

What does Reconciliation mean to You? *A Conversation*

Pamela Thomson

Marion Lynn, Mike Cheena and I represented Aboriginal Issues Working Group at an evening at Massey College library to hear several speakers this past March. It was not easy listening. Marion and I learned a lot, as we listened with open hearts and budding knowledge of aboriginal history and culture. The event was called “the most radical” event ever at Massey on Twitter.

The meeting was opened by Thunder Woman who spoke of the importance of smudging to purify ourselves and the land and air, using tobacco and a red eagle feather.

The evening was hosted by Kim Stanton, Executive Director of LEAF and Jodi Porter a CBC staffer. Both are Fellows at Massey this year.

The first to speak was Hayden King, an Ojibwe, from Ryerson. To him, the word “reconciliation” is “a bad word.” What is needed is restoration of lands in a manner that acknowledges theft of those lands. This is the beginning of truth telling from the heart. Settlers must take responsibility for the theft of land, dignity and well-being. Truth comes first, and it more than hearing stories from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

He spoke of the Anishnabe and Haudenosaunee concept of this country being “One Dish with One Spoon” indicating one land belonging to all and all belonging to one belongs to all. The spoon is round. Mr. King reminded us that treaties must be made with all creation.

Next was Wanda Nanibush, an Anishnabe-kwi, from OISE. Canada’s TRC is different because it arose from the settlement of a law suit, not from war or revolution. The assessment process for obtaining damages is revictimizing the victims of the residential school system. The mandate of the TRC is ending too quickly.

These relationships have festered under a policy (of assimilation etc.) which still exists by imposing laws, attitudes and practices which are dehumanizing.

Lee Maracle, a Stolo, from First Nations House at University of Toronto pulled no punches. The settlement does not allow victims to face their perpetrators or to see the criminal process implemented. The TRC cannot repair generations who worked rather than learned, died rather than thrived at residential schools. Survivors are “held hostage to the process.” The white/immigrant society is the guest on aboriginal land. Yet this society acts like it is the host, expecting the true host to live like the true guest. It is for the white/immigrant society to learn about aboriginal history, culture and practices, not the other way around. Want reconciliation? Give back the stolen land. The person who is hurt gets to make the call in the search for reciprocity and restitution.

Victoria Freeman was next. She has researched her family history, keeping an eye out for ways each generation related to the land which belongs to others. Her truth was realizing that Aboriginal people are not exaggerating, or belly aching without cause. We must revisit history to understand this. It is a difficult process to acknowledge our responsibility and that of our families. It is imperative to know history from an aboriginal perspective. The process is one of “transformation,” not forgiveness or reconciliation.

Harsh Zaran was the last speaker. He has worked with the TRC. The starting point must be aboriginal history for all school children and for immigrants. Every settler benefits from colonialism, and must acknowledge the racial landscape: we are all complicit and all implicated in aboriginal marginalization. The effect of ‘multiculturalism’ is assimilation. The TRC offers personal truth, but not community or societal truth, let alone reconciliation. We will get to reconciliation only on aboriginal terms and when they say so: this means decolonization and starting again.

In the discussion which followed, we were encouraged to lobby for an “Elders in the Classroom” project. I heard reference to the Indigenous Policy Journal, Nation Rising.org, the Canadian Roots Exchange for youth, and rabble.ca.

Survivors are “held hostage to the process.”