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Reflections on Rethink150: Indigenous Truth

CRYSTAL PRZYBILLE ON BEHALF OF THE
RETHINK150 COLLECTIVE*

A WEEK BEFORE CANADA'S sesquicentennial, two rugged and majestic dugout canoes arrive on the pavement of downtown Kelowna on the back of a flatbed trailer. The canoes were carved by the Syilx community. They hold in their hulls the endeavours of the Indigenous community, working together to reclaim culture and traditions stolen through the colonial process, and the stories and events that occurred during their creation.

The canoes have been driven in for the week-long *Rethink150: Indigenous Truth* exhibition at the Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art. The exhibition involves the work of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, reflecting critically on Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation. The exhibition, and the programmed events that accompany it, were organized by the Indigenous-led, intercultural *Rethink150: Indigenous Truth* collective to raise public awareness about Indigenous perspectives of colonialism on these lands.

Dixon Terbasket drove the canoes into town. He is from the Syilx Okanagan tribe and is a founding member of the *Rethink150* collective. He is a broadly built man with a strong face and long, dark braids. He stands out in Kelowna, where people tend to either stare or avoid looking at him. In colonial Kelowna, he says, he experiences some form of prejudice every day.

The canoes are heavy, and we need more people to lift them from the truck bed and into the building. Dixon begins to summon those walking down the street to come help: "Hey you, lend us a hand!" People are taken by surprise but drop their agenda – and their guard – to come help.

* Including core contributors: Dixon Terbasket, Edna Terbasket, Galen Terbasket, Jeremy Bowers, Myron Campbell, Allison Hargreaves, David Jefferess, Carrie Karsgaard, Lorna McParland, Stephanie Prentice, Ronnie Roesler, and Delacey Tedesco, with special thanks to all those who have contributed to the initiative.

The canoes are hoisted above shoulders and carefully brought into the building. They are not only heavy, but long, and it is not an easy task to manoeuvre them through doorways and twisting corridors. They are at last portaged into the gallery, where they naturally claim the space with their silent presence.

We cheer and applaud, shake hands, and grip shoulders in the warmth of accomplishment and cooperation. In that moment, people from different cultures came together, who may never have otherwise, and were part of something positive and uniting – even though just for a moment. And there was magic in that moment.

Was it magic? It's a word that comes up.

Throughout the *Rethink150: Indigenous Truth* initiatives there have been more of these “magical” moments. They occurred during the many *Rethink150: Indigenous Truth* meetings, where we came together since its inception in 2016 as voluntary, culturally disparate, yet common-visioned individuals to brainstorm how we could have Indigenous views and concerns heard amidst the dangerously dismissive din of the Canada 150 “celebrations.”

They occurred during the public events and discussions that were programmed as an extension of the exhibition. For example, during a discussion about cultural appropriation with Dr. Gregory Younging, when the conversation turned from the misuse of cultural artefacts and symbols to concerns surrounding the child welfare system, an important discourse emerged. What seemed at first a tangent slowly revealed itself to be a foundational cause for the concerns surrounding the topic at hand. Even the *children* have been – and continue to be – appropriated. Both Indigenous members of the group and settler descendants were concerned with the care of these children.

They also occurred during an interventionist art event, accompanied by a public discussion with urban geographer Dr. Delacey Tedesco and archaeologist Joanne Hammond, where nine bronze plaques, which have stood on a point overlooking Kelowna for decades (claiming the land with the settler narratives written upon them) were temporarily replaced by the attending public with nine plaques I created. Each new plaque carries a line from my poem “Viewpoint,” deconstructing that colonial process:

I LIKE THIS PLACE
I'M GOING TO TAKE IT
MAKE IT MINE
THROUGH FORCE, DESIGN
NAME IT, ANEW
MAKE A SIGN
IMPOSE MY STORY
STAKE MY CLAIM
BELIE MY CRIME

Such magical moments occurred during the raising of the art billboard on Indian reserve highway locations in the Okanagan – an image depicting the connectedness of Indigenous culture with the land, fraught with the impact of colonialism. Indigenous voices informed the image. A non-Indigenous hand drew it. Many hands – young, old, Indigenous and non-Indigenous – helped raise it and then shared food in the spirit of friendship.

They occurred when the St'at'imc Bear Dance Group arrived on 1 July in the heat of the summer – in full bear regalia – on the grounds outside the *Rethink150: Indigenous Truth Exhibition*. They offered ceremony in the form of speeches, singing, drumming and dancing, in solidarity with the *Rethink150* initiative and similar initiatives that developed simultaneously across Canada. The ceremony embodied resilience and resistance to the sesquicentennial flippancies that punctured the ceremony in the form of neon-spangled tourists riding back and forth on tricked-out beach bikes, obliviously honking horns in discord with the beating of the drums. Observable in these passersby was a slowly forming awareness that something important and sacred was going on here – and the rudimentary inception of curiosity and self-reflection.

Something special happens in these moments – many feel it. And so the word "magic" pops up like a rabbit from a hat.

But the word "magic" isn't satisfactory because it's not a trick that has happened, nor an illusion. It's something real. Something important – not quite predictable or familiar, but something that has come about for many reasons. If we identify those reasons, we may be able to recreate the conditions needed to make it happen. Because we want these moments – more and more of them – to happen to more and more people.

Because, instead of "magic," there is another word that can describe what might be happening: "healing."

A wound that is in the process of healing can seem magical. But there are systems and conditions that can encourage that positive, natural

force to happen. Given care and attention, and selectively administered remedies, an unseen but supported immune system will do its work to restore damaged cells. There is a powerful and natural force wanting to heal, wanting to thrive.

Or maybe there is another word that can describe what is happening: “growing.”

A sprouting seed can seem magical. But there are things a seed needs in order to grow. Soil, water, sunlight. A seed will stay dormant for decades without these conditions.

We hold the potential to heal, and seeds of growth, within us. We carry them with us through our lives – kernels of hope – but the conditions must be adequate to set these natural forces into motion. The concept of true reconciliation is a kernel of hope we carry, as individuals and as nations.

This is the *Rethink150: Indigenous Truth* collective’s work: to help foster these conditions. And, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has indicated, it should be *all* of our work – all of us who live on these lands. We all need to heal. We all need to grow – Indigenous, non-Indigenous – all of us need to help create the conditions that might allow reconciliation to take place.

So what are the conditions we need to allow the healing process to take root and grow?

If the magical moments that occurred through the *Rethink150* initiatives are an indication, then here are some of the conditions that were established, that helped make those transformative feelings happen:

Trust. The *Rethink150* collective was initiated by members of the Syilx community, who extended the precious gift of trust to non-Indigenous members of the group in a reasonable exchange for trustworthiness. The trust invited all those who involved themselves with the initiative to lend their varied skills and efforts to help make things better – to help make reparations.

Responsibility. The trust was received with some understanding about what it means to take care of that trust. And how to find a way, as individuals, to engage in the work in a way that is personally meaningful, while keeping the benefit of the Indigenous community the primary objective.

Courage. It takes courage to trust and also to stand up against the attitudes and activities of the majority. It takes courage to be an activist within your own community and also to work in an intercultural realm where there is no clear path and mistakes are inevitable. And it takes

extraordinary courage to speak difficult truths and to share devastating experiences.

Listening. Genuine listening requires a suspension of ego, so that shared experiences can resonate in a deeper, more commonly human, place. This is the place where empathy can grow, and the felt response that connects us. This is where we can begin to imagine how it would feel to be in a similar situation and what we would want done about it. This, in turn, inspires positive action, which requires a continuation of listening.

Reflexive Commitment. We began the *Rethink150: Indigenous Truth* initiative because we knew it was important to do *something*. We didn't know what that something would look like or how it would come to be. But through the reflexive commitment of a core group of members, supported by the efforts of many others, *something* important and substantial, indeed, happened. And with commitment, more will happen yet.

And it began by fostering that kernel of hope and “magical” ability we all carry within us – to heal and to grow.