of schoolchildren, both indigenous and non-indigenous, have been brought up on a curriculum that dismissed indigenous culture and history as worthless and inferior. Every single Canadian is affected.

Yet knowing the truth is only part of reconciliation. Reconciliation calls for listening, acceptance, patience and repentance, for walking together and bearing witness together.

It all takes time. Residential schools have harmed seven generations. It may take seven more to rediscover the harmony they obliterated.