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One of the largest shifts in attitude has come from Canada's churches, which ran most of the schools and have since settled lawsuits for physical and sexual abuse

"The 'good guys,' no matter how kindly or well intentioned, have to confront they were complicit in a system of evil," said Jamie Scott, the United Church of Canada officer for residential schools.

The United Church was one of the first to withdraw from the schools, in 1969, and in 1986 was the first of the churches to apologize. Between 1991 and 1994, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate from the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church and the Presbyterian Church also issued apologies. They have agreed to participate and donate to the commission. Scott said staff members have their own tales to tell

"Many of the people who worked in those schools never beat a kid," he said. "They saw themselves called to help people they saw as marginalized. They have a side of the story too.

But the dominant narrative will probably be stories like Thomas Louttit's.

Louttit, 60, now an elder of the Moose Factory First Nation, tosses some tobacco leaves into the flames as an offering to the spirits, a gesture that was once against the law. He watches them burn, then turns the gas fireplace off with a switch, and begins his story.

When he was 5, he and his sister were taken from their home and put on a motorboat to Fort George on James Bay, a day's journey. Their parents weren't sure where they spent 10 months of the year, didn't know that they answered to numbers, did heavy labor, and were mentally and sexually abused in the school that was run by the Catholic Church.

"One summer after I went home, my father was calling and calling me," Louttit recalled. "I didn't answer him because I was not used to hearing my name. He asked what was the matter with me. I never told him.'

Louttit said he passed that distance and dysfunction on to his children.

"I never knew how to bring up my kids," he said. "After I stopped drinking, I shared my stories with my daughter in a sacred circle. She said she had been miserable with my drinking and the violence. I told her I love her, and it took a long time for me to say that.'

Louttit has made a point of instructing his community in the ways of the tribe and the world, taking boys to sweat lodges in the bush. He has kept his hair in a long, graying braid, and his eagle feather fan is close at hand.

"Many of my classmates have gone over to the spirit side. Seven committed suicide. I wish I could have found them first," he said.

On the day of Harper's apology, Louttit will be in the bush, unsure it will make a difference

"It's not from him inside. Someone else wrote it for him," he said. "I will share my story to people who want to hear it. I will be comfortable to listen to theirs. But I wonder if they will really listen to ours.

"I think it's going to be a long journey."

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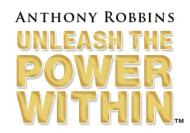


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