

THE JOURNEY OF A TS'MSYEN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SURVIVOR:

Resiliency and Healing in Multi-Ethnic Milieus

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ALTHOUGH CANADIAN SOCIETY remained oblivious and inattentive for decades, it is now widely acknowledged that the forcible removal of First Nations children from their families and communities – and the physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse that many of them suffered in residential schools – had a traumatic impact on First Nations people.¹ Despite all that, many First Nations people have been notably resilient in their post-residential school struggle to adapt to new life situations. For children who were taken from British Columbia's north coast to residential schools elsewhere, and who never resettled in their natal communities, the challenge of coping and healing has been amplified by the unfamiliarity and changing structures of Canadian society.²

This article endeavours to shed light on the challenges faced by residential school survivors, their struggles to overcome a traumatic past, and their resilience in trying to get on with their post-school lives. The core of the article is an ethnographic narrative regarding the experience of 'Liyaa'mlaxha (Leonard Alexcee), a Ts'msyen man from Port Simpson (a.k.a. Lax Kw'alaams), who attended Port Alberni Indian Residential School for four and a half years. 'Liyaa'mlaxha then became a member of

* I would like, first and foremost, to acknowledge my indebtedness to the late Ellis Benson Young for welcoming me to his community and cultivating a meaningful friendship. Second, I would like to express my appreciation to Ellis's eldest sister, Lorene, for taking "his place" upon his passing. I am also grateful to George Sampson for sharing with me his long-standing experience as a community worker at the Prince Rupert Friendship House and his knowledge of Ts'msyen culture. Thanks are also due to the Kaien Island elders for their kind support and to the two anonymous readers for their comments and suggestions.

¹ Laurence J. Kirmayer, Caroline L. Tait, and Cori Simpson, "The Mental Health of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Transformations of Identity and Community," in *Healing Traditions: The Mental Health of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada*, ed. Laurence J. Kirmayer and Gail Guthrie Valaskakis (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 3-35.

² Many First Nations elders consider "urban Native" to be an ugly phrase as it divides on- and off-reserve Indians.

the First Nations communities in the multi-ethnic cannery towns of Port Edward (1950-55) and Prince Rupert (1955 and onwards). His experiences there reveal both (1) the challenges faced by a residential school survivor living in a Canadian society oriented towards the assimilation of First Nations and (2) how reconnecting with his Ts'msyen traditions helped him rebuild his life and become an active member of his community. Besides this, the narrative enables us to understand how the changing socio-political framework of Canadian society – beyond the Indian Act – affects displacement and place-making as school survivors reconnect with family and community while living outside their ancestral and/or reserve villages.

This article is an unexpected result of Kamala Nayar having engaged with the Kaien Island Elders' Group at the Friendship House Association of Prince Rupert for her study of Punjabis in British Columbia (her research was conducted between 2006 and 2011),³ during which time she interviewed First Nations people in order to gather corroborative data, chiefly in regard to fisheries. In the summer of 2009, 'Liyaa'mlaxha expressed an interest in sharing his residential school experience. Two years later, Nayar and 'Liyaa'mlaxha collaborated to give form to his memories. With Nayar's specialization in South Asian immigrant communities and her former career as a registered nurse, and 'Liyaa'mlaxha's experience as a residential school survivor who had established himself in multi-ethnic settings, this collaboration evolved into a project about resiliency and healing in multi-ethnic BC resource towns.

We draw upon five main types of data: (1) face-to-face interviews in the form of a life-review with 'Liyaa'mlaxha in July 2011, November 2011, April 2012, and July 2012; (2) semi-structured interviews with three counsellors who work with residential school survivors and their families; (3) government (federal, provincial, and municipal) archives; (4) the local *Prince Rupert Daily News* along with Vancouver and Toronto periodicals; and (5) ongoing communication with the Kaien Island Elders' Group at the Prince Rupert Friendship House. In the course of writing this article every effort has been made to address the concerns and incorporate the recommendations of the elders, who were kept informed of the project's progress, invited to comment on the evolving narrative, and given the opportunity to review the manuscript prior to submission.

Nayar interviewed 'Liyaa'mlaxha about his life in a private office at the Prince Rupert Friendship House. Before this, they completed the

³ Kamala Elizabeth Nayar, *The Punjabis in British Columbia: Location, Labour, First Nations, and Multiculturalism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).

*Workbook for Residential School Survivors to Recognize, Create and Share Their Own Resiliency Stories.*⁴ After each interview, they shared a meal outside the Friendship House and engaged in unrelated casual conversation so that 'Liyaa'mlaxha could collect his thoughts and feelings before returning home. The interviews (which took place over twenty-eight hours) yielded large amounts of information, which is here shaped into a narrative reflecting the important themes that emerged. 'Liyaa'mlaxha assisted Nayar in the editing process and indicated what he wanted to be included in the narrative. Various drafts were shared with 'Liyaa'mlaxha's three family members (wife, son, and sister) and three friends (George, Murray, and Peter) to ensure reliability and the fullest possible recounting of 'Liyaa'mlaxha's life. Two peer-review reports on an earlier version of this article were shared with both 'Liyaa'mlaxha and his wife. This article consists of three parts. The first provides the socio-cultural history of the Coast Ts'msyen; the second tells the story of 'Liyaa'mlaxha (b. 1933); and the third analyzes the challenges and barriers experienced by First Nations survivors of residential schools.

COAST TS'MSYEN AND THE ASSIMILATIVE PROCESS

In their traditional territories along the lower Skeena River and the adjacent coast, the Coast Ts'msyen people long hunted bear, deer, and moose, and depended heavily on eulachon and salmon.⁵ Archaeological evidence indicates human occupation of the Prince Rupert harbour area for the last five thousand years; however, like other Pacific Coast peoples, the Ts'msyen followed a subsistence cycle, moving from winter villages on the coast, most of which were located in the Prince Rupert harbour-Venn Passage (a.k.a. Maxlakxaala, "saltwater pass"), to salmon-fishing territories upriver.⁶

⁴ *Workbook for Residential School Survivors to Recognize, Create and Share Their Own Resiliency Stories*, prepared by Lorraine Kenny, swac's Special Projects Coordinator (November 2003), available at <http://www.turtleisland.org/healing/resiliency.pdf>.

⁵ Ts'msyen is a broad group of people linked by language and culture: (1) the Coast Ts'msyen; (2) the Southern Ts'msyen, who live on the coast and islands to the south of the Skeena River; (3) the Nisga'a, who live on the Nass River; and (4) the Gitksan, who live on the upper Skeena beyond the canyon and Kitselas. See Marjorie M. Halpin and Margaret Seguin, "Tsimshian Peoples: Southern Tsimshian, Coast Tsimshian, Nishga, and Gitksan," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 7, ed. Wayne Suttles, 267-85 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute, 1990), 267-69, 282.

⁶ Fladmark R. Knut, Kenneth M. Ames, and Patricia D. Sutherland, "Prehistory of the Northern Coast of British Columbia," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 7, ed. Wayne Suttles, 232-35 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute, 1990); Halpin and Seguin, "Tsimshian Peoples," 267.

Ts'msyen communities were tribal and their people were organized according to four matrilineal exogamous clans (*pteex*): (1) Eagle (*Laxsgiik*), (2) Killer Whale or Blackfish (*Gispwudwada*), (3) Wolf (*Laxgibuu*), and (4) Raven (*Ganbada*). The core unit and main social grouping was the house (*walp*), which inhabited a single longhouse or cluster of longhouses symbolically understood as a "box" filled with crests (images and privileges), immortal names, songs, dances, and stories.⁷ The Ts'msyen potlatch gave authority to names and positions through public declaration, and conferred upon the house chief the authority to govern resource use, succession, alliances, marriages, and other matters that affected the power and prestige of the house.⁸ The hereditary chief of the highest-ranking house in the village was the village chief.

When the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) set up a trading post at Fort Simpson in 1834,⁹ the nine Coast Ts'msyen tribes, which had winter and spring villages along the coast, moved to the area surrounding the fort on Gispaxlo'ots territory. Subsequently, Fort Simpson became the main settlement of the "Nine Tribes" of the lower Skeena River area.¹⁰ Since they were well situated to barter goods between the HBC and the more inland First Nations (including Nisga'a and Gitksan), Coast Ts'msyen generally found trading relations to be "mutually beneficial."¹¹

In the mid-nineteenth century, William Duncan of the Church of England brought Christianity to Fort Simpson, where approximately twenty-three hundred Ts'msyen lived in about four hundred homes surrounding the HBC fort.¹² In 1862, Duncan and fifty or so followers relocated to an old Ts'msyen winter village site, twenty-five kilometres

⁷ Susan Neylan, *The Heavens Are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 166, 214.

⁸ For an in-depth analysis of the spiritual and social significance of receiving an immortal name, see Christopher F. Roth, *Becoming Tsimshian: The Social Life of Names* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

⁹ The name "Fort Simpson" is derived from Captain Aemilius Simpson, superintendent of HBC's Marine Department, who established the first short-lived Fort Simpson on the nearby Nass River (1831). The establishment of Fort Simpson was primarily a manoeuvre to undermine American dominance of the maritime fur trade. See Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1977), 28-31. See also Daniel Clayton, "Geographies of the Lower Skeena," in *Home Truths: Highlights from BC History*, ed. Richard Mackie and Graeme Wynn, 104-36 (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour).

¹⁰ The nine Coast Ts'msyen tribes include Gispaxlo'ots, Gitwilgyoots, Gitzaxlaal, Gits'iis, Ginaxangiik, Ginadoiks, Giluts'aaw, Gitando, and Gitlaan. There were originally ten Coast Ts'msyen tribes, but Gitwilkseba was extinct by the time the HBC established itself at Fort Simpson in 1834. See Halpin and Seguin, "Tsimshian Peoples," 267.

¹¹ James R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 185; Clayton, "Geographies of the Lower Skeena," 104-36.

¹² Halpin and Seguin, "Tsimshian Peoples," 267-68.

south of Fort Simpson, and established the Metlakatla mission (near the harbour of Prince Rupert). Their numbers were augmented by survivors of the 1862-63 smallpox epidemics that killed thousands of Ts'msyens in Fort Simpson and along the coast, possibly because Metlakatla was perceived a safer location than Fort Simpson.¹³ Then, in 1874, the Reverend Thomas Crosby of the Methodist Church came to Fort Simpson, creating a rivalry between Anglicans and Methodists as they both sought to convert and "save" First Nations from their "savage way of life."¹⁴ By 1879, Crosby's wife, Emma, had founded the Crosby Girls' Home (which became part of British Columbia's residential school system in 1893).¹⁵

When British Columbia joined Confederation in 1871, the federal government assumed responsibility for First Nations. Ts'msyen tribes became "bands" and were moved to new settlements (Indian Reserves) under the administration of Indian agents. Under the Indian Act, 1876,¹⁶ the government acquired the right to relocate the First Nations and expropriate their lands by armed force.¹⁷ Four years later, in 1880, Fort Simpson became Port Simpson, equipped with a magistrate and a regional government agent.¹⁸ In 1885, the federal government banned the potlatch from the coast, a prohibition that was to persist until 1951.¹⁹

In little more than a decade the contexts of Ts'msyen lives were radically, even utterly, transformed by government policy, religious zealotry, commerce, and canneries. Yet, many Ts'msyen people maintained their sense of identity, refusing to accept patriarchal baptismal names as replacements for the transmission of crests and traditional names through maternal lines.²⁰ Through the early decades of the twentieth century,

¹³ Although Duncan was theoretically setting up a "utopian" independent and self-governing Christian community, the community was in reality dependent on his authority. See Jean Usher, *William Duncan of Metlakatla: A Victorian Missionary in British Columbia* (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1974), 109. On the other hand, Murray asserts that the government's "demonization" of Duncan was a result of his push for Aboriginal rights such as land claims. See Peter Murray, *The Devil and Mr. Duncan* (Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1985).

¹⁴ James R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 90-94. For more detail of this rivalry, see Neylan, *Heavens Are Changing*, 234-73.

¹⁵ Jan Hare and Jean Barman, *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Paul Tennant, *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1990), 45-51.

¹⁷ Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 175-211.

¹⁸ Clayton, "Geographies of the Lower Skeena," 131.

¹⁹ For more information on the potlatch ban, see Douglas Cole and Ira Chaikin, *An Iron Hand upon the People: The Law against the Potlatch on the Northwest Coast* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990).

²⁰ Richard Daly, "Being and Becoming in a World that Won't Stand Still: The Case of Metlakatla." *Social Analysis* 49, 1 (2005): 21-44; Neylan, *Heavens Are Changing*, 74-75.

Coast Ts'msyen displayed their adaptability as they hung on to aspects of their traditional ways of life even as they incorporated elements of Protestant religion and Anglo-Canadian culture (e.g., language, dress, house styles) into their everyday living. It was into this hybrid, but ultimately increasingly uncertain, socio-cultural situation that 'Liyaa'mlaxha was born in the 1930s.

'LIYAA'MLAXHA'S JOURNEY TO BE HEARD AND TO HEAL²¹

*Watching the nation from the sky,
'Liyaa'mlaxha (Sky-Walker) came down from the clouds and out of the mist.
By reading 'Liyaa'mlaxha's story here,
may there be sincere and positive decisions made.*
– Mona Alexcee, 'Liyaa'mlaxha's wife

Our nation is Ts'msyen. Following my mother's family, I am Gisp-wudwada, Killer Whale. I was born on 5 June 1933 in the Ginaxangiik Tribe of Lax Kw'alaams (thirty kilometres northwest of Prince Rupert). My mother Hannah Wells tragically died while giving birth to me, so my elder brother John and I became "orphans" at young ages. We were cared for by my maternal side of the family. During the first six years of my life, my auntie took care of me. She was married to a Nisga'a man (Joseph Latimer), so we lived in Gingolx in the Nass.²² When her husband tragically drowned in a work-related boating accident, we had to relocate back to Ts'msyen land. There is a Nisga'a custom that if the bereaved ones are from another nation, they must leave all their possessions behind and return to their ancestral territory. Since my auntie and I are Ts'msyen, we were required to leave all that we owned in Gingolx and return to our nation. My auntie was such a generous lady, but after losing her husband and all her possessions she became very, very bitter.

When we returned to Lax Kw'alaams, I lived with my maternal grandmother. She was a religious lady, who planted in me the seeds of God, faith, love, respect, and gratitude. We always managed to have enough food on our plate. Our Creator looks after the poor and needy.

²¹ The narrator had been given three traditional names: (1) *Liim gaguum* ("seagull down") when he was a baby; (2) *Wa a yuun* ("a very ambitious young boy") during his youth by the elders in his house because he always helped them; and (3) *'Liyaa'mlaxha* ("walking the sky"), his immortal name, when he was a young adult. On 13 October 2012, the 'Liyaa'mlaxha House hosted its first feast in sixty years at the Native Revival Centre to declare the narrator as the house chief throughout Lax Kw'alaams.

²² The four Nisga'a villages located in the Nass Valley are Gitlakdamix (New Aiyansh), Gitwinksihlkw (Canyon City), Laxgalts'ap (Greenville), and Gingolx (Kincolith).

People and animals have spirits, too. We are a very spiritual people and are blessed to be connected to the spirit world. Even though my grandmother did not speak a word of English, she could quote from the Bible. She taught me to “love thy neighbour” and “respect our elders.” I prayed every morning and night. I attended Sunday school at Grace United Church.²³ In those days everyone went to church.²⁴ Every Sunday my grandmother and I would spend the day visiting family on our way to church. Some children made fun of me for carrying a lantern in broad daylight. But my favourite part about going to church was carrying the lantern in the sheer dark upon our return home. Our spirit (*naxnox*) ritual possessions were taken away from us by the missionaries; they were either burned or sold to museums.²⁵ When I look back now, our culture was at a standstill. It was there, but the feast and exchange of gifts were celebrated underground. I did not even know that I belonged to the Eagle House, the largest house in my village.

Our village had an Indian day school, which I attended from November to January. We harvested our food the remaining months of the year. During the spring, when we harvested eulachon at Red Bluff, a tent was set up for one teacher and about twenty children. Since I did not regularly attend school, I was not able to read or write. Education was not seen as being as important as harvesting. Harvesting salmon, halibut, and herring eggs was about survival. One day during the harvest season, when I was seven years old, I met Joe Morrison, who said he would give me “two bits” (twenty-five cents) if I carried goods for him. I said, “liar” (*biigen day*). I did not realize that, years later, I would marry his daughter Mona.

At the age of ten, my fourteen-year-old brother left Lax Kw'alaams for Port Edward to find our biological father (Peter Alexcee).²⁶ That is

²³ Soon after Crosby's arrival in the village, the Port Simpson Methodist Church was built. It entered the church union and became Grace United Church in 1925. After it was destroyed by fire (1931), a new church was built by 1938 and continues to serve its congregation. See Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision*, 93-94.

²⁴ During 'Liyaa'mlaxha's youth, there were four churches in Port Simpson: (1) Grace United Church, (2) Salvation Army, (3) Band of Christian Workers, and (4) The League.

²⁵ Thomas Crosby sold more than three hundred artefacts to collectors and museums, and he passed on at least seventy artefacts to his children. See “Coastal Missionary Cashed in on Indian Culture,” *Vancouver Sun*, 23 October 1995.

²⁶ 'Liyaa'mlaxha's paternal grandfather, Frederick Alexcee (1853-1940s), was a Ts'msyen painter and shamanic carver. Frederick was born in Fort Simpson. His mother was Ts'msyen and his father was an Iroquois who worked as a labourer on riverboats for the HBC at Fort Simpson. Frederick produced spirit artefacts to use in high-ranking Ts'msyen secret society ceremonies, which were denounced by the late nineteenth-century missionaries. He was the first artist to have painted the aerial view of Fort Simpson. His artwork can be found at the Museum of

when I found out that my mother had died during childbirth and that my father was living in Port Edward. Soon after, I ran away from home because I wanted to get away from my auntie and also meet my father. I stayed with my father, the lady with whom he was living, and my uncles. I never had the kind of relationship with my father that I would have liked. He was not too interested in me. My brother heard that we could receive a family allowance, so we went to Prince Rupert to sign up for it. Within a couple of months, Indian affairs officer Mr. A.E. Anfield came to get me because I was registered as an “orphan.”

I had no idea about the residential schools, but I resisted going to one because I did not want to leave my home and people. I was only eleven years old. I hid by staying with various people in the town over a period of two to three months. But, with the help of my brother, the Indian affairs officer eventually found me, and – against my will – picked me up. My brother and cousins thought it would be good for me to get an education. A man working for Indian affairs, Wally Price, accompanied me on a steamer headed for Vancouver. It took us three days to get there. Price then put me on a ferry destined for Nanaimo. Upon docking the ferry, I was given an envelope. I had no idea what was written in the letter. I travelled to Nanaimo all by myself; I could not speak English and not even an officer accompanied me. When I arrived in Nanaimo, there was a taxi waiting for me. I showed the letter to the taxi driver. He took me to the train station. I can’t remember who put me on the train, but when I arrived in Port Alberni, another taxi was waiting for me. This taxi took me to the Alberni Indian Residential School, which I attended for about four and a half years.

I have never forgotten the sound of the principal’s footsteps as he came down the hall to greet me. The echo resonating from his steps sounded like the Gestapo of Nazi Germany.²⁷ After meeting with Principal Reverend A.D. Caldwell, I was taken to one of the five boys’ dormitories. As I walked down the hallway to the dormitory, I heard a few children crying in their beds. A kid exited a room crying, while another

Northern British Columbia (Prince Rupert), the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology, the New Westminster Museum and Archives, and the Royal British Columbia Museum (Victoria). Remarkably, an obscure and unpublished 1939 source cites an 1882 “interview” with “Alex-see, a Mohican-Iroquois originally from Montreal, who arrived at Fort Vancouver in about 1824.” See Richard S. Mackie, *Trading beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793–1843* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 102.

²⁷ For an analysis on how the Holocaust’s well-known frames may work initially to provoke public debate, see David MacDonald, “First Nations, Residential Schools, and the Americanization of the Holocaust: Rewriting Indigenous History in the United States and Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 40, 4 (2007): 995–1015.

kid entered the room. I thought these children were crying because they were homesick. Each dormitory housed around twenty-four children. There were about six supervisors on the boys' side, and about six supervisors on the girls' side. Most of the supervisors employed at the school were former naval or army personnel who wanted to earn some money and have a roof over their heads.

The only thing familiar to me about the school was that it was run by my religious denomination. The daily routine at the school began at 6:00 AM. It was like living in a prison. After bathing and getting dressed, we would line up like prisoners down the stairwell before going to the dining room for breakfast. We mostly had porridge mush, two slices of bread, and some water. We could smell bacon and eggs, but the bacon and eggs were only served to the staff. We mostly ate pork for lunch and dinner. We hardly ate any vegetables, even the ones we farmed.²⁸ My first morning in the dining room was an eye-opener. There were eight tables and an older student monitor, who dished out the food. If the monitor did not like a younger student, he would give him less food. The monitor was the "bully" of the dining room. I eventually became one too.

In the classroom, there was an "assessment" of the children. A teacher asked me to write my name. Since I was unable to write it, I was assigned to work on the farm. There was a "smart group," which was taken to the school in the town. Alvin Dixon went to that school.²⁹ But most of us mainly worked on the farm. We planted potatoes, carrots, and other vegetables, and spent about one hour a day in the classroom. At that time, I enjoyed working on the farm because I loved the animals, especially the horses. The fresh air was also less damp than in Port Edward.

Six months after having arrived in Port Alberni, I found out that I had TB. I was sent to Miller Bay Indian Hospital – a Native Indian TB sanatorium – located about ten kilometres outside of Prince Rupert.³⁰

²⁸ Recent research by food historian Ian Mosby reveals that government-run experiments to test the effects of malnutrition involved at least one thousand Aboriginal children in six residential schools, including at Port Alberni, British Columbia. See <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/story/2013/07/17/bc-residential-schools-port-alberni.html>; and Ian Mosby, "Administering Colonial Science: Nutrition Research and Human Biomedical Experimentation in Aboriginal Communities and Residential Schools, 1942–1952," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 46, 91 (2013): 145–72.

²⁹ Alvin Dixon is from the Heiltsuk Nation (Bella Bella). In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he spent eight years at the Alberni Indian Residential School. He spent most of his career managing fisheries organizations for the First Nations. Alvin has worked with the Indian Residential School Survivors Society since 1999 and currently counsels residential school survivors in Victoria.

³⁰ Miller Bay Hospital, located at Miller Bay on Kaien Island between Prince Rupert and Port Edward, was established as an air force hospital in 1942. At the end of the Second World

That is where I met my wife, Mona. She was quarantined in the hospital for four years and was actually not supposed to live. Many of our people, including Mona, were being experimented on for TB treatment. There were doctors from all over the world, but at that time we were unaware of this. She received many different treatments. At one point, her lungs were pumped so that they would collapse, and then they would be rested (for the lesions) to heal.³¹ Mona was considered a miracle patient. She survived, unlike most of the patients in her wing. I met her twice during my year of hospitalization. When I returned to Port Alberni, I wrote (illegible) letters to Mona. I could not get her out of my mind. Mona tried to discourage any relationship because she was not expected to live.

I did not learn much at school. I did not know the meaning of “homework.” We were given *Treasure Island* to read, but I was never able to make any sense of the book. I was made to feel dumb. I had to complete the third grade three times. Since I was an “orphan” and had no money, I could not return home for the holidays; instead, I had to stay on Vancouver Island during the summer. I received a letter from my brother about twice a year.

I missed my maternal grandmother. A few of us who spoke Nisga’a did so in secret. Because of that I never lost my language. I saw some kids get their mouth washed for speaking in our language. This never happened to me. But I did on several occasions have to scrub the stairway with a toothbrush. It was humiliating. Some kids would get strapped because other kids would tattle on them to the supervisors to win their favour. And some supervisors would try to “comfort” us by first hugging us and then taking us into a shower. It was all part of the abuse game. The staff knew which ones to prey on. They would invite those kids to shows, give them money, and sometimes buy them candy. Eventually, these kids would be the ones to enter that room, where the door would be shut for about half an hour and then re-open with a kid

War, it was converted into the second Department of Indian Affairs’ hospital in British Columbia (1946) and served as a tuberculosis sanatorium, which could accommodate up to 150 patients. See Mary-Ellen Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies: Aboriginal Health and Healing in British Columbia, 1900–50* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998), 115; “TB Threat Beaten, Says Doctor,” *Native Voice*, January 1951, 5. In 1959, around 60 percent of the patients at Miller Bay Hospital were treated for tuberculosis, while the other 40 percent were treated for congenital, infectious, or chronic conditions. See “Miller Bay Variety Show,” *Talk of the Town*, hosted by John Must, who conducts a brief interview with Medical Superintendent Dr. G.W.J. Fiddes, CBC CD#47, 15 October 1959.

³¹ The plombage technique was a surgical method (used from 1930s up to the mid-1950s) to treat tuberculosis prior to the introduction of anti-tuberculosis drug therapy.

exiting in tears. We were being abused in the dormitory. I would say that about 90 percent of the supervisors were pedophiles. My dorm supervisor – Henry Plint – was eventually caught, charged, and sent to prison.³² I do not know what happened to the other supervisors.

By the age of fifteen, I became a dining-room monitor. This is when I became a bully. I now had some power over the other kids. I never hurt anyone physically, but I was verbally abusive. About once a week, five of us boys would also tie sheets and climb down from our dormitory window; we would escape and break into the River Bend Store to steal chocolates and fruit. Three other boys and I tried to flee the school a couple of times. We got as far as Big Falls (a lake outside Port Alberni), where an RCMP officer found us. We stood out because we were all wearing the same clothes. In time, I had to leave school at the age of seventeen because I was not progressing, and we also got “expelled.” Three of us beat up the principal – who was more abusive towards the girls than the boys – because “enough was enough.” I returned by steamer to Port Edward to reunite with my father and brother. I tried to shut out the residential school. I could not feel anything. I lost my connection with people, the spirit world. My childhood had been robbed.

I began to work in the reduction plant at Nelson Brothers Cannery, where I stayed for three years.³³ I earned about \$1.10 per hour. Some of our people started working when they were as young as twelve years old. In those days all one required was a letter from a parent or guardian stating that it was okay for one to work. We lived in the cannery’s Native row housing. It was during this time that I also started to drink alcohol because all the people I knew drank. I became a very angry man. I carried around the anger: I was angry towards my brother for having taken me to the steamer and at the residential school for all its abuse. I carried around my story but could never speak of it. I felt alone. You are confused and feel ashamed. Everything became me, me, and me.

³² Arthur Henry Plint pleaded guilty in March 1995 to eighteen counts of indecent assault, dating from 1948 to 1953 and from 1963 to 1968, and was sentenced to eleven years in prison. In the court’s ruling, BC Supreme Court Judge Douglas Hogarth describes Plint as a “sexual terrorist.” “Victims Recall Abuse after Their Tormentor Admits Guilt,” *Vancouver Sun*, 21 March 1995; “School’s ‘Sexual Terrorist’ Jailed 11 Years,” *Vancouver Sun*, 22 March 1995; Miller, *Shingwauk’s Vision*, 329. On 10 July 2001, Chief Justice Brenner of the Supreme Court of British Columbia handed down judgment on “The Alberni Residential School Case: *Blackwater v. Plint*,” which can be found at <http://www.courts.gov.bc.ca/jdb-txt/SC/01/09/2001BCSC0997.htm>.

³³ During the Second World War, Nelson Brothers took possession of the Port Edward cannery (est. 1919). BC Packers legally took ownership of the Port Edward cannery in 1970, which then closed in 1981. See Gladys Young Blyth, *Salmon Canneries: British Columbia North Coast* (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 2006), 111–14.



Figure 1. The native village at Nelson Brothers Cannery in Port Edward (1957–58). Courtesy of Clarence Angus Martin.

The workers at Nelson Brothers Cannery were mostly Natives from the Nisga'a, Haida, Gitksan, Ts'msyen, and Cree nations. There were also Chinese and white fishermen and cannery workers. Port Edward was a multicultural town, but we did not mingle much with the Chinese or whites. Our people worked alongside other Natives. Our housing was also separate from that of the Chinese and whites, who had better living accommodations than we did. We had no electricity or plumbing, and our toilet was an outhouse over the water! After work, we would walk to Miller Bay and play basketball. It was about a nine-kilometre walk from Port Edward. After the games, we walked back home in the sheer dark.

I started dating Mona. It took a while to convince her about me. Mona was also born in Lax Kw'alaams (1931).³⁴ She was an outdoor girl, very shy of people. She knew how to fish, trap, and skin animals. I was so happy she liked me because I had no money and was not exactly the best-looking guy. Since I was an "orphan," I had to ask her parents – on my own – for her hand in marriage. Her dad didn't say yes or no. Instead, he asked me if I knew how to fish. I said yes, even though I

³⁴ Mona Alexcee was born in the Gamayaam House of the Gispuwada (Killer Whale) and Gitando Tribe of Lax Kw'alaams, and bears the matriarch name Wiigondaw ("eagle's grasp"). In honour of her father Joseph Morrison, she was also adopted in the La'axs House (James Lawson) of the Laxsgiik (Eagle) Clan, and bears the immortal name Gouldem niix ("foresees the future").

had no clue. I was an urban boy. I went fishing with her dad and Mona showed me how to do things. I had to ask her parents three times before I received their blessing. We married on 26 July 1952 at the First United Church in Prince Rupert.³⁵ Mona and her parents taught me about our culture. My marriage was a new beginning for me since it was new to be with someone I cared about. But I never told her about my experiences at the residential school. She had no idea about this part of my past. That was still a much buried matter.

Our first son, Art, was born on 15 November 1952 in Port Edward.³⁶ Mona had a TB relapse when Art was three years old, and was hospitalized for eleven months. During this time, Mona's mother looked after Art. I looked for more regular full-time work because I did not want to just do seasonal cannery work. Most of all, we were instructed not to live in Port Edward because the row housing was too damp. Living over the water on stilts was not good for our lungs. A lady working for social services helped me find a job with Canadian National Railways (CN) in Prince Rupert (1955). I started as a coach cleaner, and earned around \$1.12 per hour. I eventually became a mechanic helper, and, with on the job training, I later became a mechanic. My wife started seasonal work at Babcock Fisheries.³⁷

Our people rented from immigrants (Italian, German, and Portuguese) who had bought vacated wartime houses that were put up for sale in the 1950s. Prince Rupert was multicultural, like Port Edward, but we encountered more prejudice in Prince Rupert because fewer Natives and more white people lived in the town. White people called us "dirty Indians." We were forbidden to enter most hotels and were even required to sit in a designated area at Capitol Cinema.³⁸ On 2 June 1953, after having attended a dinner and dance celebration of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation at the old Navy Drill Hall, we began, at 2:00 AM, to walk uptown to eat at a restaurant. A part of 3rd Avenue had been barricaded.

³⁵ The Methodist mission began in Prince Rupert in 1908, but a larger church was eventually built on a new site and consecrated as the Prince Rupert Methodist Church on 3 March 1912. Following the church union in 1925, it became the First United Church.

³⁶ Arthur Alexcee died from hepatitis C, which he contracted from a blood transfusion he had received during a surgical procedure.

³⁷ William Babcock built a plant in 1957. The company changed ownership through the years, and in 1977 J.S. McMillan took over the plant, which was then shut down in 2011. See Blyth, *Salmon Canneries*, 105.

³⁸ Capitol Cinema opened as a vaudeville theatre on 22 October 1928. It was closed in 1983 but was occasionally used as a movie house and then transformed into "Capitol Mall," with stores on the ground floor and offices on the upper floor. See "Capitol Mall Started as a Theatre 68 Years Ago," *Prince Rupert Daily News*, 22 October 1996.

We thought firecrackers were being set off, but later we realized that police were throwing tear gas at the crowd. The police had rough-handled a lady, and some half-drunken First Nations reacted to this maltreatment. Many others then joined in. Mayor Harold Whalen read the Riot Act. My brother was fined one hundred dollars, but I only had fifty dollars in my pocket!³⁹ In 1958, another protest broke out, during which Mayor Peter Lester read the Riot Act.⁴⁰ Our people were letting off steam; there was a lot of bitterness that had built up towards the police and over our treatment as “citizens.” Here we were working with other Canadians but our people were not given equal rights. In 1960, our people were finally given the right to vote. It is important to have this right. I vote in federal, provincial, and municipal elections.

Our second son, Peter, was born on 28 October 1957 in Prince Rupert. We wanted more kids, but my wife had a cyst in the womb and the doctors had to take it out. As a favour we helped a friend, who worked in the social services, by agreeing to look after Ralph (a four-year-old boy with severe birth defects) during the Christmas holidays. Our friend never returned to Prince Rupert, but we kept Ralph because he had grown on us.⁴¹ He was not expected to live long. My wife, amazingly, taught him to walk and even to run with his clubbed feet. We took care of him until he was nineteen. For some time, my wife and I worked opposite shifts so that at least one parent was at home with the kids. I worked night shift and she worked day shift. You do what you have to do. Someone had to be home with the children.

Like other Native kids, our boys wanted to be the cowboys when playing “Cowboys and Indians.” The TV shows in those days made us look bad. My wife had to explain to our boys that they were good Indians, not like the bad ones shown on TV. One day our son Art was crying because he had been beaten up by a white kid. We had taught our kids to be well mannered and not to fight others. However, one day my sister-in-law was babysitting our boys and saw Art get beaten up by three white boys. My sister-in-law had a different orientation; she told our son Art to fight back. After Art stuck up for himself, he was given more respect. Even though I cared for my wife and boys, it was hard for

³⁹ “Unlawful Assembly Charges Laid after Stoning of City Hall,” *Prince Rupert Daily News*, 3 August 1953.

⁴⁰ “Tear Gas Smashes Prince Rupert Riot,” *Prince Rupert Daily News*, 4 August 1958.

⁴¹ Ralph McKay was the adopted child of ‘Liyaa’mIaxha’s stepbrother Wally Latimer. Ralph lived in the ‘Liyaa’mIaxha’s home until he left for Vancouver, where he attended a school for people with disabilities. He eventually attended an Aboriginal ministry college in Saskatchewan, during which time he died after contracting pneumonia.

me to get close to them. I was protective at arm's-length. I did not like it if someone was to even hug me. I was not able to connect with my own kids, at least not the way my maternal grandmother had connected with me. Family and friends did not pick up the signs that I was having trouble coping with my own childhood.

At CN, I was eventually promoted to work as a crane operator, which I did for twenty years. At first I was not sure if I could do the job. The foreman was not able to show me how to operate the steam-engine crane; he was only able to hand me the manual. I had to teach myself. This was a huge accomplishment for me since I could hardly read and write. It took me a month to figure out the controls of the crane that could lift up to 150 tons, and ten years to get used to the work. But it paid well. I eventually shifted to operating a diesel-engine crane that could lift up to two hundred tons. It was stressful. I started smoking cigarettes on the job. I smoked around three and a half packs per day to relieve myself from the boredom and isolation of working alone high up in the crane. I needed to be around people. I was still drinking alcohol, but that was to forget my past and numb my pain.

I have been taking part in the All-Native Basketball tournament by serving on the committee since the early 1960s.⁴² Our team, the Prince Rupert Chiefs, won the tournament seven times (1963, 1965-67, 1969, and 1972-73). I coached some good athletes (like Jim Ciccone) when they were young playing in minor-league basketball and baseball.⁴³ I coached my sons' teams. It was a way to connect with them. Sports helped me forget my past, but it was also an excuse to "drink with the men." My son Art learned to drink. We would drink together, but I would get angry at him because I saw myself in him. My relationship with my son Peter became non-existent: he did not like my drinking.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, I occasionally contemplated committing suicide, but I never tried to do it. I deeply got into drinking alcohol. I was neglecting my body, my health. I drank to forget. I was an "emotional time bomb." I never hit my wife, but I got aggressive when I drank alcohol. She says there are two sides to me. I would be calm and then, out of the blue, I would be sarcastic or explode. This was

⁴² All-Native Basketball tournament began in 1947 and was held until 1953, then again in 1960. The annual All-Native Basketball Tournament is now held in Prince Rupert's Civic Centre's double gymnasium.

⁴³ Jim Ciccone (1952-95) received provincial honours as a basketball player for the PRSS Rainmakers and went on to play basketball for the Simon Fraser Clansmen. He served as alderman and a director on the board of the All-Native Basketball Tournament. In 1996, the Civic Centre was named in his memory.

a recurring event in our lives. How could she understand? I was afraid to tell her about the abuse. You fear rejection. My moods were very difficult for Mona, so much so that she was contemplating leaving me.

For years and years after attending the residential school, I felt bitter towards the United Church because on Sundays, at the residential school, the minister who preached the service was also abusing children. I refused to attend Sunday service. I did not go when my mother-in-law and wife attended church. My wife took the kids to Sunday school. Once, I tried telling my story at church. The attitude was to “just get over it.” I was so angry that I punched the wall. Some people have told me that I am fortunate, though, because I never had nightmares.

After moving twenty times, my wife and I realized that we should buy our own house, especially since homeowners would only rent run-down homes to our people. We bought our home in 1977. More immigrants, like Italians, East Indians, and Filipinos, were arriving in Prince Rupert. They were working with our people in the canneries and pulp mill. They often spoke in their own languages. Some of my people did not like it because we could not understand what they were saying. Perhaps Natives thought that immigrants were mocking us. But it was mostly hard to see immigrants allowed to speak in their own language after we had been abused for speaking in ours. Our Native culture was at a standstill. Our abuse was buried.

I continued to work at the CN, coach, and drink. One day, in the mid-1980s, I attended an education forum at the Civic Centre. There must have been around three hundred to four hundred people in the auditorium. Native people mostly attended the forum since it was about educating our children. Many of us had not received a good education. At one point, during the forum, a lady began talking about her residential school experience. During her talk, I became so overwhelmed that I stood up and said, “Hey, that’s my story!” I rushed down to speak at the podium. I kept talking and talking for about two hours. It was the first time that my wife heard my story and learned about what went on at the residential schools. She was shocked! It left her with a “rainbow of emotions,” if there is such a thing. For Mona, there were no words to describe the stories. She was upset thinking about us when we were children; she was also disturbed because she was thinking about her own children. After finally opening up, I realized that I was tired of being “sick.” I was not happy, my wife was not happy. I would wake up in the morning with a pounding headache. I would get another drink to

help my hangover. Basically, I was tired of carrying my story around. It was a burden. This was the beginning of my “healing journey.”

My wife told me that after the night at the Civic Centre, I had changed. It's true. I realized that I needed to talk about my residential school experience and get it out of my system. A friend gifted me a bear-claw necklace for my courage, which I wear on special occasions to protect myself from evil spirits and bring me good health. I received one-month treatment for my alcoholism in Prince George. I have also received group support over the years. Even though I needed to talk about my story, I would always break down crying. It was hard to slowly begin feeling again. The “unbelievable” stories were not believed by those in high positions. People were denying the abuse that took place in the residential schools until matters were finally brought to court and many of the same stories were heard over and over again. It's a lonely walk if you walk alone. It is sad and hurtful when family or friends do not want to hear your stories. Eventually you meet up with people who do listen and give you support. I tried sharing my story with my sons but found it hard to put it into words. They were also unable to understand.

After working at CN for thirty-six years, I retired at the age of fifty-five (1988). Soon after, I found out from my brother that our paternal half-sister, who was born in Port Edward, lived in Quesnel. I couldn't understand why nobody had shared this information with me sooner. Upon learning that she lived in Quesnel, my wife and I visited her. It was so emotional. We cried, we hugged, and then we talked some. This went on all day long. My wife and brother-in-law watched and helped out by preparing the dinner so that my sister and I could connect. They too realized how emotional it was for us. This is one of my most cherished discoveries. We visit my sister whenever we travel down to Vancouver to visit our son Peter.

In the early 1990s, I was assigned to a lawyer who – over the period of a year – collected my residential school story. I then met with a government lawyer and church lawyer, each for a week. I felt they were trying to get me angry. I also had to go through a psychological assessment for an entire afternoon in New Westminster. It was difficult to relive my residential school experiences. I relapsed during this period. I took my wife and in-laws to Port Alberni and gave them a tour of the school. We also visited the River Bend Store. I apologized to the storeowner for having stolen goods in the 1940s. She was surprised and responded, “You must have done that when my grandfather was running the store.” She had never heard the story. It felt good to apologize after forty-five years or so.

In 1992, George Sampson invited me to volunteer as part of the elder training program at the Prince Rupert Friendship House.⁴⁴ I assisted him in coaching the Friendship House Cubs basketball team. I provided guidance and said a prayer before and after practice and the games. By 1994, he invited me to join the Kaien Island Elders' Group. We get together to share our feelings; sometimes it is about something happy and other times it may be about something sad. Besides my wife, the elders have been a major source of support for me. The elders' group is really like my family. We do a lot of fundraising for the annual BC Elders Gathering Meeting. Back in the mid-1980s, we had to fight for the Friendship House to break free from the United Church. It was a feat that cost us only one dollar.⁴⁵

With my participation at the Friendship House, my community involvement just snowballed. My wife and I began visiting Roosevelt Elementary to talk with the children. I too had to learn how to express myself. The circle got bigger and bigger. We can spot the children who have the "residential school syndrome." So we try to help them find a grandmother and grandfather figure in us. With Peter Loy, who teaches life skills, we go out paddling during the school year with students from the elementary and middle schools. Canoeing brings awareness of life's challenges and of the students' own strength. It helps connect the mind with nature and with our ancestors as well. We shout *wai wa* ("Let's get going!"), which is a saying meant to encourage people at the beginning of a competition. These children have taught me patience. I love to see their open-heartedness when they greet us. My relationship with the children has been fundamental to my healing journey. My son Peter has guided us on how to connect with the children. We would talk about it for hours. This has also helped me reconnect with my son.

⁴⁴ According to local history, the Friendship House Association of Prince Rupert was initially an organization started by Reverend Robert Elliot and sponsored by the First United Church; it opened in 1958. It was a small, two-storey building that functioned as a social centre and dormitory for First Nations boys who left their villages in order to attend high school or find work. George Sampson, personal communication, 11 July 2012, Prince Rupert, British Columbia.

⁴⁵ A much cherished narrative concerns how, in the mid-1980s, the Friendship House board of directors wanted the then executive director Fred Anderson to break the organization's ties with the United Church. However, in response to this initiative, the United Church attempted to sell the building to the Friendship House for \$250,000, even though the property had been donated by the municipality and the building constructed by First Nations labour. As a result of public opinion and pressure, and – with the support of non-Aboriginal church leaders in the region – under the leadership of Reverend Rob Pollack, the United Church was required to hand over the building for one dollar. When Anderson retired in the late 1980s, Farley Stewart took over as executive director and broadened the organization's role to assist First Nations people with a wide range of social and cultural programs. George Sampson, personal communication, 11 July 2012, Prince Rupert, British Columbia.



Figure 2. Leonard and Mona Alexcee in a canoe float at the Prince Rupert Sea Festival (2008). Courtesy of Chantal Cornwall.

At one time, I was thinking of returning to Lax Kw'alaams. My brother said: "If you move back home, you can't try to change it. Everything stays the same here." For a man who likes a good challenge, it would have been the wrong move for me. When I go back to my village, I can see in the body language of some people that they don't want to hear about the residential school syndrome because they don't want to relive their experiences. It bothers me to see my people concealing their stories and avoiding the healing journey. My wife and I continue to visit the public schools in Prince Rupert and the Nass Valley. Many children going to school have parents or grandparents who went to the residential schools. If people do not talk then they do not realize the reason for their behaviour. The younger children need to learn about what happened because it affects many generations and explains the lack of attachment in families. Alcoholism is common among many of these families. Alcohol allows people to open up, but it brings all sorts of other problems. Alcohol is not a healthy way to cope.

The apologies made by the United Church (1986 and 1998) lacked sincerity. Apologies should be made in person. In 1999, I received a court settlement for the abuse I experienced at the residential school. At first I blamed God for what had happened to me, but it was not God's fault; Jesus suffered when crucified on the cross. It was the fault of the government, church, and residential school employees. It has

taken me a very long time to realize that what my grandmother had taught me is separate from both the abuse I witnessed and experienced in the residential schools and the power certain people in the church misused. Ever since this realization, I have been involved with the First United Church in Prince Rupert.

When the federal government made an apology to Indian residential school survivors in the House of Commons (2008), it did not mean anything to me. Really, the government's apology felt empty. The federal government also gave money and some of the survivors spent it on alcohol or drugs. I know some people who have committed suicide. If the big load had not been lifted off my shoulder that night at the Civic Centre and I were not blessed with Mona, I would surely be dead too. Northwest Community College held a public event about the federal government's apology, and all the schools got on board. I imagine about 70 or 80 percent of the First Nations people in the area were unaware of the apology or college event.

It is important for me to be a good citizen. It means being involved with your community. I do this mostly by engaging with the elders and the youth. My first commitment is to my people and nation, but it is good to move out of your circle. If you confine yourself then you don't grow. The discrimination is still there, but it is a lot less. It is good to talk about discrimination because it helps crumble the barriers. Through our community involvement and efforts, we have noticed that discrimination is not as noticeable as it used to be. I was elected as school trustee from 2008 to 2011. I did not spend money to campaign to be elected on the school board. Many people know me in Prince Rupert and voted for me. My main goal was to have a middle school, which was established in 2011.

My concerns are about why our people are slow learners. My people don't trust the white man's promises, and there is a lot of mistrust – in part because of the residential schools. Our children are not always encouraged to get an education. The "alternate" (i.e., alternative) school is for children who can't function in regular schools, and it helps them to adjust to the school system. It gives them a try at both going to school and applying themselves. Then they have to make a decision regarding whether to use it as a stepping stone to go up to a regular school or not. Mona and I have always encouraged our sons to get educated. We try to teach our people that the children need to get educated. Some listen but not all.

I went to the elders and asked them for an appropriate name to use for the alternate school (Pacific Coast School). They came up with

“a new beginning” (*su sit'aatk*). I don't like the word “alternate” because it sounds like it is for “dumb” people. I was made to feel dumb at the residential school. If you are told you are dumb then you act like, and believe that, you are dumb. This is something I still struggle with to this day. My residential school experience was really bad, but I have come a long way. Sometimes I feel the urge to drink. When I am reaching a “breaking point,” I share my feelings and experiences with Murray, who I take as my brother. I have gradually gotten stronger, and my attitude has changed. But the healing journey never ends. Sharing my story here has been part of it.

RESILIENCY AND HEALING IN CANADIAN SOCIETY

Any personal narrative is in some sense *sui generis*. So is 'Liyaa'mlaxha's story. It speaks particularly to that subset of school survivors who got on with their lives in Canadian urban areas beyond their ancestral villages. But, in a profound sense, it is also representative of the suffering that many – but not all – First Nations students underwent at the residential schools, of the challenges that they faced after leaving such schools and attempting to cope with their trauma, and the resilience that a considerable number of them displayed in rebuilding their lives. 'Liyaa'mlaxha's story is noteworthy, too, for the sheer length of time it took him to open up about his school experience, to heal and recover some semblance of normality, as well as for the length of time it took the larger Canadian society and polity to acknowledge the suffering that he and other residential school survivors had endured. The healing process was not made easier by the fact that European settlement in North America overturned First Nations traditional patterns of life and took away much of their land. As an Anglo-Canadian social worker explains: “There has been a sense of isolation, fear and trepidation. First Nations are very suspicious of anyone other than their own.”⁴⁶

RECONNECTING WITH FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND CULTURE

All societies and individuals are resilient to some degree,⁴⁷ but many residential school survivors also struggled because the two essential requirements for personal resilience – family and culture – were precisely

⁴⁶ Social Service 2, interview, 13 May 2009, Delta, British Columbia.

⁴⁷ Rebecca L. Carter, “Understanding Resilience through Ritual and Religious Practice: An Expanded Theoretical and Ethnographical Framework,” available at <http://www.ehs.unu.edu/file/get/3736>, p. 1.

the ones that had been undermined by earlier government policies and programs. There is no common template for healing because First Nations children had widely varying attachments to family before they went to residential schools and they underwent a range of different experiences of severed attachments, connections with others, and abuse while at school.⁴⁸ ‘Liyaa’mлахha’s account provides a mixed picture of his family and community attachments; while he had a close bond with his grandmother and his community tried to prevent his relocation to residential school, he also had run away from Port Simpson and had only a weak relationship with his father.

When attachments are limited, culture can be extremely critical since it can fill an emotional void with “appropriate substitute attachments” (like mentors, teachers, customs, heroes, gods) that can function as socialization agents to shoehorn the child into adult society and prevent delayed psychological development.⁴⁹ Religion and spirituality invest human existence with meaning and, thus, assist people in their attempts to adapt to trauma.⁵⁰ Culture is also a form of treatment. As a system of meaning it helps in coping with existential suffering and contributes to societal well-being at the community level. Like First Nations families, however, Indigenous culture had also broken down under the impact of European settlement. Not surprisingly, school survivors often engaged in maladaptive behaviour (e.g., alcohol/substance misuse, overeating, gambling) in order to numb the pain of their school experience. More specifically, the drive to alcohol and substance misuse is often related to the need both to relieve emotional stress and to provide the brain with chemicals that function as “substitutes” for feelings of love, joy, and connection.⁵¹

On the other hand, reclaimed First Nations spirituality proved beneficial to resiliency. The Ts’msyen world view, albeit fused with Christian beliefs, refers to the Lord as “One heart” (*sayt k’uulm goot*) that is interconnected with its creation, including humans, animals, and nature. This view holds that life and the forces of nature contain many obstacles and

⁴⁸ Lori Haskell and Melanie Randall, “Disrupted Attachments: A Social Context Complex Trauma Framework and the Lives of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada,” *Journal of Aboriginal Health* 5, 3 (2009): 48–99.

⁴⁹ Gordon Neufeld, “Making Sense of Adolescence” (Burnaby, BC: Jack Hirose Seminars, 2005), 1–20 (quote on 9).

⁵⁰ Robert A. Emmons, “Striving for the Sacred: Personal Goals, Life Meaning, and Religion,” *Journal of Social Issues* 61, 4 (2005): 731–45.

⁵¹ For an in-depth discussion on the four basic brain systems involved with both healthy development and addiction, see Gabor Mate, “Brain Development and Addiction with Gabor Mate” (Kaslo, BC: HeartSpeak Productions, 2009).

that these must be faced with courage. The Ts'msyen use the expression *wei wa* ("Let's get going!") to evoke a forward-looking attitude that is rooted in a firm faith in One Creator and that can empower individuals, communities, and nations. When all is said and done, this aspect of Aboriginal culture was helpful to 'Liyaa'mlaxha's healing.

Genuine public acknowledgment of abuse is critical to the healing process. Survivors need safe, nurturing, and validating spaces so that they may relieve the burden of concealed stories of abuse and restore wellness. Only in the late 1980s, when Indian residential schools came under legal scrutiny, did people and society begin to take a serious look at the detrimental impact of these schools. This growing awareness has been crucial to healing. Public acknowledgments of past wrongs assisted 'Liyaa'mlaxha in making a gradual transition from engaging in maladaptive behaviour to resolving post-traumatic-stress related problems. This transition is vital for societal well-being as psychological, social, and economic security cultivates people's confidence, enabling them to welcome the future and meet others on common ground. By contrast, insecurity tends to reinforce insular behaviour, with the result that cultural values may remain static or implode, adversely affecting both family and community.

NAVIGATING THE CANADIAN MULTI-ETHNIC PUBLIC SPHERE

Canada's deeply troubling and substantially failed attempts to assimilate First Nations into mainstream Anglo society through Indian residential schools have been exacerbated by the Indian Act's orientation towards exclusion. Although the Indian Act allowed First Nations to retain their identity, it also led to their being viewed and rendered as separate from Canadian society.⁵² However, First Nations people do not exist as if in a "silo." Throughout the twentieth century, and especially after the Second World War, separation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal spaces was undermined; as a result of the growth and concentration of the region's resource industries, a number of Ts'msyen migrated from their ancestral or reserve villages to company towns.⁵³ Despite, or perhaps because of, their entry into the Canadian paid labour force, and their

⁵² For an analysis of how the Indian Act has regulated and shaped First Nations identity and contemporary Native life, see Bonita Lawrence, *"Real" Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 25-101.

⁵³ John S. Lutz, *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 205; Percy Gladstone, "Native Indians and the Fishing Industry of British Columbia," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 19, 1 (1953): 20-34.

growing interaction with the Canadian public, some First Nations were treated – in their words – as “third class citizens” in the workforce.⁵⁴

During the 1950s, in Port Edward’s salmon canneries, workers of different ethnic backgrounds were assigned different tasks and were segregated from one another. The canneries certainly benefited from this segregation, not only because they could pay First Nations (and Asian) labourers lower wages but also because they could rationalize cheaper living arrangements for these workers.⁵⁵ In Prince Rupert, First Nations were required to rent their own housing accommodation, but many homeowners were reluctant to rent homes or basements to First Nations because they regarded them as “lazy,” “dirty,” and “unreliable” tenants.⁵⁶ At the same time, given the impoverished condition of First Nations, it was difficult for some First Nations people to maintain a standard of self-care that met the social requirements of the day. Moreover, some First Nations people tended to be careless towards property that was on what they perceived as “their land.”⁵⁷

There was informal as well as formal segregation in public places, such as First Nations were not welcome in certain restaurants and hotels even as there was designated seating areas for First Nations in theatres. In spite of such discrimination, local First Nations initiatives, like the all-Native basketball tournament and the Friendship House, served as anchors or compass points for First Nations people in Prince Rupert.

The 1950s and 1960s saw the rise of First Nations resistance to such forms of discrimination as a double standard with respect to law enforcement and liquor legislation,⁵⁸ and the federal government’s refusal to grant First Nations voting rights while recognizing their

⁵⁴ Nayar, *Punjabis in British Columbia*, 144–57.

⁵⁵ There were four segregated villages: the “whites” were housed in bungalows, the First Nations people lived among themselves in row housing near the plant over the water, the Japanese resided in row housing, and the Chinese lived in the very tight quarters of bunkhouses. Chinese workers were primarily “single” since they only began to bring their families in 1960. See Alicja Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour: Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 88–89, 129–44; Lutz, *Makuk*, 8–9.

⁵⁶ “Local Native Family Discrimination Victims,” *Prince Rupert Daily News*, 7 September 1962. For analyses of depictions of Aboriginals as “lazy,” see Nayar, *Punjabis in British Columbia*, 153–54, 185ff; Lutz, *Makuk*, 31–47.

⁵⁷ Nayar, *Punjabis in British Columbia*, 183–90, 198–99.

⁵⁸ Equal liquor rights were granted in British Columbia in 1962. For a discussion of how many Aboriginal people sought to reduce or eliminate the Indian Act’s liquor restrictions as part of their campaign for equal citizenship without assimilation within the context of the federal-provincial dispute over responsibility for alcohol deregulation, see Robert A. Campbell, “A ‘Fantastic Rigmarole’: Deregulating Aboriginal Drinking in British Columbia, 1945–62.” *BC Studies* 141 (2004): 81–104.

Aboriginal rights.⁵⁹ First Nations people were granted the right to vote in federal elections only when the Canadian government changed its immigration policy and, in so doing, enabled non-European immigrants to work alongside First Nations in the fisheries.⁶⁰ Many First Nations felt threatened by the large influx of immigrants who were seemingly both “stealing jobs” and purchasing homes on First Nations traditional territory. Meanwhile, visible immigrant minorities (like the Chinese, Filipinos, and Punjabis) occupied a “racialized location” that was somewhere between First Nations and Anglo-Canadians.⁶¹

With the implementation of the policy of multiculturalism, immigrants – whether naturalized or not – were given greater privileges than the First Nations (e.g., they could keep their language and preserve their culture). The double standards were a sensitive and – at times – a contentious issue.⁶² In other words, the fact that immigrants were allowed to speak their own language struck many First Nations people as both unfair and disrespectful, especially given their history of cultural devastation and their being forbidden to speak their traditional language in the Indian residential schools. Little wonder mistrust of government policy has been a major motif among First Nations.

SUMMARY

The narrative of ‘Liyaa’mIaxha provides insights into one man’s experience of coping with residential school trauma while readjusting to life in urban and/or otherwise unfamiliar areas of British Columbia’s north coast. Given the socio-historical context of Indian residential schools, the building of resilience has been a challenge for many survivors since the two requirements critical to any healing process (i.e., family and culture) are precisely the ones that were undermined by government policies and programs. With the disconnectedness inherent to this social situation, restoring wellness was necessarily prolonged as many survivors had to build their resilience while contending with and resisting discrimination, seeking substitute attachments and anchors, and demanding public acknowledgment of the abuses that had occurred.

⁵⁹ F.E. LaViolette, *The Struggle for Survival: Indian Cultures and the Protestant Work Ethic in British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961).

⁶⁰ Muszynski, *Cheap Wage Labour*, 73.

⁶¹ Nayar, *Punjabis in British Columbia*, 183–91.

⁶² For example, in the late 1970s some First Nations fishery workers circulated a petition concerning language (holding that no one on the Prince Rupert-Port Edward bus or in cannery lunchrooms should be allowed to speak “East Indian”). The First Nations dropped the petition after union mediation because it was determined that the petition could pass if it presented an English-only policy, thus prohibiting First Nations from speaking their languages. See Nayar, *Punjabis in British Columbia*, 171.