

THE LEGACY AND FUTURE OF THE BUFFALO PEOPLE

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“It was cheaper to educate Indians than to kill them.” (Trennert)

INTRODUCTION

THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT had to fight nine different Indian wars in Canada between 1858-1877. Aboriginal people were not giving up their rights to the Canadian Crown. To fight these wars was expensive, so in order to control the “Indian problem,” the Canadian government changed tactics; from killing Indians to educating them. The first Indian residential school was instituted in Canada in 1883 (TRC). They were used as a way for the Canadian government to assimilate and control Indigenous peoples, such as myself, by taking children from their families and putting them into these schools. Aboriginal people were forced to attend Indian residential schools and this has had devastating effects. The trauma of these schools is in my DNA, like many other survivors, and those who experience the intergenerational effects. In this paper I will reflect on the legacy of the Indian residential school system in the context of myself and my loved ones, and how I have found freedom in the context that I inherited (Maracle).

* I am a fourth generation survivor of the Indian residential school system. The Hum Programme was where I found the confidence to write my stories which set me free in the context that I inherited. It was like I was hibernating. I can now breathe. Through my writing, I finally let go of my painful past. In Hum classes, my soul woke up. My four younger children brag about how their Mom got into Hum and got published! Still in elementary school, they are already planning for their own university education, already having experiences that I so wanted for my eldest son, Howie.

INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

I am a fourth generation survivor of the Indian residential school system. I went to an Indian day school, which was crazy, but I was allowed home to my father at night. Between 1884-1996 the Canadian government placed 150,000 Indigenous children into church-run residential schools. This was how the Canadian government was controlling the “Indian problem,” by separating families and attempting to assimilate Indians into mainstream society. Children were not allowed to speak their Native languages or practice their traditional ways.

The Indian residential school system was supposed to educate Indigenous students, but no such luck. Students received an inferior education that focused on training for manual labour and agricultural work (Indigenousfoundationsarts.ubc.ca). They wanted to assimilate Aboriginal people into the lower working classes. Educated Aboriginal people would have meant trouble for the Canadian government. An educated Indigenous person, like a judge or a lawyer, would be able to challenge the Canadian government’s gruesome treatment in the Indian residential school system. Students faced “horrendous abuse by the staff: physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological” (Indigenousfoundationsarts.ubc.ca). In June 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was formed, and since then many brave people have come out and talked about their experiences of sexual, physical, emotional and psychology abuse. Survivors recall being beaten and strapped, some students were shackled to their beds, some had needles shoved in their tongues for speaking their Native languages (Indigenousfoundationsarts.ubc.ca). The conditions inside the schools were terrible. In 1922, Dr. F.A. Corbett was commissioned to do a medical inspection, and he reported that “the buildings are dilapidated; ventilation is poor, children are far below health standards in appearance; 70 percent are infected with tuberculosis, many have scrofulous sores requiring prompt medical attention” (Fletcher).

In an attempt to help people with healing, the Canadian government offered residential school survivors and their children twenty-two free visits with therapists and psychologists in order to help us deal with our trauma – they should have offered more. The TRC is educating Canada and the rest of the world about the Indian residential school system. The healing has begun. I have no clue how long it will take for my country to listen and learn about this brutal system and stop being so racist towards Indigenous people. I face discrimination on a daily basis.

LEGACY OF THE SYSTEM

On 22 June 2003, I woke up at 5:00 a.m. and turned on the BCTV news at 5:30 a.m. Details of a car accident were being reported and right away I thought, where was my son, Howie. I later found out that Howie was in that deadly car accident; killed during a pursuit by some of Vancouver Police Department's traffic cops. *The Province* newspaper reported: "Howard Wayne Delorme, 17, a passenger in the Honda Civic, was killed in the crash" (O'Brian). My son's tragic death made headline news across Canada. *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Province* newspapers carried on reporting about the accident for a whole year. One report looked at the pattern of car thefts in Vancouver and blamed Aboriginal youth: "the troubling teen accidents led a corrections officer from the Burnaby Youth Secure Custody to blame government cutbacks for the wayward teens" (Austin).

In a follow-up to the incident in 2005, *The Vancouver Sun* interviewed VPD chief Jim Chu. He said, "Police, schools, government, the courts, and parents must work together to deal with youth vehicle theft ... this is a big social problem, this is something we need to work on as a community, not just laying blame on any specific organization or any level of government or the courts" (Baron). Chief Chu had wishful thinking. "First Nations children are more likely to go to jail than to graduate from school" (Therien). When Howie was still alive, he was in and out of Wellington youth Detention Centre. The VPD juvenile police hated him. The Vancouver school system failed him. It has failed the three living generations of my family: me, late Howie and my grandson. The whole system – school, courts, police – has failed us, so how can "we" work as a community with all that has happened? One newspaper report did acknowledge Aboriginal history: "At the root of many Aboriginal youth problems is a lack of parental guidance." The author said this was to do with "residential schools, which removed Aboriginal children from their families, communities and cultures and failed to prepare them adequately as parents themselves" (Read and O'Brian). If I were born in a perfect world, without the legacy of the Indian residential school system, I believe my son would not have died in that stolen car. If I were given a proper education, I would not have been hanging out on Hastings Street. Many Aboriginal people live with similar tragedies like mine.

FINDING FREEDOM

In 2014, after the hell I went through, I finally got on the right path by writing an essay for the Vancouver School Board. They sent me to the Carnegie Centre to meet Dr. Margot Leigh Butler and Paul Woodhouse, the Academic Director and Coordinator of the Humanities 101 Community Programme. I was accepted into Hum's Writing 101 course. I completed Writing 101, and Hum101 the following year. I've now done Hum201 and am currently a mentor in Writing 101. This Programme was where I found the confidence to write my stories: "My Boy," "Broken Culture," "Resilience," and many other stories which set me free in the context that I inherited. My education is very important because it has given me the confidence to write my stories. Twenty-two years ago I was told that I had a writing talent. I never believed my upgrading instructor at King Edward Campus until I enrolled at UBC. It was like my soul woke up when I wrote stories about my painful past. Writing gave me my freedom. My younger children saw me go through the steps to be a better writer. And they have learned never to give up on their dreams. It took a lot of hard work, but helping to rebuild my confidence was worth it.

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