

necessitates essential input from Aboriginal communities towards effective policy development for a shared future. This is a critical time for the academy and Aboriginal communities, to converge in ways that sustainably contribute to redress of the IRS legacy.

Acknowledgement

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Living Reconciliation: Ancient Foundations in Our Contemporary Indigenous Worlds

John Crier

Cora Weber-Pillwax

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Part One: Elder John Crier

Cora and I shared an agreement that I would speak first, which gives me the opportunity to use extreme words and she can follow behind and smooth things out.

My friends, my relatives. There are many groups like this all over our land; groups of people who sit together and speak about these things that we have heard here already today, yesterday, and the day before. We speak of all these things that trouble us. That leads me to wonder: "What is it that we want? If we could have our way, what is it that we want?"

The first thought that came into my mind was, "I want my land back. I don't want to be homeless in my home." And, so, when I was thinking about that, I thought to myself, "Why? Why do I say I want my land back?" And the answer came back to me from myself: When I look back, before social and government boundaries were created on the land that now prevents us from accessing our land, the land actually grew us. We are from the land. And, so, when we talk about the knowledge, the epistemology, and reconciliation, we need that land to grow. Those people that we speak about as the *knowledge holders* come from the land. The land con-

tains many memories of our ancestors. These lands of our memories are not just the reserves. I'm sure there are many other discussions about this; we can know that if we depend on a colonizer to give our land back, that will never happen.

One of the ways that I understand, and that I use in my work with men, is to guide and to go with them to where the fear is the greatest. We need to name the greatest fear that would have us suppressed and oppressed as peoples: that fear that would prevent us from coming from our own place of power, from living in the world from our place of power. I think it's that fear that has us oppressed, that causes thoughts of uprisings and violence. One of the things that I learned from watching people like Gandhi and Mandela, people who were also oppressed, is that they welcomed entering into the quagmire of the society of the oppressed. Perhaps we are speaking about other examples of the traditional 40 days in the desert for the lost tribes, and we need to become that experience, and need to welcome it. Welcome that because there is no doubt in my mind that we are throwing in the towel. Yet, every person who has a longing to find who they are becomes part of the energy to find a way. And, so, out of that comes a spiritual energy that is beyond human—beyond human energy.

We did a pipe ceremony this morning, and in that pipe ceremony a thought came into my mind that we are being pushed to do this. We are being pushed to ask these questions. We are being pushed because our ancestors are wanting that flow of energy that was there previously—the flow of energy through the ceremonies, through the dreams, the visions, and the songs. That flow of energy that needs to continue, to continue into the future with the children, the grandchildren, and all the ones yet to come. I see that when we do these things, that is our actualizing of the reality of something new, a new ceremony that creates what it is that we want. We have to be the leaders in this; we have to take our children and grandchildren, and show them the way.

You know that I work in the correctional system and I see that that system is set in its place. It cannot heal the men that it holds. So, the men have to be shown how to heal themselves, what can be done, and how to do this. We have to do this so that our men and women who are incarcerated do not simply “check out,” to use the term that Peter Hanohano introduced in reference to his father. Where I work, there are many men inside that system who have checked out of society. There are also many men and women out in the streets who are—we use the term—*homeless*, but they have also checked out of society. Many young people have checked out into violence or into depression, and they disappear. So, the work needs to be done; we gather each other and we name our fears. We also name the

fears of our oppressor and we go there deliberately. We deliberately go into that energy—the dark energy—so that it does not own us, but we own it. With that, I'll pass to the next speaker.

Part Two: Dr. Cora Weber-Pillwax

Thank you, John, for starting us on these thoughts. I want to express my appreciation also to Lewis Cardinal, for bringing his father's presence and strength forward with us at this event. We deeply appreciate such support from those who have always been there with us in our work with our own peoples across this land.

I will begin by sharing a bit about the foundations of this conference, an effort that was motivated and driven almost wholly by the energies and thinking of the members of the Indigenous Peoples Education master's program cohort. One point, however, stands apart and is particularly meaningful to me. Almost two years ago, at another event on this campus, an experience opened the way for me to start thinking about the process and deeper meanings of reconciliation within this institution.

The Indigenous Education Council (IEC), a self-formed body comprised of Indigenous faculty and staff within the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, had planned and were hosting the *Hundred Years of Loss* poster presentation, a public information event about the Indian residential school years in Canada. The poster display required much dedicated open space, being supported by massive pillars holding panels and murals of large posters, pictures, and charts encircling the pillars. Most of the open lounge and cafeteria area between the north and south Education buildings had to be claimed for a one-week period. We had planned an opening event to welcome guests and visitors and, at that opening event, I was invited to extend some words of welcome on behalf of our specialization, Indigenous Peoples Education (IPE), and the IEC. When I walked forward to the podium to welcome the people, I turned around to face the group, standing so that behind me was a large wall of windows, facing east into the room. As I started to speak, I became deeply aware that another event was beginning to take place behind me, with significant movement being reflected in the windows. I found myself reaching for words of welcome and meaning, and simultaneously observing that a group of beings had been moving towards the windows, then had slowly stopped at a bit of a distance, and now were waiting and watching us.

I had felt these visitors coming, and while I was talking they arrived behind me in the open space outside the west wall of windows. They did not come in—they stopped at a distance from the windows. I knew that

these were our ancestors, those persons who had lived before us. In fact, the knowledge entered me slowly and gradually that they were the ancestors of exactly those hundreds of people—many of whom were children—who were portrayed on those posters placed strategically behind me in the display, and were therefore those persons most implicated by those events referenced on the posters and being shared as a public educational event. It was a terrible melding together in my own being: formal words of welcome coming out of my mouth and strange knowledge entering into me with the images of the unfolding event just outside the building and filling the evening sky. Within the flow of power that was sweeping me along, I finally stopped the movement so that I could speak and actually share what I was experiencing with the people in the room. I stopped the words of that welcoming event and spoke instead to the audience about what had happened, and what I had been given to understand from those events outside the room. I knew that the spirits of our people who had gone before us in experiences such as were being portrayed were there, and that what I had been given to understand was that they were waiting and watching us. They were waiting to see what we would do, and they were also telling us that we had to do something and that they needed us to do something. They were waiting to see what we would do; I was very clear within myself, and with the people who now shared this vision with me, that there had not been anything more revealed to me in that evening about exactly what it was that we were to be doing to respond to their waiting.

In the many months and several years that have now followed that event, I have been given other understandings and have been able to respond in ways that support the healing and freeing of our people, those who are still here and those who suffered immensely and were helpless to protect and care for themselves, in the face of the brutality offered by those who had taken power and lives freely, without mercy, question, compassion, or humanity. I learned how important it is to understand that we live through each other and in each other—a knowledge that we have never given up.

I will remember how strongly compelled I was to stop the formalities of a meaningless institutional practice, and to take one of the most important steps I have ever taken: to state openly in an academic Western institution of oppression that the spirits of our people were present and did not wish to enter into that space within which we were sitting. Yet, they had come to let us know they were waiting for us to respond to their presence, and they knew we knew they were there for us to reach out for them. I trembled to say out loud to the people what I knew and felt was happening outside those windows in that evening sky outside of that

building, and I always have been grateful to the Elders who sat and nodded their blessing towards me as I shared.

In my beginning thoughts about this conference, I felt it appropriate that this would be the place to share the vision again. When I walked into this gathering space, it struck me very powerfully that the space here had been created to form a sacred space, a space or lodge to accommodate a *wihkohtowin*. Someone described it as a ghost dance setting. The young women who did this gave us what we needed; the spirit brought all of this together. The fact is that this sacred space is here, and we have been living parts of the ceremony that is unfolding. I've been thinking, too, since I've entered this space that sometime we'll have the *wihkotowin* outside, and we'll have our conference outside in that ceremony. That day will come because we are here.

I didn't imagine or think when I got hired that I would ever see anything like this space within the walls of this institution. It can be rousing to see and note that the shadows can cause trembling where ignorance lies thickest and darkest. One concluding comment on the vision of the *Hundred Years of Loss*: I recall understanding that a significant part of the message was that "We need you to free us, to heal us, so we can go." Within that image, I also realized that those people whom I was seeing were all old people; they were old and middle-aged people. They were not children. They seemed to be the children grown up in pain, needing to be loved and freed from their pain, by us.

As mothers at the time of the Indian residential school years, likely we would have watched our children being taken away and probably we would have cried—and died slowly. But one certainty is that we suffered. Our children taken away were three years old, and some as young as two years old. In the suffering associated with the Indian residential schools, the mother who nursed her child from birth had to watch her child being taken away from her and her home. As the mother, I would have tried to make it as easy for my beloved child as I could. But then, after the child was gone, I would be blaming myself, hating myself, and not forgiving myself. I would have to say, "Why am I here and my child is over there? Why did I let that happen? Why am I alive and my child is apart from me?" At some point, I think I might need to be on the floor, flat on my face, asking forgiveness. And that's only the mother's side. When I think of the men's side of this situation, I think of six brothers and a father whose lives I've shared. I think of cousins and uncles and others, many of whom I helped to bury.

And, so, I begin to think of reconciliation with the children, with the mothers and fathers who had and have the children. I see that the recon-

ciliation begins a long way back; it goes back when we forgive ourselves in those people who are waiting to see what we will do. We have to forgive ourselves for that time when we let our children go from us. We have to forgive ourselves as we were in those parents and guardians of the children of that time. As they forgive themselves, they need us to forgive ourselves in them. They have to forgive us for what we have failed or neglected to do in our own living.

I thank John for reminding us that our ancestors want that flow of energy to continue. That tells me what our people are waiting for, and that they're waiting to see what we'll do in this and other places, to continue that flow of vital energy.

I think that reconciliation for us as Indigenous peoples in Canada will have to involve many types and situations of reconciliation. However, I also am quite certain that these types and situations of reconciliation mostly will occur at superficial levels of transformation and understanding, and will not reach or impact the deeper levels of personal and social being. These visible reconciliatory efforts will represent primarily policy level statements and administration models that maintain and sustain existing Canadian institutions and systems of organization, governance, programs, and services. At the levels of inter- and intra-human, personal, and social interactions of all types, the actualization or overt expression of reconciliation is unlikely to move beyond a definition to be cited and referenced appropriately. The accuracy of this projection will reveal itself within the next decade, primarily because reconciliation is a constant state in its relation or application to life; it implies an embeddedness within the constant motion of sustained balance and harmony; it is a state or quality of a way of being and living. It is not a practice and, as such, cannot be assessed or measured easily. As a particular state or way of living or being *alive*, reconciliation requires certain individual personal attitudes, shared values, and mutually-shared life goals and objectives if it is to exist between two or more entities/beings. As one example, the value of respect for differences amongst cultures and peoples can be demanded through policies, but will always be difficult or impossible to demand in practice; without this value in practice, reconciliation cannot be achieved. This is not to deny that there can be and will continue to be examples of individual situations or cases of reconciliation between and amongst groups and persons, but these by themselves cannot be used as evidence that we are aiming for or have achieved a state of reconciliation that has the power and potential to transform the relationships amongst the Government of Canada, Canadians, and Indigenous peoples of these territories.

Based on the ways that I understand, and have been taught and con-

tinue to live alongside many others, we, as Indigenous people, live our lives in ways that are steeped in reconciliation. We remain in states of reconciliation, as a constant within ourselves as spiritual beings. In a very basic way, I understand that to mean that we do not need reconciliation. When I was younger, I went to the old people for their wisdom and guidance as the generations of my people before me had done; I sat with them, especially the old women, as I struggled with the personal, social, and professional issues of mainstream Canadian education and my own existence as an Indigenous woman and educator. They would always offer kindness and love, and remind me of where I belonged before they would say, "Just keep on doing what you're doing." And I'd see what they were doing, too. I went into their houses and our houses, and I saw. I saw what they lived with and I saw how they lived. And I saw how they suffered. And I interpreted what I saw and heard, and I knew that most of them had no need for reconciliation with anything, certainly not with much of what I could identify as brutal and ugly that I had observed directed at them from mainstream Canada.

I will try now to summarize with a different context. As a young Indigenous teacher and later as a systems administrator, I spent years in anger. I had to reconcile that anger within myself because the persons, people, and systems I was angry with didn't care anyway; certainly, they did not care about reconciliation or consideration of Indigenous points of view which they could not or chose not to accommodate. I interpreted that to mean clearly that I didn't have to reconcile with them. The deep anger I was feeling was not simply being mad or angry *at* someone. That deep anger that I was feeling was a natural and instinctive individual human response to a massive societal threat against personal and social survival as a member of a distinct people; that type of anger was integrally connected to feelings of powerlessness and fear for self and others in the face of historical societal threats. Reconciliation in this context requires that those who are being reconciled will experience life as a constant process that sustains the person as both individual and collective in the various cultural expressions of being human. In the Canadian social context, the state of reconciliation would be achievable only if all members of all societies shared common attitudes and values that enabled the reconciliation of hitherto irreconcilable differences in goals, objectives, and systemic/institutional/professional practices.

When we love, there's no need for reconciliation; there is no more effective way to state this. Without entering into a process of analysis of justification, my values prohibit me from intentionally destroying other life. Love in the context of my reality includes a relationship with the land,

and land is implicated heavily in being able to give expression to and to live out this value. Many presenters have mentioned the land during this conference. The point that I want to highlight here is that the land loves us. The land here where we stand loves us. It knows us and acknowledges our presence in relation to itself. It won't betray us. That's an assurance that we have and to which we cling. In the context of this presentation, I am not focusing on details and evidence to support these statements; reconciliation as a state of balance enfolds the integral connection between person and land with as much certainty as it encompasses the connection between all aspects of my being into the one personhood that is me.

We have so many nations in this country; we are an international territory. And, yet, we have also "Canada," a puny little idea that declared itself a nation and, by doing so, is a nation. I think we as Indigenous peoples are more than nations. We have tens of thousands of years of peoplehood. This is not a boundaried reality nor is it connected to a boundaried land. It is a sense, an understanding of reality comprised of people spread out all across this unboundaried land, this *place*. We have many distinct Indigenous peoples, and we are very clear about who we are; and also very clear that the land loves us because we are born from the land and we return to the land, this land, this newly-named Canada. This knowledge is the root of my statement that it is not us who needs the reconciliation that is being talked about so widely, following the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report. However, I do think that maybe it is us who need reconciliation with our ancestors, and with the land upon which we have our being, where we have maybe been fearful and maybe have turned our backs.

I learned about the action of "turning our backs" on our ancestors and the land from my own relations who turned their backs because it was easier not to be Indian, not to be half-breed, not to be Aboriginal, not to be whatever it was that somehow made them less valuable in the eyes of Canada's societies. They decided that they would be French, and they were French for many years. With the passing of years, I learned that, inevitably, we work out for ourselves the impacts and outcomes of those types of decisions and associated experiences; the hope is that ultimately we return to ourselves, to that state of reconciliation within ourselves. Through all of our experiences, however, no matter what we do or think, the land still loves us.

My final point regarding the concept of reconciliation relates to the expression of ourselves and who we are. We need to find ways to express who we are because that is a significant part of the reconciliation of ourselves, with ourselves, and therefore within ourselves. I speak as an old person, but I think of the thousands of young people, the hundreds of old

people, and perhaps thousands of older people who have been robbed of words. These are the ones who are caught and imprisoned because they have no words to express who they are or to say what they think. They are the ones caught between the robbery of their Indigenous mother tongue and the absence of opportunity to learn a foreign language. These are the people who are around us every single day. When I think of them and that situation impacting so terribly upon our capacity for language as a primary expression of our humanity, I know that we cannot lose the ceremonies because they are another powerful and sacred means for us to express ourselves and our own individual and collective being. In a way that is rarely verbalized or stated directly, ancient ceremonies and ceremonial practices continue as the portals through which, without words, we find, understand, and express ourselves to the Source of our being, to ourselves and to others. In other words, ceremonies are the means through which we achieve and remain in states of reconciliation.

Achieving this state of reconciliation for me meant finding ways to express myself as an artist and as a teacher. Finding spaces and opportunities that supported these ways of being was never obvious or easy, and this was primarily because I was born an Indigenous person in a social reality that was designed for a non-Indigenous society. I wanted to teach in schools because that's where we were sending our five-year-olds; we were sending our little ones into war zones where they were forced to deal with adults as oppressors. These children understand the state of reconciliation because they have lived it, and they deserve to be in places and spaces that support and sustain the vitality of this state within themselves.

Conclusion: Elder John Crier

When I work with the men, I work with the intention and desire that we will change our way of thinking. I want us to change our language so that whatever it is that has us, as individual persons, imprisoned or that has caused us to be in this place of imprisonment, we will face that and do the work. We will work with the anger, the remorse, the pain, the sadness. In that process of working through these, an emergence of self happens. Then, we can begin to look around in our lives and ask with more clarity, "Where do I belong? Where is my home? Where is my land?"

With this question, many of the men will have an opportunity to recreate their individual lives. This question also signals continuing work; the person begins to have the energy that will have him maintain himself as a person—indeed, as a sovereign person. This means that we as individual persons are not accessible to any system without our choice, and we come from that place of maintaining ourselves as individuals free from the

imprisonment of any place. When that happens, and you realize that all this work that you have done, all the living and doing that went on in a good way during your stay here, you begin to understand that there is nothing else and no other reason to keep you there. And, so, the door to the prison is open.

So, my own thinking is that we need to change our language; we need to change our mentality. Instead of coming from the position of asking or requesting, we begin to change the reality and talk as if we already have access to the land, that we have our land back. There are many stories that we have told each other here at this conference; we have shared our stories of anger, of remorse. But from that, also, we have strengthened each other. Many of the experiences that I have observed and experienced with the men is that when they begin to tell their story, that sharing of their story begins to relieve that energy of its negative quality. So, when we come together like this, I welcome all the stories, including those of such heart-break as was shared last night in listening to the keynote speaker, Dr. Cindy Blackstock. There were statistics related to children presented there that I didn't know about and had never seen. But after that, I knew that the greatest impact of oppression is carried by the children. As adults, we have found a way to survive within oppression, but when I think of the children, I recall now that, in my own community, I see bits and pieces of why we have so many young people check out: commit suicide, go down a path of anger, drugs, and alcohol.

As context for a final point, let me say that I rely on and have faith in the people here who have done a lot of work in research and writing. I think that we need to articulate what it is that we need to do to change our thinking, and to change our language so as to address the situation and needs of our own states of being.