

Reconciliation: What's Love Got to Do With It?

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Thank you everyone. I just want to say thank you to Creator for giving us another day in this life. *Hiy hiy*. Thank you, everyone, for coming to this International Indigenous conference. I am in the Master's cohort in the Indigenous Peoples Education program. And we are "cohorting" to change the world.

The topic that I was inspired by is "Reconciliation: What's Love Got to Do With It?" I want to begin with something that our professor, Cora Weber-Pillwax, always says to us. She always reminds us not to be defined by a post-colonial theory and to always go way back, to the beginning, from where our ancestors were. And, so, I begin with that—from lived experience in that context, way back for me, before residential schools.

I am from this territory, Treaty 6 territory. This presentation came from exploring the genealogy of my family on both sides. One of the things that was hard to reconcile is that I'm from three generations of Indian residential school survivors; tragedy, loss, pain, and suffering are a part of my history. Two topics that are very dear to me are: the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and the issue of the child welfare experience. But that's not all of who I am, and this is what I'm learning and unlearning.

One of the things that I learned is that I come from people who are very gifted. On my mother's side, we come from spiritual and medicine people. On my father's side, my grandmother was a midwife, and others on that side of the family were very skilled with horses. They were excellent horse people.

I'm also learning about who I am. After my first sun dance, I was given my Cree name *askiy ka pimohtet iskwew*: 'she who walks the earth' is locating herself with you and this is how I'm asserting my Indigenous knowledge. For me, reconciliation is necessary and very important. I do this for the loved ones who have passed on, for my mother and my grandparents. I do this to honour their spirit. They didn't have a chance to have their stories told and so their voices speak through me. I also do this for generations to come. I am a grandmother of three beautiful grandchildren, so I speak for them too. When I look into their eyes I remember why I walk this walk. Each step that I take fulfills that responsibility of reconciliation and love. In Cree, there are so many ways we could say love: *sahkihtin* (I

love my cousin) and *sahkihtin* (I love the students in my cohort). But what I'm speaking of here is *sahkohtowin*: to care for one another and, in the context of reconciliation and love, this is very hard to do.

Through these three generations, I am experiencing intergenerational impacts that are actual lived experiences. So, of those three beautiful grandchildren, I do have one in care, and that's very hard. The only thing that keeps me solid is love. Love keeps me going in what I'm doing here in my studies and in the other endeavours that I pursue in my life. Kim Anderson writes:

In this worldview children are the center of the community. The elders sit next to the children, as it is their job to teach the spiritual, social, and cultural life ways of the nation. The women sit next to the elders and the men sit on the outside. From these points they perform their respective economic and social roles as protectors and providers of the two most important circles in our community. Aboriginal children are precious to us because they represent the future. (2001, p. 159)

The children are in the centre of the circle. Then we have our Elders, and then our women and our men. That's what that quotation speaks to. Each relies on one another and, in that relationship of *sahkohtowin*, the women are the bridge. They're the fire keepers, the fire keepers of our lodges and in our homes. Jo-Ann Episkenew writes:

As a result colonial bureaucrats, not Indian people, design the chief and council system. That is the governance model that most reserves employ today. Although women played important roles in the governance of most Indigenous nations, the colonial regime banished them from its system, which in turn destroyed the gender balance that existed for millennia in many Indigenous nations. (2009, p. 174)

Again, *sahkohtowin* (to care for one another) and *sakihitowin* (to love)—we need to restore that gender balance. Some of the things that are happening because these two were out of balance are the missing and murdered Indigenous women and the Indigenous children in care. Statistics from the RCMP (2014) show that "the rate of victimization among Aboriginal females was close to three times higher than that of non-Aboriginal females" (p. 7) and that between the years of 1980 and 2012, there were 1017 Indigenous women murdered (p.7). For children in care in Canada,

the incidence rate for out-of-home placements remains higher for First Nations children compared with non-Aboriginal children. For every 1,000 First Nations children there are 13.6 formal out-of-home child welfare placements compared to only 1.1 per 1,000 for non-Aboriginal children placed out-of-home. (Wray & Sinha, 2015, p. 1)

Speaking from my personal experience, what keeps me going and coping with all of this, for my grandchild and for a sister who has a risky lifestyle, is love. I feel very strongly that love is what's keeping him and her alive, and praying for them.

These two circles of people—our children and our women—are very important. In the book *Red Skin, White Masks*, Glen Coulthard writes:

The demand rather is that society, including Indigenous society, and particularly Indigenous men stop collectively conducting ourselves in a manner that denigrates, degrades, and devalues the lives and words of Indigenous women in such a way that epidemic levels of violence are the norm in too many of their lives. Of course, this violence must be stopped in its overt forms, but we must also stop practicing it in its more subtle expression, in our daily relationships and practices in the home, workplaces, band offices, governance, institutions, and crucially, in our practice of cultural resurgence. Until this happens we have reconciled ourselves with defeat. (2014, p. 178)

Again we have *sahkohtowin*, to care for others. We want to live by that, to live it in our daily lives, and to live it in how we speak to one another. For ourselves, what are we going to think about? Is this loving? Is this caring? Am I caring about this person if I say this? And how are we going to say it? Is it caring? Is it to care? *Sahkohtowin*.

Reconciliation humanizes. These are things to ponder, things to encourage action. It's not only to benefit Indigenous people; it is for non-Indigenous people, too. In dehumanization, both the human dehumanized and the human dehumanizing the other human are affected. Until we deal with the core issues related to our Indigenous children and women, reconciliation is going to be an ongoing issue.

Leanne Simpson, in her book *Lighting the Eighth Fire* and citing Frantz Fanon in the context of Indigenous resurgence out of the colonial frame, writes:

I think that today this process will and must continue to involve some form of critical individual and collective self-recognition on the part of Indigenous societies, not only in an instrumental sense like Fanon seemed to have envisioned it, but with the understanding that our cultures have much to teach the Western world about the establishment of relationships within and between peoples and the natural world that are profoundly non-imperialist. (2008, p. 201)

Reconciliation involves *sahkohtowin*, to care for one another. This is inner work that we're speaking of; this is Indigenous knowledge. To care is the core of teachings and the language—*pimat'siwin*, to live a life, to live a good life. How do we live that? Is it to care? We care about ourselves and we want to love ourselves, so we take good care of ourselves—spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. We have family and loved ones, so we care for them—spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically. And sometimes it's hard to care for those ones in our families who are still struggling and healing. You feel pretty powerless when you deal with child welfare. Sometimes, the prayer and the love is the only thing that keeps me going, prayer and love for my sister that someday the healing will begin for her, too.

In Marie Battiste's *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit*, she cites author Sandy Grande on Indigenous knowledge:

It is not only imperative for Indian educators to insist on the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and praxis in schools but also to transform the institutional structure of schools themselves. In other words, in addition to the development of Native curricula, Indigenous educators need to develop systems of analysis that help theorize the ways in which power and domination inform the processes and procedures of schooling. They need pedagogies that work to disrupt the structures of inequality. (2013, p. 190)

That's what I envision in my Indigenous education journey: changing structures and systems. That is a process, a way, a path that we think of for reconciliation through Indigenous education. It is not just having a Cree class or having a powwow day. Let's look at how we can make Indigenous knowledge a part of that curriculum, a part of that system.

We're a beautiful people and we have beautiful things to offer to other people. Reconciling in Canada also means listening to difficult stories and to hear and to listen with compassion. As the late Walter Lightning said:

In the pursuit of knowledge, of understanding, of education, of learning, perhaps if we open our minds in a nonjudgmental way, a compassionate way, we may move toward improving our views, our perception of what the mind is and how thought is processed and more importantly how anything and everything affects our consciousness as human beings. (1992, p. 219)

Let these stories be real life lessons in the classrooms, bringing real life into the classrooms, not just in post-secondary classrooms, but in early childhood and kindergarten classrooms, too. Mizana Gheezhik (Justice Murray Sinclair) writes about reconciliation and the role of education:

What our education systems need to do is this: it must commit to teach Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children—our children—how to speak respectfully to and about each other in the future. It begins with teaching them the truth about our history. Knowing what happened will lead to understanding. Understanding leads to respect. (2014, para. 23)

This is what I envision for young children like my grandchildren to be taught in school. Reconciliation to me is about us being accountable, us being responsible. Living *sahkohtowin*, to take care of one another and ourselves as Indigenous people, we must find, heal, nurture, and strengthen our love through our continued Indigenous knowledge systems. This love is the only hope that we have in this time of struggle for our people.

For others, reconciliation is to find your compassionate mind, to find compassion within yourselves to bring loving action to these social justice matters such as those that I have mentioned and to open your mind to other systems of knowledge. Knowledge comes in many ways. Encourage and educate others to reconcile also, with *sahkohtowin*, to care to reconcile.

Can I reconcile? I'm going to work really hard to be loving and to be a part of a reconciliation process. To be honest, this process is going to take

my lifetime and it's going to be a legacy that I leave to my grandchildren. I want to leave you with a quote about reconciliation that may help to explain why it was so hard for me to articulate that. Corntassel and Holder write:

An important element of that confrontation is assuming the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination and preceding any discussions of reconciliation with genuine acts of restitution to establish a clear break from the continuation of a state-centered discourse. Promoting awareness about indigenous histories, ongoing relationships to their homelands, and self-determination strategies should be part of a large insurgent education movement that counters state-based strategies of promoting unity, prioritizing citizenship and implementing 'cheap reconciliation' strategies. (2008, pp. 487-488)

This is something to be aware of in Canada and that we really need to critically think about. How are we going to bring *sahkohtowin* (to care for one another in our actions) into action, into the things that we do? *Hiy-hiy*.

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All the Way Back—All the Way Forward: A Journey of Mobilizing Indigenous Epistemologies and Embracing Reconciliation

[Original title: Remembering Reconciliation]

Angela Wolfe

Welcome to the University of Alberta and to this Indigenous conference. I have had the privilege of being on this team that helped plan this conference and to bring it to the university and to our faculty. I can also recall, very strongly and vividly, the first Indigenous Scholars conference that I went to as an undergraduate student. Being present at the previous conferences was transformative for me. Being able to start this conference with ceremony and presence of our ancestors, and to bring this vision here, is really wonderful and very powerful. I'm grateful that all of you are here. I'd also like to thank those who have laid some of the stones for us to follow and who made my path to be in front of you today. Some of them are not here today. One of them is the late Linda Bull. She adopted me and took me home when I first arrived at the University of Alberta. Linda was pivotal in my direction and scholarship. I recalled her this morning in our prayers and our songs. I wanted to mention and bring her here today. So, my presentation today is remembering and living reconciliation.

I have the privilege of being a student in this innovative master's cohort. A part of our journey has been around Indigenous epistemologies. I don't think that word flowed off my tongue on the first day of classes as easily as it did today, but that in itself is a part of living reconciliation because it was part of a journey back to where I am as I stand before you here today.

So, I must go back 20 plus years, to my first lesson here in this halloved place, this University of Alberta. I had not grown up knowing any Indigenous person who had ever succeeded at the university or even attended any university. I was the first in my family to apply and to be accepted at this university. I remember being extremely terrified my first days of being a university student in 1992. I was convinced that if they, the university academic elite, found out I was here, I'd be shown the door!

Ironically, one of my first classes was a Cree language class. One day, the guest speaker to that class was an Elder and scholar from my home