Truthtelling and reconciliation on the prairies

Eileen Klassen Hamm

I live along the South Saskatchewan River near the northern edge of the great prairie in a city named after the sweet purple berries that grow in abundance in the coulees and creeks of the watershed. This is a generous land under an expansive sky with room for so many stories that sometimes it takes too many years for them to bump into each other. Stories of ingenuity and overcoming, of migration and resettlement, of community and compassion exist alongside stories of deception and blindness, of ignorance and violence, and of losses in abundance.[1] We do not get to choose the stories that inhabit our landscape. We can choose how to respond to those stories. What does it mean to be a peace church in a particular watershed? How is a community's peace theology shaped by the stories in the landscape?

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As I write this article, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada is hosting the fifth of seven national events, in Montreal, Quebec.[2] I am watching it live on my computer, and it reminds me of the rhythms, emotions, rituals, and practices that I was deeply immersed in ten months ago when the TRC held its Saskatchewan national event here in Saskatoon.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is in its fourth year of a five-year mandate to learn the truth about what happened in the Indian residential schools and to educate Canadians about this history and its legacies. The commission is collecting testimony from officials of the institutions that operated the schools and from survivors and their families who have been personally affected by the residential school experience and its subsequent impacts. The TRC hopes to guide and inspire pro-

cesses of truthtelling and healing that can lead toward reconciliation and renewed relationships based on mutual understanding and respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Indian residential schools, government-funded and church-run, operated in Canada for about 130 years. The last school closed in 1996, in Saskatchewan. More than 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children were placed in these schools.

In the 1990s, church institutions involved in Indian residential schools began coming forward with apologies for their actions in these schools. On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper, on behalf of the government of Canada, delivered a formal apology in the House of Commons to former students and their families and communities for Canada's role in the operation of residential schools.

> *Two primary objectives of the Residential Schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child." Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. . . .*
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> *It has taken extraordinary courage for the thousands of survivors that have come forward to speak publicly about the abuse they suffered.*
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> *It is a testament to their resilience as individuals and to the strength of their cultures. . . .*
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> *To the approximately 80,000 living former students, and all family members and communities, the Government of Canada now recognizes that it was wrong to forcibly remove children from their homes and we apologize for having done this. . . .*
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> *The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a Gov-*

> *ernment, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again. You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey. The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly.*[3]

The TRC came to my town last June, and it changed my life, shifted my worldview. From the lighting of the sacred fire in the early morning of the first day to the closing words of the commissioners four days later, I was drawn into a powerful experience of listening, wrestling, unlearning, relearning, reimagining. This was not my first experience with the residential school story. I would have said I had a fairly good grasp of the history; I had taught it to college students. What was so new was the intimacy of the experience. We, white settlers and recent immigrants, were invited into a most intimate re-storying of our community and our country. The stories are disturbing, troubling, heartbreaking. Our hearts should be broken by these things—children snatched from their parents and grandparents, stripped of their identity, isolated, abused, never told they were precious. Our hearts should be broken wide open to make room for transformation.

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Many church folk supported the TRC event in Saskatoon. Some congregations raised funds for food and travel expenses; some created educational conversations ahead of and after the TRC event. During the June event, church volunteers assisted with the flow of activities, and many joined the gathered community witnessing the testimonies of survivors and their families. We wondered how it had taken us so long to listen for the stories that live right here among us on this land. Will the TRC change us as a church? Will it transform us? What gifts does the TRC offer to us?

Truthtelling and repenting

An examination of Indian residential school history is also an examination of colonialism and the church's willing and enthusiastic participation in colonialism. The Mennonite story in Canada is not at the centre of this history, but it plays at the edges and is not unconnected. The TRC is making room in the public discourse for churches to carefully and critically remember their own stories (not just the honourable ones), to tell their own truths, and to take responsibility for their memories. It is a rare moment in a nation's experience when leaders of institutions line up to make public apologies. The TRC has created spaces for that to happen.

Unsettling history

As truths are told and confessed, identities are dislodged. One such identity lies close to the heart of many peace church folk, and that is of Canadians as "benevolent peacemakers." Canadian settlers like to remember that while the United States conducted "Indian wars," Canada enjoyed a more benign settlement process made possible by treaty negotiations with Indigenous groups. These treaties spoke of peace and harmony, bounty, and benevolence. Stories being told at the TRC are calling this national mythology into question, both historically and in the present. Broken treaty promises litter the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples,[4] and the stories of residential school survivors bring us face-to-face with horrific violence enacted on children's bodies and souls as well as the hearts and minds of parents and grandparents, over generations. Seven generations.

Many Mennonite settlers came to the prairies to escape violence in Ukraine and elsewhere. We have benefitted immensely from the treaty negotiation processes, which opened up large tracts of land for Mennonite settlers to recreate communities based on language, religion, culture, and communal practices. At the very same time and in the very same landscape, Indigenous communities, generation after generation, were shattered by the Indian residential school policy and the Indian Act, which systematically sought to strip Indigenous peoples of their languages, religion, culture, and communal practices. What is a peace church on the prairie to do with such knowledge? How might we share such a burden as we journey forward?

Courage and forgiveness

In the midst of immensely difficult stories of violence and abandonment, the TRC is also a place of forgiveness and grace. I have been astounded at the open-handed forgiveness offered by survivors, first to themselves and also to those who hurt them. Life stories are not only about victimization but also about courage and resilience and overcoming. Telling and receiving painful stories can be an act of dignity, an act of redemption. There is a role here for us, as settlers and as church folk, to receive stories, to witness the hard telling, to honour the long journey.

Peaceable spaces

The TRC events have been carefully constructed to create healthy and gentle spaces for the oh-so-difficult work of telling truths and stepping toward reconciliation. Both the smaller community hearings as well as the large national events are wrapped in prayer and compassion. Local elders begin each day with prayers and songs. Often prayers are requested during the day, and each day ends with prayers. There is a clear understanding that this work cannot be done without the guidance of the Creator. Healthcare workers and cultural support workers encircle the rooms where testimonies are given, creating a safe space for vulnerability, watching for distress, holding a hand, supplying tissues for tears, paying attention to the storytellers as well as the listening witnesses. The tear-filled tissues are carefully collected each day, and when a sacred fire is lit at a national event, the tissues carrying such pain are burned there. These rituals and symbols have much to teach us about creating peaceable spaces for whatever difficult work our communities have before us.

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Reconciliation mentors

The commissioners of the TRC, Justice Murray Sinclair, Chief Wilton Littlechild, and Marie Wilson, are remarkable people with extraordinary ability to weave together the pain and gifts of

community. Theirs is a massive re-storying task, and in the doing of it, they make room for laughter and weeping, for anger and art, for questions and dancing, for singing and grieving. They practice gratitude, recollect learnings, and offer their whole hearts to this work, which they consider a sacred trust. They are mentors for us all, gracious teachers leading us toward healing and reconciliation. The commissioners are also patient and pragmatic, reminding us that it took seven generations to bring us to this place, and that change will not happen overnight. It may take another seven generations to undo the harm. We are all invited to be part of the healing generations.

Cultural revitalization

The TRC, among other activities in our country, is playing a role in the resurgence of Indigenous language, culture, and identity in our communities. The traditional knowledge, songs, and rhythms of Indigenous peoples are honoured and showcased at the TRC, and the strength and hope this brings to people is tangible. I am hopeful that we can embrace not only the pain but also the joy of Indigenous peoples, that we can set aside our paternalistic impulses and genuinely value the skills and teachings of the cultures that surround us, living and breathing so comfortably in this landscape.

Healing for settlers

Do I need healing too? I need healing from an imperialist mindset, from thinking I know what is best for others. I need healing from racism that lives and breathes in the institutions and activities of my everyday life, that gets ugly quickly when Indigenous peoples speak up for themselves, questioning the inequalities they face in housing, employment, education, healthcare, access to safe water.[5] I need healing from denial that colonialism has shaped my church, my workplace, my family. I need to be honest about how I have benefitted from the Canadian colonial enterprise.

We need healing and courage to imagine mutual relationships with Indigenous friends and neighbours. Five years ago, the prime minister stood in Parliament and gave what was considered at the time a heartfelt apology to former students of Indian residential schools. Included in his statement was a commitment to forge "a

new relationship between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians, a relationship based on . . . a respect for each other and a desire to move forward together." Many Indigenous peoples are still waiting for this apology to come alive, waiting for us to make space for new conversations between peoples, to create new opportunities for sharing our lands and resources, to acknowledge the missing and murdered Indigenous women, to renew treaty relationships, to celebrate a multitude of languages and identities.

The apology is only words on a page until we act it out in the watersheds of our landscape. The church is invited to be part of making the apology come alive and breathe in our communities. The church, with full knowledge of a sordid past, is still invited to look forward, even to seven generations, nurturing the growth of reconciliation, celebrating small shoots and blossoms of peace on the land.

Notes

[1] Two examples of writing that explores the stories of a landscape are Roger Epp, *We Are All Treaty People: Prairie Essays* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008); and Candace Savage, *A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2012).

[2] The TRC's last two national events are in Vancouver in September 2013 and in Edmonton in March 2014. All TRC information is available at www.trc.ca.

[3] For the full text, see http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649.

[4] For settlers seeking to establish more just relationships with Indigenous friends and colleagues, I recommend Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 83–110. For an incisive subversion of the history of Indigenous-settler relations on both sides of the 49th parallel, I recommend Thomas King, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* ([Toronto]: Doubleday Canada, 2012).

[5] Recent examples are the backlash to Idle No More activities, to Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike, and to protests at oil pipelines and mining sites.

About the author

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