



Embracing One Native Lifeforgiveness

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I am a victim of Canada's residential schools. When I say victim, I mean something far different from "survivor." I never attended one of those infamous schools. But my family did and the course of my life was altered irrevocably because of that experience.

When I was born, we lived the last vestiges of the old Ojibway life. My first home was a canvas army tent hung from spruce boughs and the first sounds I heard were the susurrations of wind in the trees and the soft roll of Ojibway talk. My family existed as hunters, trappers and fishers.

But there was a spectre among us. It was vague like fears are but had tentacles that reached deep into the hearts and minds and bellies of my family. The incredible hurt, isolation and sorrow that sprang from their residential experiences erupted in drink and violence and ultimately, neglect.

I was taken into child care the year I was three. I would not see my native family again for 21 years. When I came back, I was as wounded as they;

unable to speak my language, ashamed of my native identity, ignorant of my culture and traditions. The institution of child care was as much a kidnapping as the schools they attended.

When I began to move about my people, I learned about the legacy of residential schools. I spoke with hundreds of people and coupled with my family's utter inability to recount those days, told me how much people had suffered. It enraged me. Because I'd been displaced and lost my identity, I identified strongly and I was vehement in my judgments about government and institutions.

That anger drove me for a long time. But when I was in my late 40s, I'd had enough. I saw how much that anger had hurt me. I determined that I did not want to carry it forward. I began to look for a means to diffuse the anger bombs I carried in my belly. So one day, I walked into a United Church and forced myself to listen. It was hard and I wanted to leave, but there's a sense you get when the big events of your life are unfolding and I sat there.

The woman beside me sat with her eyes closed and a small smile on her face. She seemed at peace and I craved that. So I closed my eyes too and paid attention to what was being said. The minister spoke about his fear of approaching and helping a drug-addicted woman on the street. I heard compassion in his voice. There was no inferred superiority, no judgment, liturgy or doctrine. Instead, I heard the very

human struggle to be spiritual in a hard world.

I went back to that church for weeks. The messages I heard were all about humanity, the search for innocence, comfort and belonging. There was nothing in the message that was not about healing. I

heard compassion talked about, love, kindness, trust, courage, truth, loyalty and an abiding faith that there's a God, a Creator taking care of all of us. With my eyes closed, there was no white, no Indian, no difference at all and exactly when my anger disappeared, I do not know.

That church changed my life. Sure, there are genuine reasons to be angry, and the hurt that was caused by the residential school experience both by the survivors and those, like me, who were victimized a generation or more later, are huge and real and overwhelming. But healing happens if you want it bad enough and that's 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 new 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, about our resiliency as a people, about our capacity for forgiveness, self-examination, compassion and our abiding yearning for peace. That's how reconciliation happens.

It's 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.

We have within us, as nations of people and as individual members of those nations, an incredible capacity for survival, endurance and forgiveness. In reconciliation with ourselves, we find the ability to create harmony with others, and that's where it has to start -- in the fertile soil of our own hearts and minds and spirits.

That, too, is Indian.

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