

Reconciliation Begins with Self

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My name is Kelsey Reed and I am a master's student in the Indigenous Peoples Education program at the University of Alberta. Over the past six months as a master's cohort, we have had many conversations about the concept of reconciliation. When thinking about the topic for our conference there were many questions I began to ask myself: What is reconciliation? What does it mean to truly reconcile with another? Who and what is in need of reconciliation in our communities? And, most importantly, what will be my contribution? I have had a lot of time to think about these questions, and I was always thinking of the big picture and on a large scale. I was thinking country wide, provincially, and within my own community. But, in trying to fully get my mind around the concept of reconciliation, I felt that there was always something missing, as if I was not able to position myself within the concept of reconciliation. It finally occurred to me one day that the process of reconciliation within a nation must first begin with self.

Within the Indigenous Peoples Education program I took my first university courses that included Indigenous epistemologies and this was the first time in which I needed to locate myself. In my family, there's my older sister Ashley; my brother Chris; my mother, who was originally from Beaudry's and Okemasis First Nation; and my father who is from Cold Lake but his family is originally from Ireland. I was born and raised in Sherwood Park, Alberta. My first language is English and my second language is French. I was raised in a Catholic household attending a Catholic French immersion school with grades ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 12. Upon entering an Indigenous program at the University of Alberta, there were many personal processes that I needed to work through in becoming—and developing as—an Indigenous scholar.

In locating myself, some differences from other students in the program stood out for me. Growing up in Sherwood Park, I didn't have many opportunities to connect to my Aboriginal heritage. During my elementary and junior high years, my family was the only self-identified Aboriginal family in our school. I attended my first Indigenous ceremony at the age of 19. I have never hunted, I have never fished, and I have never gathered berries. As an adult student, I have taken Cree courses and surrounded myself with Cree-fluent speakers; however, I still have a low fluency in

Cree. My first experience with Indigenous epistemologies has been in the past academic school year with the Indigenous People's Education master's cohort.

So why is this important? It is important because, according to the 2011 Canadian census, 56% percent of First Nations people live off-reserve (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada Canada, 2011). Many grow up away from their ceremonies and traditional ways of living. This has been my experience.

I have created a model that illustrates my understanding of the process of reconciliation with self. It is based on the Grief and Loss model (Kübler-Ross, 1969). I developed a model that outlines the series of emotional stages experienced by Indigenous people who have been separated from their Indigenous communities, ceremonies, and families. There are several reasons why I was feeling the way I did throughout my earlier life. Focusing on who or what is to blame for the disconnection from my Indigenous ways of knowing and being hindered my ability in the process of reconciliation of self. Therefore, looking within my being in the present, here and now, is where the process must begin.

The process I will describe here involves different stages. The reason why I like this is because it is fluid: you are not just locked in a stage, and once you go through a stage, you do not just stay there. You keep going through the stages and the process is ongoing throughout your life. I found the categorization and labeling of processes to be liberating. Others who are struggling may relate to this process and, most importantly, see that their struggles will subside. It is in creating process that we are also creating self-awareness.

As I describe the stages in the model, it is important to note this model is based on my own experience. The first stage is the "Acknowledgment of Difference." It was difficult trying to pinpoint the exact time in my life where I began to acknowledge difference—difference from some of my family members, difference from the kids at school, and difference from people in my community. In being a parent to my four-year-old daughter, I have noticed that it has been within this past year that she is beginning to notice that some people are taller, some people are smaller, some people are darker, some people are lighter, and some people speak different languages.

The second step is "Internal Struggle/Conflict" and this has been something that has come up quite a bit for me. The questions that I ask myself in this stage are: Where do I belong in this world? Who am I? Am I Indigenous enough for some or am I too Indigenous for others? The whole process is a process of combining what I've always known (what I've

learned in school, at home, and in my community) and what I've always been, which is an Indigenous being.

The next stage is what I refer to as "The Awakening Moment." For me, this came at my first powwow. I was living in Calgary and I hadn't been to any Indigenous ceremonies or gatherings before. When I first got there, I felt a bit uncomfortable. It was a new setting, new people, and a new environment all together. But when the drumming started, this feeling came over me. I could feel the drum inside every fibre of my body, which almost brought me to tears. And it was at that moment I knew I belonged. I knew that it was a part of who I was.

So, after having the awakening moment, I began to search for the same experience. I started getting involved in more and more ceremonies and related activities. I began attending more sweats, picking medicines, and getting involved in the community. In this stage, you now have the courage to put yourself out there, to take in as much information and experiences that you can.

The final stage is the stage of "Acceptance of the Reconciliation of Self." This stage is when you get to that place where who you are in that moment is enough and who you are at that moment is exactly who you were meant to be. A feeling of serenity comes over you, and you can just be.

So, how will identifying process mobilize Indigenous knowledge? Entire generations have been growing up separated from their communities, from Indigenous ways of being, and from Indigenous language and ceremonies. To enter a place where your mind and heart are able to learn you must work through the uncomfortable stages. It is within the awakening, longing, and final stages that we are able to explore our identity and place in the world.

As teachers, social workers, parents, and community members, the more opportunities we provide for others to experience these awakening moments, the more we are able to support them through their processes of reconciliation of self. Although the process must occur within self, we are responsible for the transmission of Indigenous epistemologies to our future generations. It is with the reconciliation of self that we can become the Indigenous knowledge holders who will inspire and empower future generations to come.

Note

Kelsey Reed is now enrolled in the doctoral program in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta.

References

- Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. (2011). Aboriginal demographics from the 2011 National Household Survey [Figure 5]. Retrieved from <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1370438978311/1370439050610>
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