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Turning Sideways Toward Truth: A Statement from the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre

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EVENTS UNFOLDING AT another BC campus over the past week have brought renewed attention to a familiar tactic: attempts to provoke controversy around the history of residential schools in order to draw Indigenous communities and institutions into an exhausting cycle of reaction. Even though, to our knowledge, UBC has not been directly targeted, many in our community are feeling the strain. Harm of this sort spreads quickly, and it lands unevenly. Indigenous students, staff, faculty, and community members often bear the heaviest weight.

Moments like this ask us to choose our posture. It is always possible to turn squarely toward the harm, to confront it head-on, to argue point by point. But not every frame is worthy of that energy. In my own work, I describe another orientation – turning sideways*: a refusal to let harmful rhetoric dictate the terms of engagement, and a deliberate movement toward what matters most. Turning sideways is not withdrawal. It is a way of protecting the work, the relationships, and the truths that guide us. It is a choice about where we place our attention.

* Turning sideways” comes from a Nuu-chah-nulth teaching about Skate and Raven. When threatened, Skate shifts her body so the danger loses its angle; she all but disappears as a target. I have drawn on this teaching elsewhere to describe a posture Indigenous peoples often adopt when negotiating with power – declining the terms of confrontation set by others and staying oriented to one’s own responsibilities and sources of authority (see Johnny Mack, “Turning Sideways: Intimate Critique and the Regeneration of Tradition,” *Review of Constitutional Studies* 28, no. 2 (2024): 241–67).

The history of the Indian residential school system does not require debate. It is established through the voices of Survivors, through government and church records, through the extensive findings of national commissions and inquiries, and through the ongoing work of Indigenous communities who have carried these truths across generations. These records describe a system that separated children from their families, suppressed languages and forms of life, exposed generations to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and led to the deaths of many children under institutional authority.

It is also necessary to say clearly that this system was genocidal in both its intentions and effects – moving on cultural, familial, and bodily registers at once. Some now call for “proof” in the form of children’s remains, as though truth must be excavated again to be believed. We will not meet that demand. The record already stands, coherent and overwhelming, and many of those records are held here at the IRSHDC.

Turning sideways here means refusing to be pulled into arguments that deny or diminish these truths. But it also means something more: turning toward the responsibilities that this history places upon us. The Centre holds thousands of records from governments, churches, Indigenous communities, and Survivors themselves. These are not simply documents; they carry memory, relationships, and obligations. Our work begins with care: for those who entrusted their stories to us, for the communities who continue to live with the impacts of these institutions, and for the generations working to rebuild what Canada worked so hard to break.

The IRSHDC also sits at the heart of UBC’s commitments. The Centre itself exists because of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action, which urged institutions to create spaces of truth-telling, public education, and Survivor-centred access to records. UBC responded by establishing the Centre as a place where these responsibilities could be taken up in a sustained and accountable way. Through the Indigenous Strategic Plan and the recent strategic plan refresh, the university has further pledged – publicly and repeatedly – to align its governance, teaching, research, and relationships with the obligations set out in the TRC’s Calls to Action and the standards articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The IRSHDC is one of the clearest expressions of those commitments. It is where institutional promises are translated into practice.

So in this moment, our response is to orient ourselves deliberately. Turning sideways means turning toward our work at UBC and refusing to be pulled off course. It means grounding ourselves in truth rather

than distraction. It means continuing to support Survivors and Inter-generational Survivors in accessing records related to their experiences. It means working alongside Indigenous Nations in their pursuit of justice and remembrance. And it means upholding the integrity of the historical record with the care and accountability it demands.

To Indigenous students, staff, faculty, and community members: we see the impact these moments have, and we stand with you. You are not alone. Supports are available across campus, and our team at the IRSHDC is here if you need guidance or care. A list of healing and wellness resources is also available on the IRSHDC website: <https://irshdc.ubc.ca/for-survivors/healing-and-wellness-resources/>.

We remain committed to truth. We remain committed to community. And we continue—as we must—to turn sideways, steady ourselves, and carry forward the work we are responsible for.