



Although he was raised in a family of staunch atheists, Douglas Todd has gone on to become one of the most decorated spirituality and ethics writers in North America. He has received more than 60 journalistic and educational honours, many of them international. With this blog, readers are invited to adventure with Todd in exploring the ideas and movements shaking up the world of spirituality and philosophy. You're invited to post a message on this blog or **contact Douglas Todd directly**.

Residential School Blues 2 - Spiritual healing and more

I sat with 200 aboriginals around the healing circle. The smell of burning sweetgrass filled the room. Hand-drums pounded, people chanted.

It was 1993. We were in the village of Canim Lake. Aboriginal men who had been young students at St. Joseph's Mission residential school were pushing themselves to openly reveal the inner demons tearing apart them and their families.

Many cried. Many expressed bitterness about the abuse, harsh discipline and insults they endured as boys in the Catholic-run school near Williams Lake, which was headed in the 1960s by a priest named **Hubert O'Connor (left), who would go on to become Bishop of Prince George and, eventually, face disgrace**.



David Belleau, a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of a priest at St. Joseph's, told his offspring in front of everyone he had always wanted to reveal his secret. In black suit and tie, he said that in residential school he always bowed his head, in shame.

Looking straight into the eyes of his handsome male and female children, Belleau told the healing circle with stony conviction:

"My children will never ever, ever go through something like that."

Like other Cariboo aboriginals, Belleau was showing leadership in trying to avoid becoming just another residential-school "victim." A reminder was posted on the wall of the gymnasium, a sign saying it's healthy to experience grief, but it's bad to indulge in it.

Like scores of other aboriginal men and women who were sexually or physically abused at St. Joseph's, Belleau was seeking his community's deepest support in looking into the shadows of his residential-school experience, which he was convinced contributed to his drinking, gambling and rages.

Like many aboriginals, Belleau was trying to heal through a complex mix of aboriginal rituals, Western psychotherapy, Alcoholics Anonymous, traditional art and dance and, surprisingly to some, Christianity.

Despite the tragic fact some abusers of aboriginals were Catholic clergy, most aboriginals don't reject Christianity. Tribal leader Charlene Belleau says more than half of the natives in the rolling Cariboo hills continue to attend Catholic churches.

The aboriginals don't like seeing all priests and nuns tarred with the same angry brush as the rare abusers.

The residential-school healing movement continues today, stronger than ever.

Some of it is coming through secular means, such as financial payments from the federal government and churches, continuing land-claim negotiations, enhanced aboriginal education and slowly rising native entrepreneurship.

But much of the healing is coming in spiritual forms: Many aboriginals are accepting church apologies and offering forgiveness, while exploring a blend of spiritual and psychological practices, both aboriginal and Western.

Canada's aboriginals believe multiple approaches are necessary to mitigate how, for about a century, 125,000 Canadian aboriginals -- more than one-quarter of the total first nations population -- were removed from their villages to attend more than 120 strict, underfunded church-run boarding schools.

They were sent to the schools, many of them in B.C., to be "civilized," which was equated with being "Christianized."

A few years after Ottawa gave aboriginals the vote in 1962, the last of the residential schools were shut down. Most Anglican and United Church leaders had, by the 1960s, realized they had made a grave, colonialistic mistake in operating the schools.

Judging from news media stories, however, much of the Canadian public seems to believe aboriginals, as a result of the residential schools, have turned their back on Christianity, and are exclusively turning for healing and meaning to aboriginal rituals and myths.

As well, most media stories continue to give the false impression that virtually all residential-school abusers were clergy. But a study published last year in the B.C. Medical Journal suggests only six per cent were priests and nuns. The rest were lay staff.

University of B.C. aboriginal historian Coll Thrush says he spends a lot of time disabusing students of the stereotype that aboriginals have utterly rejected Christianity and are restricting their spiritual practices to long-held aboriginal customs.

"Outsiders want authentic Indians," says Thrush. "And they think that's all about the longhouse and winter dances. Many people don't want native Indian cultures to change. They think if they change, that makes them less aboriginal. But I don't believe that aboriginals who accept Christianity, or Mormonism or the Baha'i religion are less aboriginal."

Of Canada's almost one million aboriginals, roughly two-thirds told the recent Canadian census they were Christians of one sort or another.

More than 410,000 said they were Catholic. That is, they claim affiliation with the same denomination that ran the vast majority of the residential schools, particularly through the Oblate order.

Another 129,000 Canadian aboriginals say they are Anglican and 59,000 are affiliated with the United Church of Canada. More than 59,000 aboriginals report they are Pentecostal.

Only 27,000 Canadian aboriginals, fewer than three per cent of the total, say they follow "aboriginal spirituality."

These census figures hint at just how hard it is to keep track of how aboriginals are using spirituality to alleviate the pain and dysfunction associated not only with residential schools, but a host of other causes.

As Thrush says, West Coast aboriginal spiritual practices are tremendously rich, complex, varied and full of paradoxes. B.C. aboriginals, he says, might mix West Coast longhouse rituals with Prairie Indian sweetgrass ceremonies and sweatlodges (right) with belief in Jesus, seeing Christianity "as just another source of spiritual power."

Aboriginals' loyalty to Christian tradition is remarkable, given that inside the residential schools their own spiritual practices were explicitly forbidden.

Despite many well-meaning Christians working in the defunct schools, aboriginal students were often punished or strapped for speaking their own languages or following their customs.

Many aboriginals accepted the loss of their traditional spirituality. Others took the old ways underground.



Read it all.

Read Residential School Blues (1), my earlier perspective on this issue, about which I've written more than 115 stories

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