The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

A Personal View

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Introduction

- I want to thank Roberto for inviting me to make a presentation to your class.

- I am looking forward to our exchange of ideas about the issues raised by the TRC, for Canada and for each of us in our professional and our personal capacities.

- Working with the TRC changed me. I am here as a witness to the TRC, with a respectful account of what I saw and what I learned from my experience.
Who I am

- Historian of migration
- Archivist – passionate believer in access to archives and public participation in history
- Policy analyst – digital policy, stakeholders
- Archives Advisor to the TRC for 18 months
- Interested citizen engaged in reconciliation, particularly in archives/memory
What is the Indian Residential School Experience?

Danger of pre-conceptions from our own culture

● Compulsory removal from family and community

● Compulsory teaching and living in English; separation of brothers and sisters

● Western curriculum, world view and learning practices imposed

● Denigration of aboriginal culture

● Sub-minimal levels of nutrition, clothing, and education

● Critical to view IRS as an element of the colonial relationship which Canada has imposed on aboriginal peoples
What were the effects of the IRS?

- Loss of language and culture/inferior western education
- Loss of parental love and care, and family life
- Frequent incidence of physical abuse
- Death resulting from malnutrition, poor conditions and abuse
- Damaged ability to love, to connect and to belong in either aboriginal or western society
- Damaged patterns of behavior transmitted to next generation
Origin of TRC

- Breaking the silence on harm and speak publicly
- Litigation, costs, failure
- False step of ADR – ignored culture and family loss. Mrs. Merrick, her mother’s funeral, standards of day, $1500 from adjudicator – GoC appealed
- Negotiated settlement between Canada, AFN and ITK, and 47 RC entities, the UC, Anglican and Presbyterian churches
- TRC is one element of the Settlement
Goals of TRC

- Truth and Reconciliation events at the national and community level
- Statement taking in whatever format desired
- Complete historical record accessible to public
- Public education of IRS and its impacts
- Report on IRS system and experience, on-going consequences and legacy
Accomplishments of the TRC

- Provided survivors and their families a safe environment to testify about their experience through community and national events, and the acceptance of written testimony and works of art.

- TRC integrated aboriginal cultural practices of ceremony, truth telling, use of objects and witnessing into its statement gathering – complete contrast to litigation. STORY

- I was a witness to truth telling about school and legacy: hand made winter coat for a 4 year old; deeply traumatized woman; statement taker who needed health support

- Begun process of healing for many survivors of the schools and for family and community members
Challenges the TRC faced

- Complex mandate with limited time and resources
- Differences of interpretation of mandate, particularly in relation to document collecting
- Lack of trust particularly between Commissioners and Government of Canada and the Roman Catholic entities
- Variable levels of public engagement and common belief that this was history.
Is the work of reconciliation done?

- What were the policy forces that produced the residential school system?
  - Decision that aboriginal culture was of little value and must be abandoned. Actions taken in ignorance of aboriginal learning and values
  - Canadian government adopted the role of a colonizer over Aboriginal peoples and ignored the treaty relationships
  - Economic investment in IRS did not match the requirements of the education and care of children: government ignored evidence of policy failure
Is the work of reconciliation done?

These policy failures call for a long term response to undo the harm caused to individuals and to the relationship between aboriginal people and Canadians:

Culture:

- Culturally appropriate education for aboriginal children
- Develop inter-cultural protocols
- Explore sharing of aboriginal culture with Canadians
Is the work of reconciliation done?

Decolonization:

● Importance of aboriginal processes and law for this work

● Resolve issues based on respectful negotiation and collaboration on program development.

● Develop new story work for Canada – what will the story of the relationship between aboriginal and other Canadians be?

Economic investment to match policy goals:

● Funding for FN education should equal or exceed provincial spending

● Justice system
Is the work of reconciliation done?

What role should universities and professionals play in reconciliation? In my profession of archivist:

- Stories are windows on who we are. They form symbolic capital, which is natural and taken for granted. Constituting oral history as hearsay was Canada’s use of invisible power.

- Archival practice: Indigenous archives include stories, the land and wampum which preserve concrete information and FN world views. What constitutes an archive is part of how we construct who we are.
What are your responsibilities?

What might you do to further reconciliation?

What is the role of universities?

What is the role of professionals?

Have Canadian governments confronted their own history and identity as colonizers and perpetrators of assimilationist policies that did irreparable harm?