

TELLING TRUTHS AND SEEKING RECONCILIATION :
EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES

- By -

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Published in “*From Truth To Reconciliation: Transforming The Legacy Of Residential
Schools*” (2008) Aboriginal healing Foundation Research Series

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A. INTRODUCTION

I applaud the determination of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission to help aboriginal survivors of residential schools break their silence, tell their stories of neglect, denigration and abuse, and seek healing from the grief, anger and pain they have carried all these years.

I applaud as well the efforts being taken to bring the truth of such mental, physical, emotional, spiritual - and cultural - abuse into the forefront of Canadian history. Until all Canadians understand how the churches and governments treated aboriginal peoples in their attempt to “de-indigenize” them, there is little chance that they will understand the enormity of the wrong done *or the scope of their obligation to now approach them from a helping perspective.*

As important as those efforts are, however, I am concerned that much more needs to be done if we are to achieve our twin goals of securing adequate healing within aboriginal Canada and creating a respectful relationship with non-aboriginal Canadians. There are, I am afraid, many more secrets that need to be told, and processes of reconciliation that need to be established, both within aboriginal communities and between our two cultural communities.

Within aboriginal communities themselves, I suggest there are three distinct challenges:

1. designing processes to deal with the abuse of aboriginal students within residential schools *by other aboriginal students*;
2. designing processes to deal with the abuse of returning children by the adults who were left behind when the children were taken; and

3. designing processes to deal with present-day family violence and sexual abuse, whether or not the perpetrators were residential school survivors, in recognition of the fact that those schools frequently set in motion an inter-generational transfer of trauma that continues to cause significant “downstream” damage to aboriginal families, their children and their grandchildren.

Each of these categories of abuse, kept secret in far too many communities, raises different issues and may require different processes. If those secrets are left untouched, however, I fear that the numbers of aboriginal children harming themselves and each other, sometimes fatally, will continue to escalate.

The task of bringing aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians into a respectful relationship is perhaps even more daunting, and certainly requires very different kinds of approaches. Frankly, I’m not sure ‘reconciliation’ is the right term, because apart from some early fur-traders like David Thompson who seem to have understood the sophistication of traditional societies, I don’t think such a respectful relationship has ever existed. I certainly don’t see much evidence of respect for traditional societies in European writings at the time of contact: to the contrary, Thomas Hobbes infamously described aboriginal peoples as living lives that were “mean, nasty, brutish and short”. It’s hard to imagine that the people who created the residential school system disagreed with Hobbes. More disturbingly, I suspect that Hobbes’ words describes how many non-aboriginal Canadians see things *today*.

In that regard, I acknowledge that I too, despite my privileged education, grew up with that impression. Like almost all Canadians, I was never educated about the variety and sophistication of traditional approaches to governance, psychology, family raising,

metaphysics, pharmacology, spirituality, holistic thinking or a host of other foundational structures that existed within aboriginal societies at time of contact. As a result, none of us ever came to understand that *something of value was taken away* by those schools. Perversely, all of the tragedies we see today, including the suicides, family violence, sexual abuse and community dysfunction, make it *easy* for many to believe that it has always been that way; in fact, I have heard people suggest that the real failure of residential schools wasn't that they were abusive ("just a few bad apples, stop complaining") but that they proved incapable of rescuing aboriginal people from themselves.

If truly respectful relationships are to ever emerge, non-aboriginal Canadians must come to understand that there were healthy, vibrant and sophisticated societies on this continent at the time of contact. They must understand that it was the determined policies of assimilation, including residential schools, that were primarily responsible for the *damage done* to those societies, and the tragedies we see today. Until that history of damage is understood, it is unlikely that the dominant society will understand why they now bear the responsibility of assisting aboriginal people in their efforts to *undo* the harm that was done.

I will turn now to the various contexts in which I suggest truth and reconciliation processes within aboriginal communities must be encouraged.

B. THE ABUSE OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS BY OTHER ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

It should not be surprising that students abused other students, because residential schools were themselves institutions centered on power, position and force. The children who came into them were suddenly without defences, living completely at the mercy of their surroundings. Many aboriginal people have confided that they were never abused by nuns, priests or teachers, but were abused regularly by older students. They told me that gangs flourished, bullying was common, and the only protection was membership in parallel gangs. There was no-one to complain to, so you just shut up and took it – or plotted revenge of your own.

This category of abuse presents unique challenges. In the first place, it is one thing to accuse ‘foreign’ priests, nuns or teachers, but quite another to accuse one of your own. Many have kept this secret for 30 year or more, even from their own families, because they knew no-one wanted to hear about it

Secondly, while most of the abusive priests, nuns or teachers have died or moved away, those students who abused are likely to be close in age, very much alive and, in many instances, living in exactly the same community, just down the road. If truth-telling happens, it will have immediate consequences.

Thirdly, such accusations may well be denounced as personal attacks aimed to further *existing* animosities within the inter-family politics of dysfunctional communities, and not be seen for what they really are: major *contributors* to those animosities.

Fourthly, such accusations may bring a host of related accusations into the open, for if gangs were operating, they involved many people, few of whom have elected to speak of it over the decades. The person who opens up this Pandora’s Box runs the risk of

losing their welcome in their community, and of compromising their extended family's welcome as well.

Keeping silent, however, may only *perpetuate* the inter-family antagonisms that plague community politics, hiring, education, welfare, housing - and healing. Many aboriginal communities complain that it is the adversariality of the western system of government that lies behind the instability, rancour and occasional violence seen in reserve politics; while that may indeed contribute, it is also likely that the unresolved history of abuse provides the personal, vendetta-like ferocity often seen within that institutional adversariality.

At the very least, it must be difficult to see the sons or daughters of someone who abused you 30 years ago entering relationships with your own sons or daughters – and difficult as well to pretend cordiality and warmth when there is hurt and anger that has never been acknowledged.

Additionally, much of that abuse was likely witnessed by other students. They know what happened, and are likely to translate things they see in today's community dynamics in terms of those secrets from long ago. Many may feel guilt for not having tried to stop it, or not having brought it out into the open when it began to poison community relationships. The complex lines of fear, resentment, guilt - and even regret - form subterranean spider-webs that likely ensnare many community and inter-family relationships in ways that defy clear articulation, by anyone.

I do not know what kinds of processes might bring those secrets safely into the open. This category of abuse is different from family violence or intergenerational sexual abuse, for there are no "family ties" or "parent/elder responsibilities" to draw on in an

effort to have all parties honour their relational responsibilities and come together in healing processes. To the contrary, there may be the opposite reaction of “I owe you nothing, because you and your family have always had it in for me”. It is hard to know what might motivate people to acknowledge their misbehaviour and seek reconciliation, unless it is seen by all as a *community* healing process aimed at expunging *all* of the hurt that afflicts today’s community relationships.

And I suggest that might be an important role for the Truth & Reconciliation Commission: making a detailed analysis of how children placed in intrinsically violent situations like residential schools begin adopting violence in their relations with each other. If that dynamic can be explained in such a way that whole communities, abused and abusers alike, come to recognize that it was the *situation* which prompted the violence between them, capturing so many children, often turning one year’s victim into the next year’s perpetrator, then perhaps individual truths could safely be told, and true reconciliation begun.

If that kind of reconciliation doesn’t happen soon, I worry that chaotic community governance will continue in too many places, and legitimate demands for ‘self-government’ will continue to be strongly resisted.

C. COLLATERAL VICTIMS: THE ABUSE OF RETURNING CHILDREN BY ADULTS LEFT BEHIND

One woman in her late 40’s told me that she had not been physically abused in her 10 years at residential schools, but when she returned home she was sexually abused first by an uncle, and then by an older cousin. She had kept that abuse secret for decades.

When she first started to acknowledge it, she was engulfed by a desire to do violence in return, but as her healing journey progressed she came to see it differently, to understand that the adults she came back to were in fact “changed” adults, that the whole center of their universe had been taken from them the instant the children disappeared. It took her many years to see them for what they were, *collateral* victims of the residential school system, people who had been forced to endure the ultimate insult of being told that they were incapable of raising children properly.

Once again, there is a grotesque irony at work: taking the children to protect them from imagined disadvantage and harm ultimately created exactly the situation the authorities said they feared. “We were all victimized by that system,” she told me, “and it took me many years to understand that the people who abused me deserved my sympathy, not my anger.” I still marvel at the sophistication of her analysis and the fact that she put it into practice by going to her abusers in a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. I often wish her story had been captured on film and shown in First Nations across the country, because not many harmed people have been able to reach her level of understanding

This may be another valid task for the Truth & Reconciliation Commission: finding ways to articulate the impact of residential schools not only on the children captured within them but also on the adults left outside them. I believe every parent, of every culture, would immediately understand the totality of that loss, and be moved towards regret, reconciliation and recompense. Just as importantly, if aboriginal people who were victimized upon their return to changed communities can be helped to

distinguish cause from effect, to see their abusers as this woman did, then perhaps they would be more likely to seek reconciliation with those who caused them such harm.

D. THE DOWNSTREAM VIOLENCE WITHIN FAMILIES

In my 22 years as a prosecutor, some stories have haunted me – and taught me how violence within one generation transfers into the next.

I recall one young boy who exploded in sudden violence one day. As he explained it later, the thing that drove him crazy growing up was that everyone in the community knew how frequently his father beat up his mother, but everyone pretended it was not so. His father pretended, his mother pretended, his brothers and sisters pretended, everyone did. His parents had both been to residential school, but never learned how it damaged their ability to form relationships based on trust, openness, generosity and respect. Instead, they put on a brave face, spoke of things like ‘forgiveness’, but continued living within violence, and continued passing violence to their son.

In another case, a 16-year-old boy had been raised in a situation of chronic violence and alcohol abuse. On welfare days, the drinking was at their house, along with the beatings and, frequently, the sexual abuse of passed-out women. He told of hiding in the closet with his little sister, putting his hands over her ears so she couldn’t hear the thuds and grunts going on around them. When everything turned quiet, they’d sneak out of the closet, step carefully over the bodies, and scrounge for food. Because his hands were over his sister’s ears, nothing blocked those grunts and thuds from his own ears, so he learned to block them out mentally. He got so good at it that he became a virtual psychopath, *unable* to feel the pain of others. By the time he came to our attention, he had

crossed over normal sexual boundaries with more than a dozen girls, oblivious to their objection and pain. Despite lengthy treatment, we couldn't bring that human capacity for empathy back to him, and he continued to offend. It was the most severe case of "downstream damage" from residential schools I had ever seen.

Until recently, that is. Things seem to be unraveling with frightening speed in a number of communities in my region, with a whole new generation of non-empathic, isolated, angry, lonely and violent children appearing in our courts. They are children of the children of parents who "survived" residential schools, and if they are the future, it is bleak in far too many communities. I worry that all of the Truth & Reconciliation opportunities brought to their grandparents, all of the financial settlements and apologies from churches and governments, will do virtually nothing to help those damaged children. What they need is truth, reconciliation and healing with – and between – their traumatized parents, and nothing less will do.

In northwestern Ontario, incredibly, we have only *two* residential facilities dedicated to family healing, and literally hundreds of families needing their help. I have seen miracles take place within those facilities, and I am deeply angry that there are not more opportunities to work those miracles.

One of those miracles took place at the Muskrat Dam Family Healing Center in northwestern Ontario. Even though her husband had beaten her severely, the wife wanted to give family healing a try. I agreed, releasing her husband from jail, and they traveled to Muskrat Dam for their 5-week program. When they returned to their own community with good reports from Muskrat Dam, I still waited nearly a year before sentencing, to see if the changes were lasting. Two of the wife's friends told me the changes were so

obvious that they had asked her if she and her husband could share what they had learned. She was very clear in her explanation. She and her husband had *both* grown up with abuse between their parents, but had never talked about it with each other. In counseling, they learned that they were still seeing things through the lens of their parents' abuse. When one would get angry about something, the other would receive that anger within their experience of abuse between their parents, as leading quickly to violence. As a result, they would respond in a disproportionately resentful, fearful and hostile way. This, in turn, would cause the other one to come back with a similarly disproportionate response, escalating the fear and hostility, until both were swept up in exactly what they feared: a level of violence that often became physical. It was as if the patterns of escalation were so deeply implanted that they took over even the slightest disagreement, leading led both of them where neither wished to go. Once they understood the chain reaction, however, they could begin to disengage from it. I can't recall her exact words, but it was something like this: "we learned how to talk to each other, instead of talking as if we were our parents, and we learned how to hear each other, instead of hearing them. We're learning how to escape those patterns we grew up in."

I must mention that both husband and wife felt it was essential that their children join with them in exploring the past and learning new skills of listening and interpreting. They were surprised to learn that the children felt responsible for not having stopped the violence, or for starting it in the first place, and were grateful they had a chance to convince them otherwise. Their story helped me glimpse the validity of the aboriginal healing perspective that it is not *people* who must be changed, but the ways in which they relate to each other, for it was out of that perspective that their miracle emerged.

In that regard, a Cree grandmother phrased it this way: people who do violence to others somehow grew up learning that relationships were things built on values like fear, anger, power, jealousy, secrecy, greed and the like. To counter that, it was necessary to begin teaching them how to establish relationships based on the opposite values like trust, openness, generosity, respect, sharing, caring and love instead. She asked me what values prevailed in our jails and, when I chuckled at that, she told me that was the reason she thought it was often harder to bring people into living good relationships once they'd been sent off to jail; in her view, we need to give those people the experience of good relations, not an even deeper experience of bad ones.

For the first time, I began to see how people who were abused as children could grow up to be abusers of children: they stayed in exactly the same *kinds* of relationships they learned as children, only the roles reversed when, as adults, the power came to them. I have also learned that most of them vividly recall the pain they felt as kids, so they know the pain they themselves are causing. Unfortunately, they have never been given ways out of those relationships, and their self-hatred grows.

Perhaps this is another worthwhile challenge for the Truth & Reconciliation Commission: fostering the creation of processes where traumatized families can escape the violent relational patterns they absorbed as children and start living within healthy relationships instead, before their children are *irrevocably* damaged.

As a footnote, many families refuse to seek help in their home communities, fearing that gossip, ridicule and retribution may follow disclosure. If more 'neutral-ground' family healing centers like Muskrat Dam were available, perhaps operated by multi-community groups like Tribal Councils, that obstacle might be overcome.

On a hopeful note, the Truth & Reconciliation Commission does not have to look far to find effective community intervention strategies. First Nations like Muskrat Dam, Hollow Water in Manitoba and Mnjikaning (Rama) in southern Ontario have already demonstrated how traditional teachings can bring families back to healthy relations. The real challenge may lie in persuading government agencies to stop putting roadblocks in their way, a topic I'll return to later.

E. INTERGENERATIONAL SEXUAL ABUSE

The Hollow Water First Nation of Manitoba has been dealing with sexual abuse cases for nearly 20 years, and working with other First Nations for almost as long. Their experience tells them that in many communities between 60 and 80 % of the people have been victimized by sexual abuse, primarily at the hands of extended family members, and fully 50% have been victimizers to one degree or another.

The layers of secrecy and fear on this issue, however, often seem impenetrable. I remember sitting in a circle of aboriginal women from across Canada one day, and mentioned a case where we'd charged a 'respected elder' with sexually abusing his adopted daughter for 5 years, subjecting her to both anal and vaginal intercourse. Instead of the shocked denunciation I expected for accusing an 'elder' of such a thing, I was swamped with stories of similar abuse in other communities. When I told them that the Chief responded to the girl's plea for help by calling the 'elder' and telling him to come get her, there was a chorus of stories about similar cover-ups. And when I mentioned that the Chief and Council, upon conviction of the 'elder' after a hard-fought trial, asked the court for a "healing sentence" despite the fact that the 'elder' had never admitted his

crime and the little girl had been banished from the community, I got the same response: the power structures in many communities routinely supported the abusers and banished the victims.

I also recall a case where the father was charged with sexually abusing his youngest daughter; when she finally disclosed and charges were laid, all her sisters turned on her, saying “What makes you think you’re so special? We put up with it.” The normalization of sexual abuse in some communities, and the degree to which it is tolerated, stands as perhaps the darkest “secret” needing processes for truth and reconciliation.

Even when help is offered, denial still may rule the day. In one community, two energetic mental health workers arranged for 16 young men, each facing charges for offences of significant violence, to go to an Alberta treatment center, and we agreed to adjourn their cases to let that healing begin. When the Chief and Council learned, however, that the treatment was to focus primarily on the sexual abuse they’d endured as youngsters, they withdrew the funding: too many skeletons would be revealed in too many closets. Sadly, until *safe* processes are in place to handle the emotional explosions such disclosures inevitably prompt, that response cannot be faulted. In the meantime, entire communities live in perpetual denial of significant pain.

In my view, there is an urgent need for the Truth & Reconciliation Commission to help communities develop healing processes in sexual abuse cases. To repeat an earlier refrain, unless that happens, all its efforts to bring survivor stories out in the open will contribute little to community health, for the youngest and most vulnerable generation will still be living a deeply traumatizing existence.

Once again, we don't have to *imagine* what such truth and reconciliation processes might look like, for we already have the example of Hollow Water. Instead, we have to ask why more communities have not been able to follow Hollow Water's lead and create community healing teams of their own.

F. NECESSARY CONDITIONS FOR COMMUNITY TRUTH & RECONCILIATION

In my view, First Nations like Hollow Water and Mnjikaning have succeeded in establishing effective truth & reconciliation processes for two reasons: they decided their children needed nothing less, and they firmly told government funding agencies that they were *not* going to be bound by their rules, their definition of 'the problem', or the kinds of training they offered. They decided to do it their own way – and they did.

Federal and provincial governments fund many kinds of service providers in First Nations, including grief counselors, family workers, child-care workers, alcohol and drug counselors, nurses and nurses' aides, teachers and teachers' aides and suicide prevention workers. In one community, there were 19 people on full-time salaries for work related to community healing. Each of their outside supervisors, however, controlled what they could do, demanded strict confidentiality, determined what kinds of issues could and could not be dealt with, and designed the kinds of training they should be given. I don't suggest malevolent intention here: it's just the way our bureaucracies are organized.

What Hollow Water did was as simple as it was revolutionary: each worker told their outside agency that they were going to come together as a healing team, share their information and design common training which recognized that almost every

manifestation of trauma could be traced to a single source: the imposition of colonization strategies, especially residential schools. They then insisted that they would establish their own priorities and processes for healing, with special emphasis on holistic family and community healing. It took exceptionally brave and determined people to do that (and a few courageous officials in justice, health, education and other bureaucracies), but they are succeeding.

There may be other challenges beyond bureaucratic roadblocks: as we have seen, some band councils may wish to never have the secrets revealed; some communities may be so traumatized that it's hard to even start pulling a team of healthy individuals together; and some may just feel there's no hope anyway. But I do suggest that the primary reason communities like Hollow Water and Mnjikaning have succeeded lies in the fact that they were strong enough to defy governmental insistence on confidentiality and control.

Another task of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission might involve, then, putting together an argument capable of persuading government departments (or the political leadership of those departments) that truly *effective* healing work under each of their separate mandates requires four things:

1. granting permission for each worker's participation in a community healing team that shares information about the families and individuals in need, acknowledging that the confidentiality requirements should apply to the teams *as a whole* instead of individual team members;

2. understanding why it is that almost all the dysfunctional behaviour to be dealt in First Nations stems out of the larger traumatic experience of colonialism, with special reference to the multi-generational impact of residential schools;
3. lending necessary support to community healing teams in the design of their own training so that all those manifestations of colonization trauma are approached in an holistic fashion, according to the traditions and cultures of individual peoples, and within their own evaluations of what the community is or is not ready to accept;
4. re-designing their funding structures over longer terms so that skills-development and community acceptance are not compromised by constant uncertainty about program continuance.

Were those steps taken, many more communities would likely embark on healing programs of their own design and begin approaching the achievements of First Nations like Hollow Water and Mnjikaning. If we also helped in the transfer of experience between such programs, program maturation might be accelerated.

I don't underestimate the enormity of that challenge, for it is in the very nature of western bureaucracies that each agency has its own rules, its own definition of the job to be done, a fierce determination to maintain control and minimize the risk of program failure, and in inevitable sense of "turf" that makes it institutionally difficult to become partners in holistic approaches. It does not require bad faith or malevolence on the part of such agencies to resist an holistic approach, because the western governance paradigm is clearly constructed upon reverence for segmentation, narrow specialization and complete control. While 19 agencies working separately in Toronto, with separate chains of

command, training and confidentiality, may be necessary, it is almost ludicrous to see 19 healers in a community of 500, 800 or a thousand souls being prohibited from working together, especially when the root issue is the common experience of colonization trauma.

I suspect, however, that it will take a well-positioned champion like the Truth & Reconciliation Commission to convincingly demonstrate the inapplicability of that service-delivery paradigm to government and achieve an institutional willingness to shed it in favour of an holistic and coordinated response. It is not how we are used to doing business, but it is how we *must* do business with troubled First Nations if we are to enable them to create strategies of recovery from the damage we have inflicted.

G. THE TRUTH... AND THE WHOLE TRUTH...

At this stage, I want to mention a touchy subject: whenever people identify residential schools as the *sole* cause of trauma and dislocation, I worry that this focus will cause us to miss *other* causes, and so deal only with a *portion* of the real challenge.

I remember listening to a group of aboriginal people in Alaska where there was no history of residential schools, yet their communities showed the same dislocations. In their view, everything began to unravel when Europeans brought new diseases that killed huge portions of the population, while the white man was unaffected. As they saw it, this told their ancestors that all the medicines, and all the power of the medicine people, had been illusory. Not only was the fabric of physical life fundamentally shredded by all of the deaths, but the core belief system was also shredded, and all notions of a coherent culture began to evaporate.

I have encountered many examples of troubled aboriginal peoples around the globe with no history of residential schools. By coincidence, the June 2007 issue of Backpacker Magazine spoke of the Havasupai Tribe of the Grand Canyon who ascribe their social problems to the invasion of sacred territory by tourism, and disruption of those culturally critical relationships with place. The more I look, the more it seems that the collision of aboriginal cultures with the culture of western Europe has wrecked havoc almost everywhere, whether or not the dominant culture took the overtly colonizing step of creating residential schools to “de-indigenize” those populations. As a result, I think we do a disservice if we stop our examination of causes – and therefore of remedies – with residential schools. Until we learn the breadth of possible causes, we’ll miss things that need to be done, and it will be aboriginal populations that continue to suffer.

One of the most powerful causes of cultural dislocation, in my view, is simple to express: a pervasive conviction of cultural superiority by the non-aboriginal world. I see it expressed at every stage in our history together, manifesting itself in almost every dimension of our relations, right down to the determination of government agencies to control the content of healing programs proposed by aboriginal peoples. And that takes me to the final challenge for any large-scale program of truth and reconciliation.

G. TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT ABORIGINAL CULTURES

In my view, the public perception of the cultural inferiority of aboriginal peoples, both historically and today, must be forcefully put to rest by clear demonstrations of cultural validity both then and now. While it may be understandable that, when European settlers saw a comparative dearth of technological sophistication, they assumed an

absence of social and cultural sophistication as well, surely the time has come to admit how wrong that judgment was. Ironically, the very absence of preoccupation with the technological dimension may have given traditional peoples substantially more time to dedicate their curiosity and creativity to the social, psychological and cultural dimensions instead, helping them achieve certain sophistications that, in my view, continue to elude the rest of us.

Exploring that possibility in a public way would contribute greatly to correcting historical misperceptions of cultural inferiority. Canadians should be aware, for instance, that David Bohm, a co-worker with Albert Einstein, was so intrigued by the metaphysics of aboriginal peoples (and the capacity of their languages to convey them) that he convened a series of “Science Dialogues” in Banff, Alberta, between quantum physicists and aboriginal linguists, teachers and philosophers from around North America. That fact that those two groups *understood each other* should be known to every school child in Canada; better still, imagine a 30-second television spot aired during the Stanley Cup playoffs where a respected physicist described how surprised he was by the sophistication of traditional understandings of the universe. It would reach huge numbers of Canadians – and likely blow them away!

Imagine another T.V. spot where a respected historian describes how Thomas Jefferson based the American Constitution’s balance of powers on what he learned from Mohawk people. What if everyone learned what Discover Magazine has reported, that 75% of all prescription drugs came from the discoveries of aboriginal peoples? What if everyone heard an internationally-recognized psychologist describe how 1400 of his colleagues from around the globe gave a standing ovation to a one-hour description of the

insights of aboriginal psychology, as happened recently in Montreal? Or heard a judge of Ontario's Superior Court Of Justice describe how a similar standing ovation came from over 300 of his colleagues when the same presentation was made to them? What if they heard that the large movement towards restorative justice across the western world was not simply the result of Quaker initiatives, but came primarily from the justice perceptions of aboriginal peoples, most especially the Maori people of New Zealand?

If those kinds of 'truths' became part of the consciousness of every Canadian, aboriginal and non-aboriginal alike, wouldn't that make a difference for all of us? If the CBC can sponsor a series of spots called "Hinterland Who's Who" so we all learn about birds and animals, can't we consider asking that the same educational generosity be extended to aboriginal people in their effort to correct an historical misperception of such devastating social and cultural consequences? In the 25 years since I began exploring aboriginal understandings of life, my own sense of the richness, complexity and wonder of existence has been immeasurably expanded. If that can happen to me, it can happen to anyone.

So perhaps this too could be one of the challenges taken on by the Truth & Reconciliation Commission: setting the stage for true reconciliation by replacing the myth of cultural inferiority with the truth of cultural richness and diversity that, while severely damaged by every strategy of colonization, retain a sophisticated validity in today's world. And if we all absorb that truth and make it part of our daily consciousness, perhaps we can start building a relationship centered on the most important value of all: mutual respect.

It was not there in the past, and there's not nearly enough of it today, but it could be there in the future, if enough people take up the challenge. I hope the foregoing is of assistance in articulating where the particular challenges lie, and the kinds of responses that might be considered to meet them.

I hope as well that the *urgency* of effective response becomes better understood by everyone because, as I earlier said, we are seeing far too many aboriginal children harming themselves and each other, sometimes fatally. As communities like Muskrat Dam, Hollow Water and Mnjikaning have proven, we are not without the knowledge of how to turn things around. What is needed, from all of us, is the will.

