

What does this have to do with us?

A letter to my child¹

Leah Reesor-Keller

Dear I,

You asked me why I wrote a letter to your sister, but didn't write one to you.² Well, this is your letter.

What does this have to do with us? You ask me versions of this question when we're talking about what you'll wear for Orange Shirt Day at school, or when I do something that seems strange to you like put a copy of the book *Treaty Words: For as Long as the Rivers Flow*³ up on our picture ledge in the living room.

Hearing this question always makes my heart constrict. Have I failed as your parent, that I haven't already infused this knowledge into your bloodstream? Tied it to your hands and bound it on your forehead, as truths that must not be forgotten? I see it as a core responsibility for your dad and me to raise you in a good way where you know your ancestors, know your community members, and know how we are connected in the web of life in the world. We are treaty people, part of living, generational covenants with the original caretakers of the land where we live and with all nations, the human and non-human world that we are connected to in relationship together.⁴

And despite my panic, I am glad you ask the question, because curiosity is the gateway to education. The Honourable Murray Sinclair, Chief

1 I would like to offer my gratitude and respect to the many Elders, teachers, and friends who I have learned from in my own journey of decolonization and reconciliation. In particular, thanks to Terry Swan, Yvonne Bearbull, Connor Sarazin, and Clarence Cachagee for your gifts of conversation and shared wisdom over the last couple of years. I am grateful.

2 Leah Reesor-Keller, "Epilogue: Dear Ava," in *Tending Tomorrow: Courageous Change for People and Planet* (Herald Press, 2024), 185–188.

3 Aimée Craft and Luke Swinson, *Treaty Words: For as Long as the Rivers Flow* (Annick Press, 2021).

4 Drawing on the principles of reconciliation in Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation* (2015), https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Principles_English_Web.pdf.

Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada that led the inquiry into the Indian residential school system, famously stated that “education got us into this mess, and education is key to getting us out of it.”⁵

Knowing your history, culture, faith, and family knowledge over the generations is powerful. That is why the Canadian government tried to break Indigenous families apart through the historic and ongoing harms of the residential school system. They wanted to stop the sharing of stories, wisdom, language, and song that families and communities nurtured and sustained over untold generations. Another name for this is cultural genocide—seeking to end a peoplehood by purposely trying to make people forget, or never learn, their culture, history, and ancestral languages.⁶

“Do I know anyone affected by residential schools?” you asked me. Yes, you do. We talked about friends of mine you know who are descendants of residential school survivors. But more than that, *it is our story too*. Anabaptist-Mennonite church denominations and organizations to which our family is connected were part of running homes and schools where Indigenous children were forced from their families, were told their languages, culture, and faith practices were evil, and experienced spiritual, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.⁷ Our people were part of committing cultural genocide.⁸

Bobby Bird was ten years old, the same age that you are now, when he ran away from Timber Bay Children’s Home (also known as Montreal Lake Children’s Home) in Saskatchewan to escape the daily abuse and rejoin his family in 1969. He died in the attempt and was missing for decades before his remains were identified.⁹ My father, your granddad, would have been just a few years older than Bobby at the time of his running away and subsequent death. What if it had been him in the home? What if it had been you? I feel

5 “Education,” National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2020, <https://nctr.ca/education/>.

6 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation* (2015), 5, https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Principles_English_Web.pdf.

7 For a detailed examination of Anabaptist-Mennonite involvement in residential schools, see Melanie Kampen, “The Mennonite Peacemaker Myth: Reconciliation without Truth-Telling?” *Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 42–61.

8 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation* (2015), 5, https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Principles_English_Web.pdf.

9 Jason Warick, “Cold and Alone; The 30-Year Search for Bobby Bird,” *The Star Phoenix*, 9 Aug. 2015, <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/saskatoon/cold-and-alone-the-30-year-search-for-bobby-bird>.

sick thinking about it. The reality is, it was people who looked like us, from our family's faith and ethnocultural tradition—perhaps even people who were our relatives—who were in charge of the home at that time, and who caused the abuse that led to Bobby's death and harm to so many others.

This is not ancient history—the home finally closed in 1994,¹⁰ when I was about Bobby's age. Many former students, teachers, volunteers, and administrators of the home are still alive, and the generational harms persist. Timber Bay Children's Home was not part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement that provided compensation to survivors, and to this day Timber Bay survivors continue to seek justice and restitution for the harm caused to them and their families.¹¹

What does this have to do with us? Everything. It has everything to do with us because it is our story too, as Canadians and as part of the Christian denominations that sought to destroy Indigenous culture, languages, and faith practices in the name of the Christian faith. The summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada includes a quote from Reverend Stan McKay of the United Church, who is also a residential school survivor. He makes it clear that we have our own work of healing to do too:

[There must be] a change in perspective about the way in which Aboriginal peoples would be engaged with Canadian society in the quest for reconciliation. . . . [We cannot] perpetuate the paternalistic concept that only Aboriginal peoples are in need of healing. . . . The perpetrators are wounded and marked by history in ways that are different from the victims, but both groups require healing. . . . How can a conversation about reconciliation take place if all involved do not adopt an attitude of humility and respect? . . . We all have stories to tell and in order to grow in tolerance and understanding we must listen to the stories of others.¹²

Do you understand now why it is so important to me that you learn about Indigenous cultures and history since time immemorial here on the land where we live, and know our own culture as descendants of Swiss Mennonite

10 "Timber Bay (Montreal Lake) Children's Home," Paths to Reconciliation, *Canadian Geographic*, <https://pathstoreconciliation.canadiangeographic.ca/?mpfy-pin=4012>.

11 Nick Pearce, "New Calls to Recognize Timber Bay as a Residential School after Kamloops Discovery," *The Star Phoenix*, 5 June 2021, <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/local-news/new-calls-to-recognize-timber-bay-as-a-residential-school-after-kamloops-discovery>.

12 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2015), 10, https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf.

and Brethren in Christ early settlers? I long for us as a family to find our way forward to a place of genuine humility, respect, and friendship. That's why I care that you wear an orange shirt to school on September 30, Canada's National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, and why I wear my own orange shirt and take part in the survivor-led commemorative walk through our city every year.

You were in the audience a year ago when Chapeau Cree First Nation member and Crow Shield Lodge founder Clarence Cachagee joined me in a conversation about re-telling Indigenous and Mennonite stories, held at our Mennonite church, the congregation itself founded by Swiss Mennonite settlers in the 1800s and now a faith home to a diverse body of believers from many different cultural backgrounds. Now that you understand how family, language, songs, and prayers were taken away from children in the residential schools and children's homes like Timber Bay, you will understand why it was so important that we show as a Mennonite faith community that we welcome, honor, and respect the Cree spiritual practices and traditions that Clarence brought with him into the space that evening. Considering the legacy of harm that we have inherited, it is a privilege I don't take lightly to be part of genuine conversations pointing toward reconciliation, reparations, and action for change. Clarence reminded all of us in attendance that night that

*we're in the truth part right now of reconciliation. We're going to be sitting in the truth part for five more generations. It's going to take seven generations of us sitting in that truth until we can even possibly talk about reconciling. And what we're going to talk about reconciling is the land. It's going to be a difficult conversation. But I think that conversation needs to be happening. . . . Let's start creating new pathways of understanding as equals. Where we walk beside each other. Not one in front of the other. Not one behind the other. Not one on top of the other, or below the other. But walking beside each other as equals.*¹³

This letter to you is my way of sitting in the truth, of making sure that you know that this is your story too, that you have a part to play now and in the future as the next generation to keep moving forward in this journey of repentance, repair, and transformation.

I still follow this global, living faith tradition, not only because it is the faith that I inherited from my ancestors, but because I see the seeds of good things there still, of liberation and shalom for people and the whole

13 Clarence Cachagee, transcript from live event "Retelling Our Stories: Mennonite and Indigenous Perspectives in Conversation," Erb Street Mennonite Church, Waterloo, ON, November 8, 2024. Recording available at <https://youtu.be/OU5Pd7E3P4Q?si=RMfaG9c6rfnX7gBo>.

This letter to you is my way of sitting in the truth, of making sure that you know that this is your story too, that you have a part to play now and in the future as the next generation to keep moving forward in this journey of repentance, repair, and transformation.

earth. I see teachings on repentance and transformation, on the possibility of turning around and going in a new, life-giving direction, of forgiveness and repair being worth seeking after. This speaks to my soul, and I hope it speaks to yours as well.

The thing about adult baptism in the Mennonite tradition is that you must choose it willingly, with full knowledge and consent, choosing inwardly and outwardly to be part of the community of faith. Our faith ancestors in the early Anabaptist tradition, including many of our biological ancestors, understood this choice, and made it at great

personal cost. This cost included their very lives in some cases. In the same way, as you grow up you have the choice to lean in, to be an active participant in the work—community and relationship-building work—of reconciliation and reparations.

Choices reveal character, and I know your character to be strong, to be attentive and determined. You have great capacity for empathy and imagination, and a mind that stores knowledge like an endless library. You have so much to bring to this journey toward reconciliation here on Turtle Island. I hope you choose to step into the stream, into relationships of restoration and healing. I hope that you will be a solid link in the chain of generations sitting in the truth on the journey toward reconciliation.

That is my hope for all of us on this journey of repentance and transformation toward reconciliation. May we draw on deep wells of empathy and determination, using the strength of our history, cultures, and faith traditions not to exert control over others but to move toward changed relationships and structures, toward making things right with people and the land.

I know you can be a part of this transformation. You already are.

About the author

Leah Reesor-Keller is the author of *Tending Tomorrow: Courageous Change for People and Planet* (Herald Press, 2024), and is a writer-in-residence at the Kindred Centre for Peace Advancement in Waterloo, Ontario, on the lands of the Haldimand Tract and the traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, Chonnonton, and Haudenosaunee peoples. She formerly served as executive minister for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada and transitional executive director for KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives.