

# *Spirit of Reconciliation*

*A Multi-Faith Resource*



*Editors*

*Rev. Dr. Raymond C. Aldred  
Rabbi Dr. Laura Duhan-Kaplan*

*A joint project of  
The Canadian Race Relations Foundation and The Vancouver School of Theology*

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Canadian  
Race Relations  
Foundation

Fondation  
canadienne des  
relations raciales

## CANADIAN RACE RELATIONS FOUNDATION

*The Canadian Race Relations Foundation is Canada's leading organization dedicated to the elimination of racism and the promotion of harmonious race relations. Its underlying principle in addressing racism and racial discrimination emphasizes positive race relations and the promotion of shared Canadian values of human rights and democratic institutions. It strives to coordinate and cooperate with all sectors of society, and develop partnerships with relevant agencies and organizations at the local, provincial and national levels.*

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### VANCOUVER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

*The Vancouver School of Theology is an ecumenical Christian seminary offering programs in Christian studies, Indigenous studies, and Inter-religious studies. In its call to form thoughtful, engaged, and generous Christian leaders, it educates future ministers, spiritual care providers, and scholars.*

### PUBLICATION INFORMATION

*Publisher: Canadian Race Relations Foundation*

*Date: 2020*

*Title: Spirit of Reconciliation: A Multi-Faith Resource*

*Editors: Rev. Dr. Raymond C. Aldred & Rabbi Dr. Laura Duhan-Kaplan*

*Webpage: [www.crrf-fcrr.ca](http://www.crrf-fcrr.ca)*

### ISSN CANADA HAS CATALOGUED THIS PUBLICATION AS FOLLOWS

*Spirit of Reconciliation: A Multi-Faith Resource*

- ISBN: 978-0-9950432-2-0 (book)
- ISBN: 978-0-9950432-3-7 (electronic book)

# Canada

*We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.*

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## Acknowledgements

WE ARE GRATEFUL to have had the opportunity to work together to create this resource book, *Spirit of Reconciliation*. Through the process, we learned much about Canada's religious landscape, and the participation of its faith communities in Reconciliation. We made new contacts, bringing community leaders into mutual conversation and action. We were educated by each community's honest self-examination of their actual and potential contributions to Reconciliation. And we are inspired by the commitment of Canada's faith communities, both new and well-established.

Our greatest thanks goes to the Canadian Race Relations Foundation. The CRRF proposed this resource as part of their visionary project *Canada Beyond 150: A Promise to Our Children*. This five-part project is designed to bring together Canadians from all backgrounds to engage in discussions about the elimination of racism and discrimination. We are equally grateful to the Department of Canadian Heritage for their funding of this important work.

We thank the authors from the nine faith traditions represented in this resource book. Seven of the essays were written by individual authors whose names appear in the book. Two others are the work of a community, and we thank the contacts who facilitated that: Geoffrey Cameron of the Bahá'í Community of Canada; The Ven. Yin Kit Sik, Eva Ziduliak, and others of the Po Lam Buddhist Community. We also thank our skilled book designer, Cree artist Don Monkman. Several staff members have provided particular guidance and support, including Praan Misir and Suvaka Priyatharsan of the Canadian

Race Relations Foundation; and Catalina Parra, Hubert Barton (Nisga'a), and Hillary Kaplan of the Vancouver School of Theology.

In our work on this resource, we are pleased to represent the Vancouver School of Theology. This ecumenical Christian seminary, located on the campus of the University of British Columbia, teaches students to use religion for the public good. VST, currently under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Richard Topping, offers programs in both Indigenous Studies and Inter-Religious Studies. We are grateful that our programs could collaborate on this project as part of our shared work.

Finally, and most fully, we thank the Creator for this land and the creatures who work for its common good.

*Rev. Dr. Ray Aldred, Indigenous Studies*  
*Rabbi Dr. Laura Duhan-Kaplan, Inter-Religious Studies*  
*Vancouver School of Theology*  
*Unceded Territories of the Musqueam People*



## **Message from the Executive Director – Lilian Ma**

THE CANADIAN RACE RELATIONS FOUNDATION, in partnership with the Vancouver School of Theology, is pleased to produce the *Spirit of Reconciliation* guidebook.

This project is a part of the bigger project, Canada Beyond 150: A Promise to our Children that was developed to bring together Canadians from all backgrounds to engage in discussions about the elimination of racism and discrimination. *Spirit of Reconciliation* is a component of the five initiatives of the project overall. We would like to thank the financial support by the Inter-Action Grant Program from the Department of Canadian Heritage to make this Guidebook possible.

We would like to thank the Vancouver School of Theology specifically Rev. Dr. Raymond C. Aldred and Rabbi Dr. Laura Duhan-Kaplan for the research on reconciliation and identifying and coordinating the essay submissions from subject matter experts. They bring forward personal feelings, experiences and beliefs that touch upon many different aspects and perspectives of reconciliation. Seeing the essays come together have been extremely rewarding. We are excited to share this with you and hope the Guidebook will raise the awareness of all Canadians in this topic continuing this important dialogue throughout the spread of readership.

Many thanks to the 12 contributors from various faith communities for this Guidebook: Ray Aldred, Laura Duhan-Kaplan, Rennie Nahanee, Melanie Delva, Susan McPherson-Derendy, Ilona Shulman Spaar, Sukhvinder Kaur Vinning, The Bahá'í Community of Canada, Po Lam Buddhist

Community, Arun Chatterjee, Acharya S.P. Dwivedi, Nanda Gopala Dasa, Syed Nasir Zaidi; to our past and current CRRF staff/consultants for developing the proposal and for assisting with the deliverables: Suren Yoganathan, Arsalan Tavassoli, Jean-François Pagé, Sharon Pun, Len Rudner; especially our CRRF past and current Project Managers: Praan Misir and Suva Priyatharsan; and to the dedicated readers, for their current and ongoing support.

This Guidebook is provided for information and educational purposes only, and does not constitute legal or professional advice. The content published herein represents the belief and work of its authors, researchers and other outside contributors and does not necessarily reflect the official policy or positions of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation. We hope this Guidebook can be used as reference for people of various faiths to discuss steps towards reconciliation and stimulate conversations towards a society of acknowledging past wrongs and achieving peace and harmony moving forward. As the Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report suggests, we should hold the responsibility of mitigating conflicts and preventing spiritual violence and thus call upon leaders of faith communities to respect each other's spirituality in its own right. This Guidebook will be a reflection of moving towards a more inclusive society of the diverse peoples of Canada.

*Lilian Ma*  
*Executive Director*



*Seek proper relatedness (Indigenous Studies)*

# Invitation to Reconciliation

**Ray Aldred**

THE REPORT OF THE TRUTH and Reconciliation Commission defines reconciliation as establishing and maintaining good relations between Indigenous peoples and newcomers to Canada.<sup>1</sup> We are producing *Spirit of Reconciliation*, a volume of resources, with the hope it will add practical examples and ideas to the TRC's purposed reconciliation. As we walk in reconciliation, seeking a nation to nations, group to group, family to family, and person to person proper relatedness, communities will continue to build upon success from the past and heal the challenges going forward.

The First Peoples of Canada have a long history of seeking proper relatedness in the land, especially when faced with significant challenges. The historic treaty process with the sweetgrass ceremony is one example. In the sweetgrass ceremony of the Plains Cree, the



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<sup>1</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Summary: Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*. Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015.



*Joy in drumming at Vancouver School of Theology, photo Shannon Lythgoe, VST*

braid of sweetgrass represents three groups. The one strand of the braid represents the First Nations, the people who the Creator put first upon this land, which some call Turtle Island. The second strand represents the newcomers to Canada, all those peoples whose original relationship is traced back through their ancestors to another place upon the earth. Finally, the third strand represents the Creator. When this ceremony is performed, it remembers the treaty, the covenant originally made between the newcomers and the First Nations. A covenant or a treaty where we promised to live in a harmonious way upon this place and the Creator would hold us to this promise. With the continued immigration of peoples to Turtle Island, the seeking of proper relatedness continues to move us toward harmonious relationships, which is the basis for a society surviving and thriving.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission also notes the complexities of a multicultural modern society. A joint TRC statement from Indigenous Elders and newcomers makes this point. “As Canadians we share the responsibility to look after

each other and acknowledge the pain and suffering that our diverse societies have endured—a pain that has been handed down to the next generation.”<sup>2</sup>

This resource guide highlights Canadians taking responsibility to heal the pain and suffering by walking in reconciliation. We are highlighting how different faith expressions in Canada have worked towards proper relatedness by moving toward a reconciliation. This could be described using the principles of restorative justice: telling the truth or complete disclosure; listening with heart and not just the intellect; and engaging in a shared plan built upon a return to the ongoing historical Indigenous-newcomer relationship.

We have collected writings from people of various faith traditions all aimed at understanding and promoting reconciliation in Canada. We asked them to tell us what their tradition offered by way of a principled approach to reconciliation as well as what they had done by way of activities and what they hoped to accomplish. We hope that you find them inspirational.



*Reverend Dr. Ray Aldred, Cree from Treaty 8, is the Director of the Indigenous Studies Program at the Vancouver School of Theology, which partners with the Indigenous Church to further healing and reconciliation through education. Ray’s passion is to help as many people as possible to hear the gospel in their heart language.*

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*



*Learn about Indigenous cultures  
(Inter-religious Studies)*

# Reconciliation: A Journey of Learning

**Laura Duhan-Kaplan**

RECONCILIATION. Why should you, a person of faith, get involved? What can you and your faith community do? What if your community is new to Canada?

I am a rabbi, ordained in the Jewish Renewal movement. In the year 2005, I came to Canada from the USA on a Religious Worker visa. I knew very little about Canadian current events. Certainly, I knew nothing about the pending government compensation to residential school survivors. Or about the role of the churches in residential schools. Or the first steps taken towards a national Reconciliation process, led by courageous Indigenous activists.

But at my new job as rabbi at Or Shalom Synagogue, I began to learn. David was my first teacher. He came to our synagogue for a while, on Shabbat. He was quiet but not at all shy. Our interactions had a ritualized pattern. First, he would compliment me, saying, “You’re beautiful inside and out.” Then, if he wanted something, he would ask for it. Food, usually. Or an opportunity to tell his story. Finally, he would thank me by reciting an original poem.

David was a residential school survivor. After he graduated, a Jewish family had adopted him. The family, he said, was good to him. He still used their last name. As a young adult, he did seasonal outdoor work in the north. But a piece of heavy equipment cut through his abdomen. His company offered no benefits to seasonal workers like him. So, he healed slowly. Chronic pain haunted him. Sometimes it would weaken him. He'd be hospitalized for days or weeks. He couldn't work. No family was left to support him. So, he cobbled together a community of support as best he could. And we were part of that community.

Most Canadian Jews don't have a settler lineage. Instead, we came to North America recently as refugees. We fled European antisemitism, pogroms, and death camps. But when we became Canadian, we adopted Canada's past and future as our own. We chose to inherit Canada's history. So, we need to help atone for Canada's genocidal policies. And help create a better future for all our children.

At least, that's how I understand the Biblical prophet Malachi when he says: *I am sending you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents towards the children and the hearts of the children towards the parents—lest*

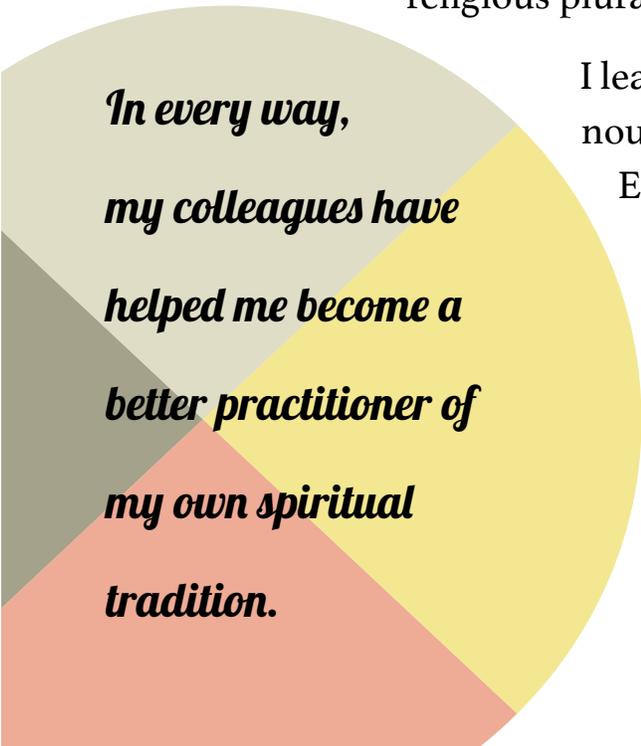
*Laura Duhan-Kaplan at the 2017 Walk for Reconciliation, photo courtesy of Charles Kaplan*



*I destroy the land* (Mal. 3:24). Yes, the future can bring destruction. But, if we reconcile, it will bring great healing.

Moving from hurt to healing is a theme of this multi-faith volume. Writers from nine faith traditions speak about it. Three Christian writers (two Indigenous and one non-Indigenous) show steps their denominations have taken to atone for the past. Jewish, Bahá'í, and Sikh writers describe their communities' participation in Truth and Reconciliation activities. Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic writers explain why, for their traditions, Reconciliation is an urgent issue of justice, and how their communities can begin to reach towards it. Each writer describes actions they, and you, can take.

For me, personally, the journey of Reconciliation has also been a learning journey. In 2014, I took a job at the Vancouver School of Theology. There, I began teaching the “Inter-Religious” portion of a program in “Indigenous and Inter-Religious Studies.” Indigenous students welcomed me into their worship circles. Introduced me to their diverse, creative, integrated traditions. Shared their ability to listen, disagree, and harmonize. Together, we navigated bumpy roads and explored religious pluralism.



***In every way,  
my colleagues have  
helped me become a  
better practitioner of  
my own spiritual  
tradition.***

I learned so much from our Indigenous faculty as well. About Mother Earth, our nurturer. And about living sustainably through local food knowledge. About the beauty of balancing that practical scientific know-how with imagination, myth, ritual, and story. And about

the creativity and flexibility of oral cultures. In every way, my colleagues have helped me become a better practitioner of my own spiritual tradition.

We hope that you, too, will continue your journey of learning as you enter the *Spirit of Reconciliation*.



*Rabbi Dr. Laura Duhan-Kaplan is Director of Inter-Religious Studies at the Vancouver School of Theology, where she brings together diverse groups to discuss topics of shared interest and concern. She is author of *The Infinity Inside: Jewish Spiritual Practice Through a Multi-Faith Lens* (Albion-Andalus, 2019) and *The Multi-Species Mind of God: Animal Narratives in Hebrew Bible* (Cascade, forthcoming).*



*Use the prayer resources of your tradition (Catholic)*

## Psalm 23: A Psalm of Reconciliation

**Rennie Nahanee**

DEAR GOD, I, Deacon Rennie Nahanee, present to you a paraphrase of Psalm 23 as it applies to the Indigenous People of Canada today in the Year of Our Lord 2019.

### *The Lord is my shepherd*

We recognize the one true God as being our Creator and the Great Spirit who takes care of us, not the Federal Government's Indian Affairs Department who believe they are God, controlling us with the INDIAN ACT and other laws which they lord over us from birth to death. They are not sorry for what they have done to the Indigenous people of Canada, they do not ask for forgiveness and none will be given. The successive governments of Canada are our oppressors, taskmasters, puppeteers who have treated us as slaves and kept us your people in bondage.

### *I shall not want*

We know that the Chayth Siyaam created this land for us and provided his Indigenous people with food, medicines, and longhouses for shelter. We had everything needed to sustain our lives for many generations. We shared our land with

the newcomers, showed them how to survive the winters, sided with some countries about who owned this land you gave to your people. Over the past century since then, our ancestral land diminished to small sections the government called reservations. We could not hunt or fish in our territory, nor gather medicines, nor practice our culture and our spirituality. Our children were taken away from us and were forbidden to speak their language. When they returned home, they were like strangers in the villages. The government made laws which further removed our rights to be the people you created, and we became wards of the governments and subject to their whims. We became dependent on the government for our livelihood. They are not sorry for the treatment they gave us, do not ask for forgiveness and none will be given. For the people who have struggled with us and supported the Indigenous People of Canada in seeking restitution and reconciliation, I call them my brothers and sisters.

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures*

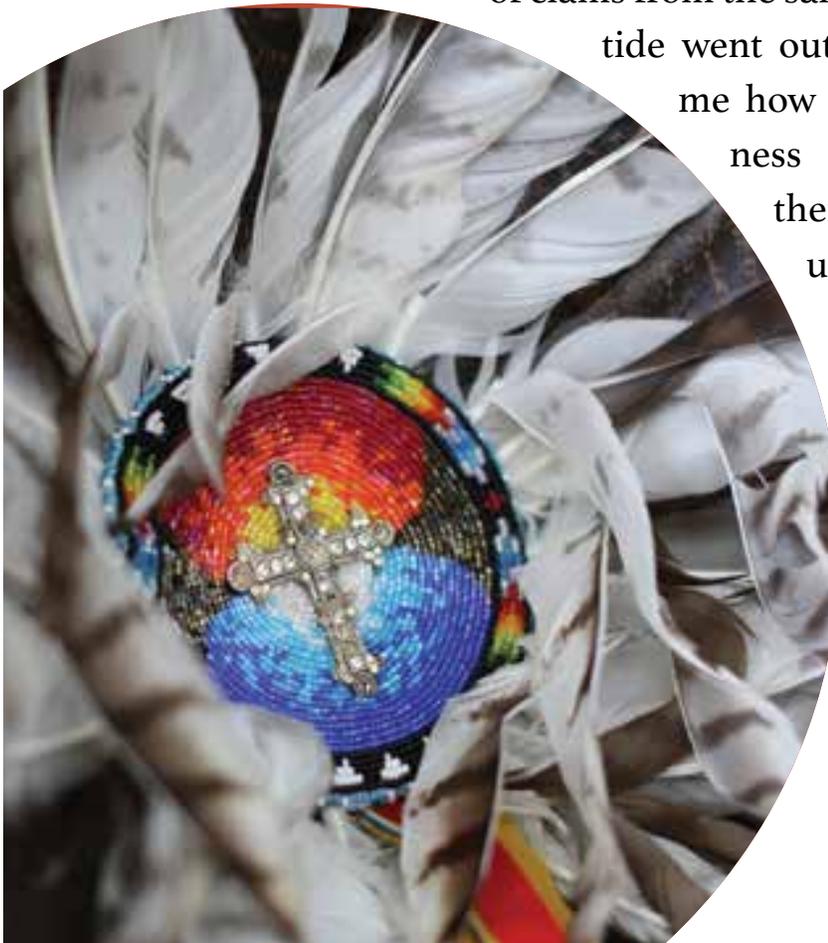
Our green pastures which once supported thousands of buffalo and creatures from the forest as our source of food, and were our traditional food source, became a sport for non-native hunters who killed the animals, and they did not think about using only what they needed like we did. Our Mother Earth has been ransacked for the minerals, timber and oil which lay beneath the surface of our land and none of the income realized from these resources was shared with us. The land which once fed and nourished all of your creation is now unfit to grow anything for all of your creation. Forgive them for they know not what they do, or they just didn't care but the resulting devastation to the Indigenous people killed

many martyrs. They do not ask for forgiveness for what they did, and none is given. With no money or resources to fight back against the ransacking of Mother Earth, all we can do is protest. For non-native people who care about our planet and work to protect it, I call them brothers and sisters.

*he leadeth me beside the still waters*

Dear Lord, the rivers which fed many of your creatures, including the eagles and the bears, and the salmon who came to spawn in great numbers, are dwindling in numbers because of overfishing by commercial fishing boats and pollution. Our salmon will not return to the spawning grounds because of the warmer temperature of the water. Some of the water is unfit to drink because of contamination by corporations who spill fracking polluted water into our rivers, making the water unsuitable to sustain any kind of life. When I was a child, our family would travel to a nearby reserve to dig up many bags of clams from the sandy beach when the

tide went out. My father taught me how to find the Dungeness crab which bury themselves in the sand until the tide returns and where to find the clams which were buried under the sand. Now as an adult I cannot teach my children to do what I was taught



*Photo Amber Green © 2020*

because the pollution from nearby chemical and petroleum plants has contaminated the beach and made any food located on the beach inedible. I have led many of the KAIROS Blanket Exercises to educate the non-Indigenous people about the history of the Indigenous People of Canada. My hope is that Canadians will respond to our plight and support us in saving our Mother Earth.

*he restoreth my soul*

You alone o God give us comfort and hope in this world we live in. Can the corporations and overseas companies restore our distraught souls, these people who have taken away so much from us, our land, our language, our culture, our medicines, our children, our spirituality, our customs and our livelihood? Can they restore the environment which you created for us to live on? These polluters and money hungry corporations do not even see us as children of God. Sure, these companies have brought progress and wealth to few people in this country but we could not even eat the crumbs which fell from their tables. They need to reconcile themselves to God first for what they have done. I trust in God to continue saving us from annihilation, because He sent His Mother, Our Lady of Guadalupe to help the Aztec people in their time of need. I talk about the Guadalupe event where Mary visited a poor Aztec Indigenous person, with the baptismal name of Juan Diego and his ancestral name—Quatlatoatsen—“Eagle who speaks.” The relevance of this is Mary’s first appearance on earth where she left a picture of herself on Juan Diego’s tilma. She appeared as an Aztec woman carrying a child, speaking in the Aztec language, and her clothing was decorated with symbols of the Aztec people. Thus I know that God is still with us.

*he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness*

We have learned from you in the Good Book about righteousness, morality, ethics, and respect for creation and our brothers and sisters all over this world. It is our way of life and we share this with other peoples. We and other Indigenous people on this planet have experienced pain, misery and death from those who do not believe in you O Lord. Big businesses do not believe that the world was created for everyone, where people can own their own land, grow their own crops on their land and live in peace and harmony. These corporations see all of your creation as a commodity, as something to buy, sell or steal if necessary, no matter who lived on the land before they came along. In our modern times we have peaceful ways to deal with these carpet baggers through prayer, educating ourselves on who they are and where they come from, and to plan action against them righteously in the name of God.

*for his name's sake*

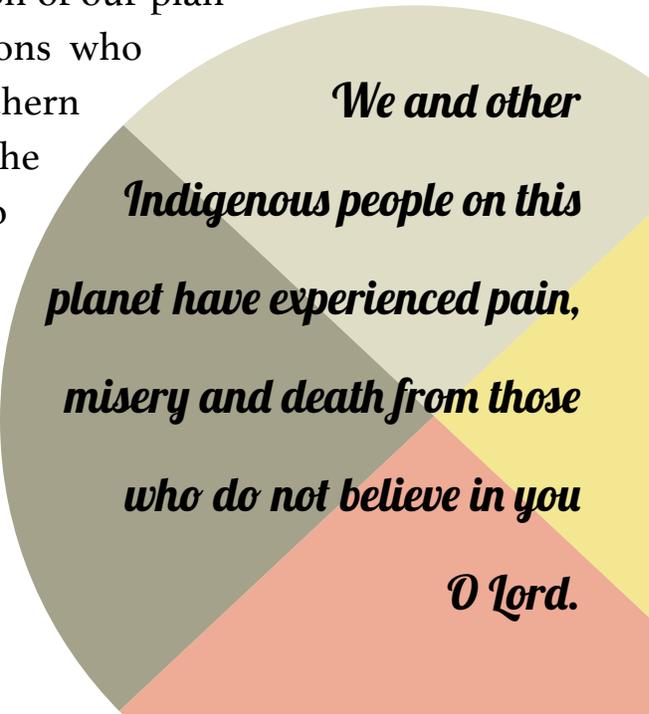
Dear God, you who are all powerful, all knowing, omni-present, and everlasting have given us words to live by. In your name we abide by your wise teachings, in your name we help one another, in your name we worship you, and in your name, we have survived as part of your creation to protect it.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley  
of the shadow of death*

There are many valleys of death on this planet Dear Lord from the older days, with wars, bombing, massacres, such as Hiroshima, Nagasaki, atomic bomb testing in Nevada, dumping of military waste into the ocean from the former Sovi-

et Union, Bikini Atoll bomb testing in the South Seas, and chemical warfare. Thus began the destruction of our planet and today it continues with the search for minerals, oil, fresh water, harvesting of forests for building materials, or to make land available for growing crops. It is not only creation which is being destroyed but mankind as well. People cannot make a living or grow things on their land which is polluted, or whose water supply has been diverted to serve the growing demands of corporations.

Our land of British Columbia was what I once called our Garden of Eden where we gathered food from clear and clean river and tidal waters. The forests protected many animal species, sacred sites, burial grounds, spawning grounds, medicinal plants and the giant ancient cedar trees which we used to build our Longhouses, Ocean going canoes, paddles, cooking utensils, the roots were used for basketry, hats, mats, and ancestral clothing. The bark was also used for clothing and the cedar branches were used for cleansing in the streams and in ceremony. We only used what was needed. Now the rivers and sea waters are polluted, and the forests are gone. Now we must buy our food from the grocery stores. We are witnesses to the legacy of the destruction of our planet through greedy corporations who have taken land in the southern hemisphere, gotten rich off the misery of the poor people who live there and now have their eyes set on the Indigenous people of Canada's resources. Our fight against the foe is also for the brothers and



***We and other  
Indigenous people on this  
planet have experienced pain,  
misery and death from those  
who do not believe in you  
O Lord.***

sisters of the southern hemisphere who lost their livelihood, their homes, their children, their mates and by our actions they will know that God has not deserted them and that justice will be done.

*I will fear no evil for thou art with me*

Many times, we have been put to the test Lord. Our people have died from diseases that our ancestors were not immune to. Our children, who were going to be our future, were taken away from us, hurting us as parents and them as children. As our Jewish Elder brothers said, "We have little because others have more." We have been burned in the fire and have been found worthy in your eyes Chayth Siyamm. You give us strength to face many issues that would destroy us as a people. You give us strength to face our foes as like David who faced Goliath. You give us courage to never give up, even when situations seem hopeless. You are the light that brightens up the evil things that men do in this world. We have give you thanks and we raise our hands up to you.

*thy rod and thy staff they comfort me*

The symbolism of your rod and staff as the One who leads and protects is not lost on us and this gives us comfort in knowing that you are always close to us. We know that the saving power of the Lord is greater than the power of man and we will follow your teachings that you've given to us to lead a good life and to pass these teachings down to our young ones.

*Thou preparest a table before me in the  
presence of mine enemies*

Usually we feast and celebrate after having a victory over

the enemy, but you o Lord set the table for us as a done deal, as though the enemy were nothing to worry about, with all their contriving, taunting, bullying tactics, huffing and puffing against us, all in vain on their part. I once heard someone question on how you take away land from a people. The answer is you kill the Indigenous population. How do you kill the indigenous population in Canada? Biological warfare began in early Canada by the giving away of small pox infested blankets and native people in British Columbia were not immune to this disease. They would take these infested blankets back to their reservations and share amongst their people these gifts as was their custom. They then would ultimately die a horrible death including men, women and children. The then vacant land would be taken over by non-natives and sold to other non-natives at a good profit. In the eastern part of Canada many native people died from participating in the war be-



*St. Paul's Indian Industrial School students and staff Middlechurch ca. 1901 - Library Archives of Canada No. PA-182251*

tween the French and English as their allies. In the prairies, the buffalo which sustained the Indigenous population with meat and clothing were killed for sport, forcing the native people to eat food which they were not used to eating. In the present times by not eating their own foods, the Indigenous population became unhealthy by eating fast foods, or not having enough money to pay for good food, they ate what they could buy and became diabetic, some developed heart troubles, cancer and tuberculosis along with other health issues and died from these health issues. The trauma of the Indian Residential Schools led to alcoholism, beatings, divorce, separation and despair, setting a path to death or suicide which would further affect the descendants of the original children who went forcefully to attend these schools. Yet Lord, despite all these tribulations, you have saved us, and so we are still here and continue to survive and thrive in our native land called Canada. We have many Indigenous martyrs who died that we the descendants might live one day like the days of old where we flourished and our children will not have to face the enemy that we came to know.

*thou anointest my head with oil*

You Lord have treated us with the greatest respect at this banquet as though we were royalty. You heal our wounds with your ointments and give us comfort like the Good Samaritan.

*my cup runneth over*

You have given us many things to be grateful for in our ancestors' time, our time and for those coming after us. We raise our hands up to you in thankfulness and gratitude for our lives, our environment, our food and clothing, our culture, our

spirituality, language and way of life which is not incompatible with your teachings.

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life*

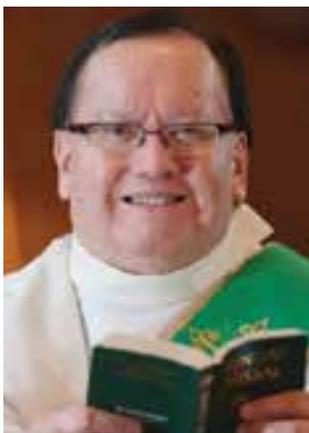
We know this to be true when we live your teachings Dear Lord. We know because we have lived and survived all that has been thrown at us. Our spirituality comes from you Lord, our teachings come from you and it is these teachings that you've given to us that help us survive. Your goodness and your mercy shown to us are models for the life given to us by you O Lord and you have shown us what true happiness means.

*and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever*

When we pass from this world into the spirit realm, that others call heaven, we will once more enjoy the beauty of your creation protected by your Word and Will. In our struggles you have not forgotten us and we have tried to live the good life so that when we meet face to face in your spiritual realm, we will not be ashamed to be in your presence.

*Thank You God*

*Chen Kwen Mantumi Chayth Siam*



*Deacon Rennie Nahanee, an Elder of the Squamish Nation, is Coordinator of Indigenous Ministry for the Catholic Archdiocese of Vancouver.*



*Work towards social justice (Anglican)*

# The Year of Jubilee: A Diorama of Christian Reconciliation

**Melanie Delua**

## *“Reconciliation” – A Fraught Word*

IN READING ITS SACRED TEXT, the Bible, the Anglican denomination of the Christian church follows what it calls a “lectionary.” This is a kind of calendar of Bible readings set up in such a way that much of the Bible is read within a 3-year period. By causing everyone who follows it to read the same texts at relatively the same time, it brings Christians throughout the world together in a way. It also has the effect of preventing us from “cherry picking” our favourite texts to read and contemplate and thus ignoring ones that may give us some necessary spiritual tension and questioning.

Sometimes, when I am asked to preach in a parish or at a particular event, and to focus on reconciliation, the leadership says to me, “Let us know what Bible readings you would like to choose for that day, so that they can match up with your theme of reconciliation” — instead of referring me to the as-

signed lectionary readings for that day. This presumably generous and accommodating offer often causes me confusion, and makes me wonder about the approach that person takes to our sacred text. Because, as I see it, the entire Christian story as given to us in the Bible from Eden to the early church and beyond, and as lived out in the lives of followers of Christ in the present day, is a story of reconciliation.

In the context of Indigenous-settler relationships, the word “reconciliation” is fraught. On the one hand, it is the inspiration and fuel for many people to engage in positive action and seek justice. At the same time, many people, particularly the victimized and oppressed, experience it as a buzz-word. At best, they feel, it is over-used; and at worst, it is a feel-good smoke screen, distracting people from the hard work of painful self-analysis and the surrender of power and privilege. Even a dictionary definition can only get us so far. The Oxford English Dictionary, for example, defines “reconciliation” as “the restoration of friendly relations.” Many early settlers did have peaceable relationships with Indigenous peoples, and entered into partnerships with them. But, in reality, in many places relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada were not so friendly. They were often characterized by distrust, broken promises, abuses, and deceit.

With this in mind, is “reconciliation” even the right word to be using for the Canadian context? Someone once suggested to me that perhaps the “re” should simply be removed to avoid the reference to repetition or a return to something from earlier times. Perhaps the word “conciliation” might be better. However, the OED defines “conciliation” as a “placation” of the other. Sadly, that is what some non-Indigenous people hope for, sometimes unconsciously, when they talk about rec-



*Vancouver Walk for Reconciliation, 2013, photo courtesy of Laura Duhan-Kaplan.*

conciliation. This approach manifests in “charity models” of social justice and in prayers without action. It manifests in the verbal support of Indigenous justice but the failure to actively recognize and honour inherent Indigenous rights. But the soothing of anger and frustration, hurt and despair through anything but deep and painful justice is not true reconciliation.

Despite the problematic nature of the word “reconciliation” and the dictionary definition’s extremely loose correlation with the reality of Indigenous-settler relationships in Canada, many Christians remain committed to its use. Thus, our continued use of the term can make us appear naïve, misinformed or racist, or even members of the “why can’t they just get over it?” chorus. But the word is central to the Christian Gospel’s message and to the ongoing trajectory of the Kingdom of God made manifest in the world. So, let us try to understand it, in its truest form.

### *Jubilee in Christ*

I like to use the concept of Jubilee to help people in Christian contexts think about true reconciliation. In the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) God asserted that a Year of Jubilee should be observed every 50 years. If observed properly, it would be a game-changer. It was revolutionary.

*And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the after growth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property (Leviticus 25:10-13).*

In other parts of the Bible, it is sometimes called “the year of the Lord’s favour” (Isaiah 61:2). In this year, slaves and indentured servants were freed. Debts were cancelled. People who had bought or taken land were required to return it to its original owners. In this way, lands were not to be separated from the families, tribes, or peoples of that land. Even land had been sold had to be returned. Thus, a people could not be permanently separated or excluded from their lands, not even if they had been coerced or forcibly displaced or had to sell the land due to death or debt. This practice served as a reminder that people were not “owners” of the land. Rather, they were care-takers and occupants of the land that belonged to God, and that God had entrusted to them.

In other words, the Year of Jubilee was about freedom and justice. In the math of the Christian faith, these make reconciliation possible.

But what makes Christians unique is our belief in Jesus Christ. We see him as the fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptural laws and prophecies. Following his life, death, and resurrection, many Christians assert, the scriptural laws don’t need to be kept. For example, laws against eating shellfish or

wearing fabrics made of mixed fibers are obsolete. However, Jesus himself said he did not come to make the Old Testament laws obsolete (Matthew 5:17). And, in the context of the Jubilee, it is a particularly unfitting notion. In fact, unlike with fabric, Jesus actually did have something to say about the Year of Jubilee!

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”*

*Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant  
and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were  
fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this  
scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:16-21).*

Jesus does not say that the year of the Lord’s favour is obsolete. Rather, he says that he is the fulfilment of the Jubilee. His life, death and resurrection pronounce freedom, healing, and justice from all that binds humanity — from both outside ourselves and from within. This freedom, healing and justice through Christ’s resurrection formulates reconciliation

between all creation and God. This includes reconciliation between peoples; between humanity and creation; and between all creation and God. This is good news, indeed!

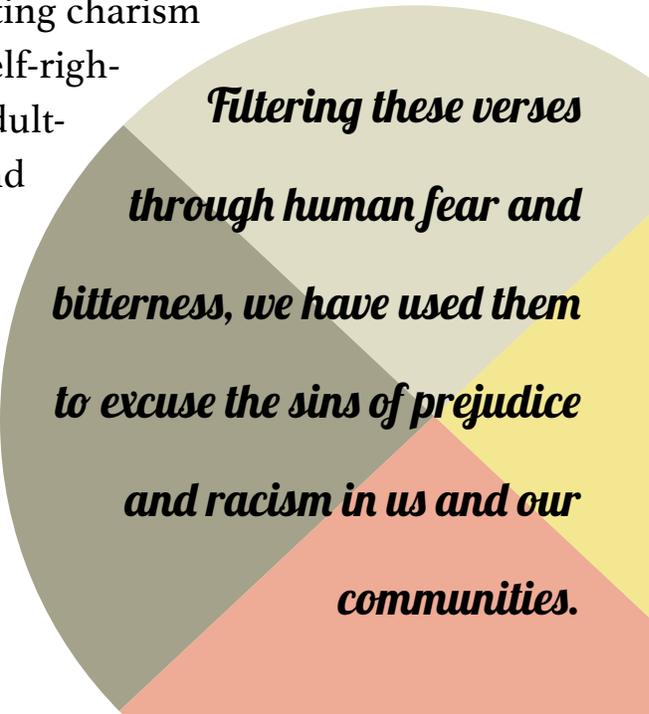
### ***Broken by Truth***

It should be very difficult to be a true follower of Christ and also racist. That doesn't mean some of us don't try to make this square peg fit through the round hole. Bible verses such as those found in "The Great Commission" have paved the way for us to engage in vicious colonial endeavours.

*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20).*

Filtering these verses through human fear and bitterness, we have used them to excuse the sins of prejudice and racism in us and our communities.

I know that the sins of prejudice and racism are plausible in the so-called Christian mind because I have experienced them myself. I was born into and grew up in a very racist context. Therefore, I carried the resulting charism of suspicion, judgment and self-righteousness into my early adulthood. Through education and life experience, I began to see the sin of my way of thinking and being towards my fellow humans. It was a painful reality to face. But I was forced to face it while work-



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communities.***



*St. Paul's Indian Industrial School, 1910, Middlechurch, Manitoba. - Manitoba Archives*

ing as an Archivist for the Anglican Church of Canada. In my role, I was part of the effort of the churches to fulfill one of the calls of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. We were to gather and hand over copies of all church records pertaining to the Residential School system to the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In that work, I reviewed thousands and thousands of pages of residential school records. I saw photos and listened to audio recordings.

This was my Road to Damascus moment.<sup>3</sup> I was broken. I was devastated. I was devastated by what the church I had converted into had done. I was devastated by what the country I had always been so proud to be a citizen of had done. I

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<sup>3</sup> In the New Testament Book of *Acts*, Chapter 5, Saul of Tarsus spends his adult life persecuting and killing Christians, until he is blinded by God on the Road to Damascus. He is called by God and confronted with the evil he has done. He has an intense conversion experience and becomes a powerful apostle of God and messenger of the Good News of Jesus.

was devastated by the reality that I as a person was capable of evil as well. I was forever changed. As I continued in this work, I had the privilege of developing deep and meaningful relationships with many Indigenous survivors of the residential school system. They honoured me with their stories—of pain, abuse and loss, and of resilience, strength and hope. I began speaking out against racism and half-hearted “conciliation” efforts within the church and in wider society. Today, I continue this work in a different iteration. And, dreaming of true Jubilee in our time, I commit each day to finding ways to shepherd it into existence.

### *Walking the Radical Path of Reconciliation*

People often ask me what, as Christians, they can do to pursue true reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. I tell them that every context is unique. Practically speaking, what reconciliation looks like in a rural village on the prairies may look nothing like what it looks like in an urban city core on the coast. But there are things that every Christian can do to be a midwife for Jubilee-style reconciliation.

A first practice is to pray and study Scripture. Desmond Tutu wrote,

My friends, I have often said that we do not need more political or other ideologies to oppose apartheid. They would not have been radical enough. The Bible turns out to be the most revolutionary thing around in a situation of injustice and oppression.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Desmond Tutu, “Why, as Christians, We Must Oppose Racism.” Speech at the Episcopal Diocese of Texas <https://www.epicenter.org/why-as-christians-we-must-oppose-racism/>

We sometimes forget how radical Jesus was to his time and place in history. His words have the power to shift our gaze from what we have been hypnotized by society to value to that which brings Life.

We have been brainwashed to see a false divide between the sacred and the secular. Thus, some of us act as though the pursuit of justice is not a sacred task. We seem to believe it exists in parallel to, but not necessarily woven into, a life of prayer and Scripture study. However, the words of theologian William Stringfellow suggest that we are wrong. He writes, “The biblical lifestyle is always a witness of resistance to the status quo in politics, economics, and all society. It is a witness of resurrection from death.”<sup>5</sup> We are called to practice intentional conversation with God and the Word given to us in Scripture. This the foundation on which we plant our feet as we interact with God. As many Christians have said, even if we don’t see it changing what is happening around us, it changes us.

A second practice is to act within relationships with Indigenous peoples. Jesus did not call his followers into relationship with a concept or idea or unknown entity. He called us to be in fellowship with our neighbours, especially those who look, act, speak, and think differently than we do (Matthew 25:35-40; Luke 10:7). Only in relationship is reconciliation given flesh. Within our fearful and limited imaginations, there are a thousand reasons not to do this. We worry. “What if I make a mistake?” “What if I make things worse?” “I don’t know any Indigenous people.” “What if I am rejected?” But there are always ways and means to foster relationship. Indigenous public centres and events proliferate in both rural and urban com-

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5 William Stringfellow, *Instead of Death* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock), 1976.

munities. They offer cultural tours, art exhibits, pow-wows, music events, language classes, and friendship centres. Some even issue calls for volunteers. Find out on whose traditional territory you live, work and play. Do you know who the leaders of that nation are? If not, find out. Invite someone for coffee. It doesn't have to be contrived. All that is necessary is a heart and mind open to encounter Christ in a stranger.

A third practice is to show up and act. Granted, though it sometimes appeared that he was late, Jesus showed up (John 11:21). Sometimes he took action in the form of performing miracles. Sometimes he spoke; sometimes he was simply present and in fellowship with the people. But he showed up. Oh, and it usually involved food, hospitality, sharing a meal together (Matthew 14:13-21; 26:17-30; John 1:9-12). Showing up can be literal in the sense of some of the activities described above. One can also show up by offering solidarity with Indigenous-led calls for justice. Here, the Jubilee-style reconciliation takes flight. Some people answer this call in public actions against resource extraction without the “free, prior, and informed consent” of Indigenous peoples, which is required by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).<sup>6</sup> Some advocate with elected officials, participating in campaigns that seek to close the gulf-sized gap between the quality of life of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Others raise awareness in their non-Indigenous communities, workplaces, social circles and beyond. Still others engage in

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) is used throughout the Articles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/publications/2016/10/free-prior-and-informed-consent-an-indigenous-peoples-right-and-a-good-practice-for-local-communities-fao/>

reparations, returning land to Indigenous peoples or “tithing”<sup>7</sup> part of their salary to Indigenous organizations. The possibilities for action are as endless as the injustices.

### *What We Seek*

No matter what Christians do, we must not limit ourselves to the confines of our own ideas or imaginations. If we do that, we will always come up short. Instead, we must seek to be part of a radical, boundary-breaking, everything-turned-on-its-head movement of love and justice, at a level that offends systems of power and privilege. In this movement, wolves and lambs are best friends, lepers dance with glee, the guile-less wonder of children is heralded as true wisdom, and Jubilee is realized for the poor, the oppressed, the prisoner, the blind, and yes – even for you and me.<sup>8</sup>



*Melanie Delva is Reconciliation Animator for the Anglican Church of Canada.*

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- 7 Within the context of Christian communities, tithing is the practice of giving a portion of one’s resources (typically financial) to the Church. Historically, to tithe meant to donate 10% of one’s income, though there are many variations, and the practice has faltered in some Christian communities.
- 8 *Cf. Isaiah 11:6, “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.”*



*Join a sharing circle (United Church)*

# Reflections on Reconciliation: A Journey of Sharing, Learning, and Change

**Susan McPherson-Derendy**

GOD CANNOT BE KNOWN by thinking (or thought alone) but by experiencing and loving. In my effort to be hopeful and also realistic, I think of reconciliation as a vision that may not happen in our lifetime. Still, healing will happen for each journey forward in honesty with self, acceptance of diversity, and the willingness to change.

## *A Story of Calling*

I was raised by my Cree parents, Jimmy John and Celia McPherson, along with my three sisters, along the banks of the Churchill River. They lived a traditional life in that they were very connected to the land that provided for them to live. They spoke their language; my mother only spoke Cree. We didn't go to residential school, as my mom had lost her treaty status when she married my dad. But most of the cousins we grew up with down the River Flats did. Our parents had their struggles, but over time, I was able to see all the good that was in our upbringing. For that I will always be thankful. When our relatives or community friends went to school or ended up

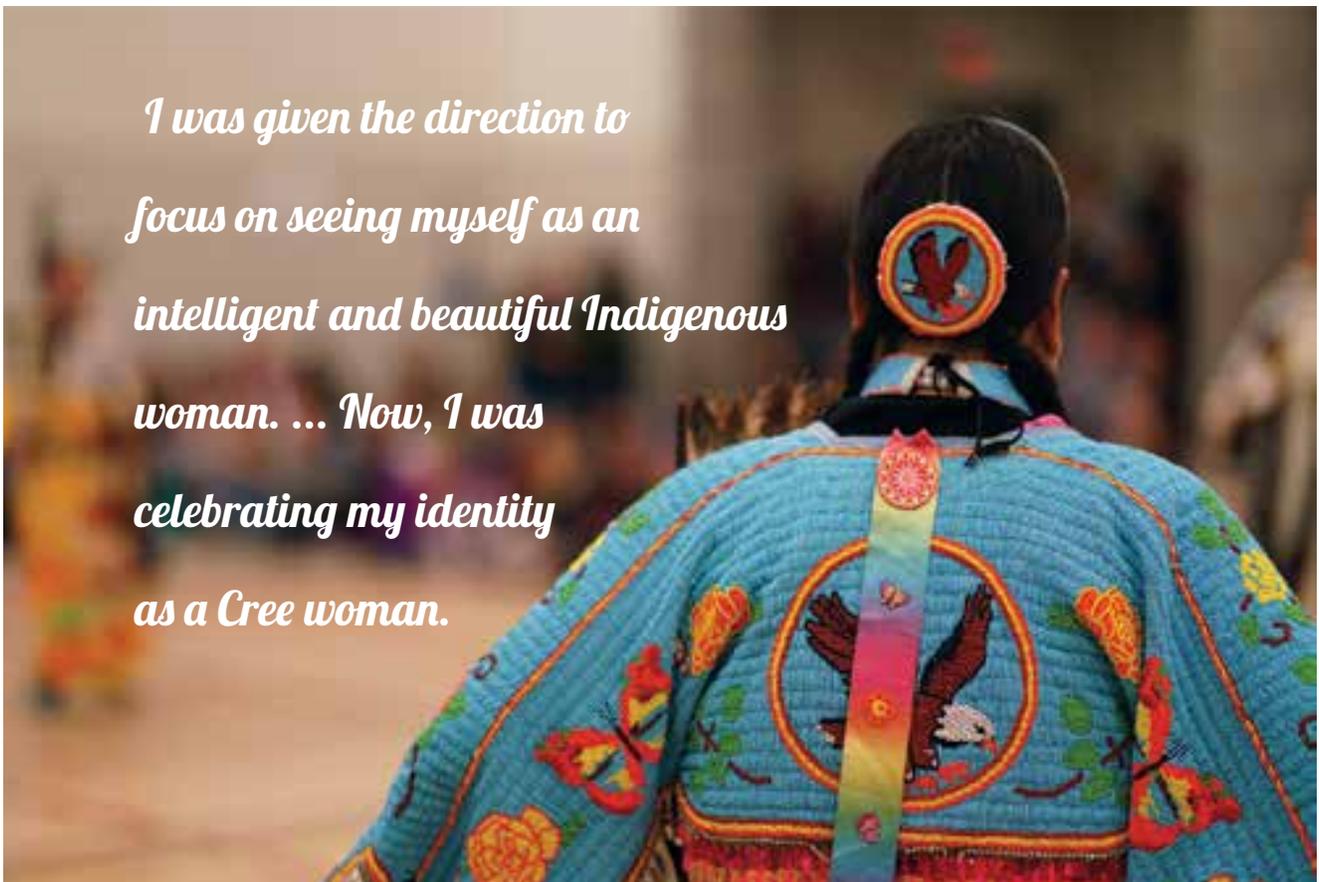
in the Child Welfare System, they were taken away from the struggles of family and community. But they also missed out on what was good and healthy.

For the past several years, I studied to be ordained in the United Church of Canada. In the process of my studies, I knew that I wanted to be a part of the healing for Indigenous People. I had a number of deep and profound experiences in my life that drew me to this place. Three particular ones that changed my life forever happened over a few years in the mid to late 1990s.

My prayer had always been that I would see myself as Creator saw me, worthy of every effort that it takes to love, accept and nurture myself. But I had defined myself by the challenging childhood I had; by my mistakes as well as my parents' mistakes; by the way society saw our people in such a negative way. That is who I thought I was, how I was conditioned to see myself. In the mid 1990s, the community church I was at-

*Photo Amber Green © 2020*

*I was given the direction to focus on seeing myself as an intelligent and beautiful Indigenous woman. ... Now, I was celebrating my identity as a Cree woman.*



tending did a book study. At the end, I went through a process of counselling and prayer that helped me to see myself as a Child of God. I learned that I was one who made mistakes and fell short at times—not a sinner, as I had been taught. I felt such a freedom to know this truth. It was important for me to see myself as one who can help my self and others, especially when Indigenous people were for too long seen as the Church’s “mission field.”

Within a few weeks of this experience, I was invited to a Re-evaluation Co-counselling Program and worked on the pain of life. I was given the direction to focus on seeing myself as an intelligent and beautiful Indigenous woman. It was naturally the next step to my previous experience of seeing myself as a Child of God. Now, I was celebrating my identity as a Cree woman.

In the Autumn of that same year, 1998, I was doing temporary work with World Vision Canada Aboriginal Programs. I had the opportunity to go to the World Christian Gathering of Indigenous People in Rapid City, South Dakota. There, people from all over the world came to celebrate their faith with their prayers, dances, songs, language and ceremony. At the beginning of the Conference, a mission group who had carried the gospel message to the Indigenous people of South Dakota read a letter of apology. The letter stated that the way in which the message was shared with them that said that their culture was to be denied. This message, the letter said, was not of God; rather it was of man. As I thought of the devastation of people and cultures, I felt both deeply sad and hopeful, and began grieving for many things. Still, I left there with a prayer for spiritual revival and cultural restoration for Indigenous people. I continue to pray for this even now.

I believe this prayer has led me to my ordination in June 2019 and to where I am today. In my ordination speech, I said that I am called to be a part of the United Church of Canada living out its apologies to Indigenous people. This has also included sitting with non-Indigenous people and facilitating a better understanding in any way I can. Our stories, including our personal reconciliation, will bring about stories of reconciliation that can be shared with others.

### *Sharing Circles*

December 2019 will mark three years since the Westman Sharing Circle started at Knox United Church in Brandon, Manitoba. The first circle was called, “The Gift of Reconciliation.” In the middle of December, during the Christmas season, thirty people gathered together. Though the circle was held in a church building, it was important that it not be a church event. Instead, it was a gathering of community people who thought it important to be together, listen and learn from each other by sharing experiences and hope for healing... where all are welcome. Organizers offered these questions to reflect on: “What are our thoughts on reconciliation? Where are we at, as individuals, with it?” But a circle takes us beyond our individual thoughts. It is a kind of action.

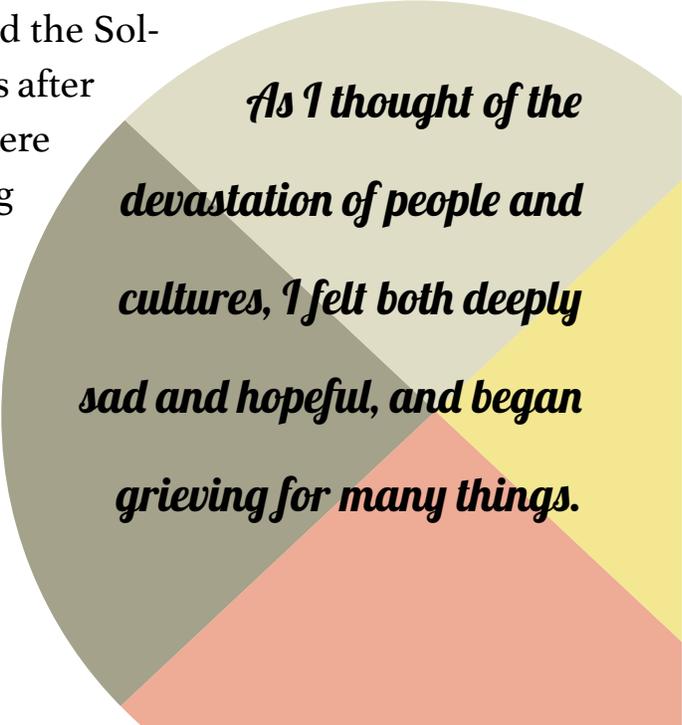
In the many circles that I am a part of, I have been given a vision and direction for life that wasn't there at the talking and planning stage. Each time, I have started on a plan and then, after the first few steps, more has been revealed. So, it will be up to those who participate in this Sharing Circle to determine where it will go and how the future will happen. The progress so far has been encouraging and enlightening. Others in the circle have shared that it gives them a sense of

being grounded. It is so important to ensure that the circle is a safe place for all people.

A few years before the sharing circle officially started, people regularly shared with me what they were learning about reconciliation. They learned through attending community events, reading books, listening to podcasts, and several other ways. So, the thought of a sharing circle came to my mind. How much more beneficial the learning from each other would be if we each shared these thoughts and experiences on a regular basis!

During this time, I was leading a weekly girls' singing and drumming group. This group also had an opening and closing time of sharing, and I loved it. The theme was "Celebrating our Culture & Heritage." It was richly rewarding and an honor to be involved in the lives and families of the children who were there. In December 2014, the children and I hosted a Winter Solstice Gathering called "Songs, Story & Solstice." We gathered with family and friends; the children shared their songs; parents and family shared stories from their memories of childhood and family. After a brief teaching on the Solstice, all shared a meal. We continued on to celebrate the Spring Equinox next, and the Solstice and seasonal Equinoxes after that. That the gatherings were held in the church building was in itself something to be thankful for.

This past summer, at the July sharing circle, one guy shared that he



***As I thought of the devastation of people and cultures, I felt both deeply sad and hopeful, and began grieving for many things.***

went to the Canada Day celebrations. He said that he was very disappointed when the MP for the area brought greetings on behalf of the government and talked about how settlers made Canada what it is. Lonner said he felt so frustrated with those comments because there was no acknowledgement of the history of the Indigenous people who were here when the settlers arrived. Nothing was said about how they helped the settlers survive some of the challenges that the settlers were not prepared for. So, rather than making a scene at the Canada Day event, Lonner decided he would write an email to the government official, reminding him that he missed an opportunity to acknowledge what Indigenous people contributed to what Canada is today. Lonner said he was surprised that the MP was pretty quick to admit that he was mistaken to not mention this. The government official added that he would be sure to do so given another opportunity. The most interesting thing about this story is that Lonner, who is non-Indigenous, said that a year and a half ago he might not have even noticed anything missing from the MP's greeting, let alone address it as he did. He also said that he gave thanks for what he has learned in the circle about his personal responsibility—not only to learn and understand better, but also to do better.

There are many other hopeful stories from the circle. One young man who is Anishinaabe gives me much to hope for. He said that he had decided he would never set foot in a church. But he heard about the good that was happening at the circle from a friend who was attending. Now, this young man hopes to gather the youth at some point and plans to teach the Anishinaabe language one day. We are so encouraged by all who attend.

I will also tell the story of my experience of sitting in circles for thirty-eight years and how it changed my life. As I sat and listened to others over the years, I realized, as time went on, that a deep transformation was happening within me. For the first five years of my circle experience, I could only sit and listen. Eventually, I found my voice there. The experience of circle gave me more than I gave to it. It is truly a miracle when I think about where I was then and where I am now. I have seen this change in the lives of many others also. So, I want others to know that this kind of engaging and being with people is not only liberating, but also lifechanging. In saying this, I am convinced that circle work is vitally important to the ongoing work of reconciliation.

Not everyone is as excited about the idea of a Sharing Circle. Many were and are still hesitant. But I think of circle as part of the solution. So, I encourage those who are uncertain to just come and listen and see what they will learn about themselves and others, and about reconciliation. While I think of connection, reciprocal learning, and relationship and community building, some see it differently. Some seem to think that only certain people need a sharing circle; that maybe it is only for “those” who need help. But the truth is, I think, that there is much to learn from each other.

### ***Blanket Exercises***

For the past five years, I have been involved in Blanket Exercises. This is a participatory history lesson about the challenges of the last 200 years for Indigenous people. It was developed by the Kairos Ecumenical Canadian Justice Initiative in collaboration with Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers and educators. Though many think that the Blanket Exercise



*Kairos Blanket Exercise at Calling Lake, photo courtesy of Kairos Blanket Exercise*

is something you do once, twice or a few times, I and many others have come to see it as an ongoing tool for reconciliation. It is a blessing to sit as the Elder/Knowledge Keeper for many circles, and to be a part of training facilitators for universities, colleges, school divisions, government programs, churches and many other organizations and groups. When I do the Blanket Exercises, I partner with my non-Indigenous friend Debby. For me, it is an example of reconciliation that we facilitate together.

I see the Blanket Exercise as an excellent way to tell the story of Indigenous people and Canada, and to raise awareness. The activity can be seen as the planting of seeds of truth. It is an encounter with a truth that challenges one to think of their own personal reconciliation. Each participant is challenged to explore their own stories of where they are at, and what is their relationship with Indigenous people or the land/territo-

ry where they live or grew up in. For example, before doing the Blanket Exercise, many people in Brandon didn't know there was a Residential School located nearby on the Grand Valley Road. Last year, I was part of a Blanket Exercise that had ninety Education students. They are so passionate and committed to providing an education that has a balanced history that honors all children. Always, I am inspired by what people share at the Blanket Exercise circles. When people are unable to share, I am thankful for their participation and their presence.

### *Learning Must Continue*

When it comes to talking about reconciliation, it is important to think about the society we live in. This society is built on a Western worldview. There is also an Indigenous worldview where life is seen differently in some ways. When institutions and organizations talk about change resulting from apologies and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I often see a clash of worldviews. We know well that, for more than a half a century, the worldview of Indigenous people has been dismissed. Our identity and personhood have been denied in many ways. Many are conditioned to believe, and thus are convinced, that their way of being is not necessary or important.

Change is happening as more and more Indigenous people are claiming and reclaiming their Indigenous identity. More are standing up for themselves and taking back what they need. They are challenging the status quo to make change for children and youth. This new generation needs to know that society celebrates with them who they are, and the gifts and beauty they bring into the world. It is true that, since the 2015 TRC final report, there has been more intentionality. But many Canadians are still unaware of the colonial foundations

of society. They are oblivious to the institutional racism that is prevalent in our lives today and continues to perpetuate problems in the lives of both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people.

For too long, the message from the churches was that ways of Indigenous spirituality and worship were not acceptable. Now, the United Church of Canada is living out its two apologies. One apology was made in 1986 for banning of Indigenous Spiritual Ceremonies and ways of worship. The second was made in 1992 for residential schools. While I am thankful for what has been done, there is still much to do to change the systemically colonized ways of society. The church and other institutions need to see the value of Indigenous worldview, history and education. They need to set it foundationally side by side to the Western worldview and ways. Work needs to be done in the public schools, colleges and university, and churches, to help ensure that there is equality and fairness when decisions that affect people are made.

I will end with an adapted version of a quote from Martin Luther King. “It must be said that some people are not putting in a similar effort to re-educate themselves out of their ignorance. Is it an aspect of their sense of superiority that some believe they have so little to learn?” In truth, we all have much to learn.



*Rev. Susan McPherson-Derendy, of the Cree Nation, is a graduate of the Sandy-Saulteaux Spiritual Centre; an alumna of the Canadian Council for Leadership and Learning; and a participant, Intercultural Mentor, and Facilitator of the Deepening Understanding of Intercultural Ministry.*



*Share difficult stories through dialogue (Jewish)*

# **A Sacred Duty: Steps Towards Reconciliation by the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre**

**Ilona Shulman Spaar**

*with assistance from Lise Kirchner and Shyla Seller*

## *Envisioning a World Free of Discrimination*

Within its broad mandate, the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre has embraced reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous Peoples. Thus, it has helped bring the reconciliation movement's message of understanding, tolerance and hope to the communities it educates. The VHEC invites people interested in reconciliation to learn about its shared journey with its Indigenous partners.

The Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, a teaching museum founded in 1994, is a leader in Holocaust education in British Columbia. It emerged from the vision of local Holocaust survivors, who have been sharing their eyewitness accounts since 1976. They have spoken against genocide, in order to promote social justice and human rights for all. Each year,

the VHEC engages more than 25,000 students in its commemorative, educational and cultural programs.

The VHEC challenges young people to become committed and responsible global citizens. It helps alert them to injustice, discrimination, racism and genocide in today's world. The VHEC analyzes lessons learned from the Holocaust within broader national and international contexts, both historic and contemporary. The VHEC programs have featured the stories of Canadian Holocaust survivors along with stories of survivors of genocides in Rwanda, Darfur, Armenia and survivors of the genocidal Indian Residential School system in Canada. Programs have explored the experiences of Jewish refugees as well as South Asian, Chinese, Ugandan, Vietnamese and Syrian refugees. From these diverse contexts, universal lessons emerge.

*Holocaust Survivor Robbie Waisman:  
A Story of Resilience and Education*

Reconciliation, it has been said, begins with one person willing to hear and engage in a difficult dialogue. Within the VHEC community, Robbie Waisman has been that person. Robbie, a child Holocaust survivor, is a past president of the VHEC and a current board member. He has helped connect the Jewish community with Canada's Indigenous communities, initiating a journey of mutual learning and understanding.

Robbie's early experience of trauma shaped him into an empathetic listener and speaker. Born in pre-war Poland, Robbie was the youngest child in an Orthodox Jewish family. For the seven years of the war, from the age of eight on, Robbie



*Robbie Waisman (right) was recognized and honoured in a blanket ceremony for his contributions to reconciliation and his work at Reconciliation Canada at the Walk for Reconciliation in Vancouver on September 24, 2017. Photo courtesy of Reconciliation Canada.*

was confined to a Jewish ghetto, forced into slave labour, and ultimately deported by train to the Buchenwald concentration camp. Robbie lost his parents and four brothers in the Holocaust and was one of 430 children liberated from Buchenwald at the age of 14. Those surviving children, labeled *les enfants terribles* for the destructive anger they exhibited, were given little to no psychological counselling. They were deemed by psychiatrists as damaged beyond repair.

After spending three years in a French orphanage, in 1948 Robbie immigrated to Canada, where he married, raised a family and built a successful career. Yet, like many survivors of the Holocaust, it was years before Robbie was able to open up about his personal experience. For many, the decades following the war were for rebuilding broken lives; Holocaust experiences were buried in order to focus on the present.

Yet Robbie had promised his fellow inmates at Buchenwald that, if he survived, he would tell the world what he had witnessed. That promise resurfaced for him in the early 1980s during the trial of Canadian Holocaust denier, Jim Keegstra. That trial motivated Robbie to speak publicly about his experiences.

The first time Robbie spoke in public was so emotionally devastating that he vowed he would never do it again. But with encouragement from peers and a profound sense of mission and obligation, Robbie persevered in sharing his experience:

My survival meant something. After all these years, I felt that I had to do it. I think any of us in our community who is in a position to bring healing and reconciliation has a sacred duty to do whatever they can.

Robbie has since dedicated himself to educating thousands of students across Canada and around the world about the dangers of intolerance and hatred. Through his work, he raises awareness about and encourages compassion toward those who have suffered trauma, in the solemn belief that education and understanding will bring healing and reconciliation.

### *The Importance of Sharing Eyewitness Accounts*

Since 2002, Robbie has worked to build relationships between the Jewish community and Canada's Indigenous Peoples. Drawing on his experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust, he has reached out to those who suffered trauma within Canada's genocidal Residential School system. With the goal of contributing to the process of healing and reconciliation, he has offered his personal experience and insights.

In 2003, Robbie and Residential School survivor Willie Abrahams first collaborated together to address students in BC

about their shared experiences of persecution and violence. Willie Abrahams was taken from his home to Saint Michael's Indian Residential School in Alert Bay, B.C. For seven years, the school tried to force him to change his culture, language and way of life, through a process of physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual abuse. The two speakers shared their vision of a world of respect and acceptance.

In 2008, Robbie was invited to address delegates at a Residential School conference held in Fort Providence, NWT. Some of the Indian Residential School survivors had never before spoken about their experiences. They came from different nations and spoke many different languages, but with the help of translators they heard Robbie's message of hope. Robbie was moved as he witnessed the tears of Residential School survivors and heard their personal stories about abuse and trauma experienced in Canada's Indian Residential School system.

Since then, Robbie has spoken to, and heard from, hundreds of people from Indigenous communities. Hearing Robbie's story of persecution, survival and healing, many Residential School survivors became inspired to face their own painful memories of persecution and loss. One survivor commented, "Look at this guy. He had survived; we can survive." Robbie's visit to Fort Providence changed his perspective as well. "I came to see my own experiences reflected in the tragedy of the Residential School survivors," he said.

### *Participation in the National Effort of the TRC*

In 2011, Robbie was inducted as an Honorary Witness to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada led by Chairman Justice Murray Sinclair. In this role, Robbie trav-



*Brad Marsden from the Gitksan Nation with members of the Jewish community of Greater Vancouver, during the workshop *Impacts of Colonization & Residential Schools: Responses to Historical Trauma* on March 24, 2019. Photo courtesy of the VHEC.*

eled the country for two years, meeting many of the estimated 80,000 surviving Residential School students. He heard their stories and shared his own. Robbie saw how difficult it is for many survivors to tell their stories directly to their children. He told Justice Sinclair, who took Robbie's advice seriously. In 2015, Justice Sinclair told a reporter:

Based on that, when we go to a community, we bring all the [residential school] survivors in and we always make a point to bring their children in so that when the survivors are talking to us, the children are hearing them. That proved to be an exceptionally strong piece of advice for us to open the lines of communication within families. From the perspective of residential school survivors, often the most important process of reconciliation that they wanted to engage in, that they needed to engage in, was to apologize to their own families for how they behaved after residential schools and to be given an act of forgiveness by their children, their spouses, their family members.

Robbie has shared the history of Canada's Residential School system to audiences across the country. He was an early advocate for its inclusion in school curricula. Together with the VHEC, he facilitated the participation of the Jewish community in the 2013 and 2017 Walks for Reconciliation in Vancouver. In 2017, Robbie was honoured by Reconciliation Canada in a blanket ceremony.

Robbie feels strongly that the Jewish people can play a crucial role in national reconciliation efforts: "People need to see that others want to listen, that they care. When they know people have compassion for them, they gain the strength to change their ways. Jews can help in the national reconciliation process by listening and showing their care. It can really make a difference." However, Robbie also believes it is not enough to simply bear witness: "One has to show compassion and also educate next generations."

### ***Shared Educational Programming for Future Generations***

The VHEC's Annual Symposium on the Holocaust for high school students is one of its most successful programs. The symposium speakers for 2014 and 2017 were Indian Residential School survivor Chief Dr. Robert Joseph and Robbie Waisman. In response, one grade II student wrote, "It touched my heart. I feel as if I have not been appreciating my life enough. I will do more for the world and hope I do something in the future that will not just help my community but everyone on this planet."

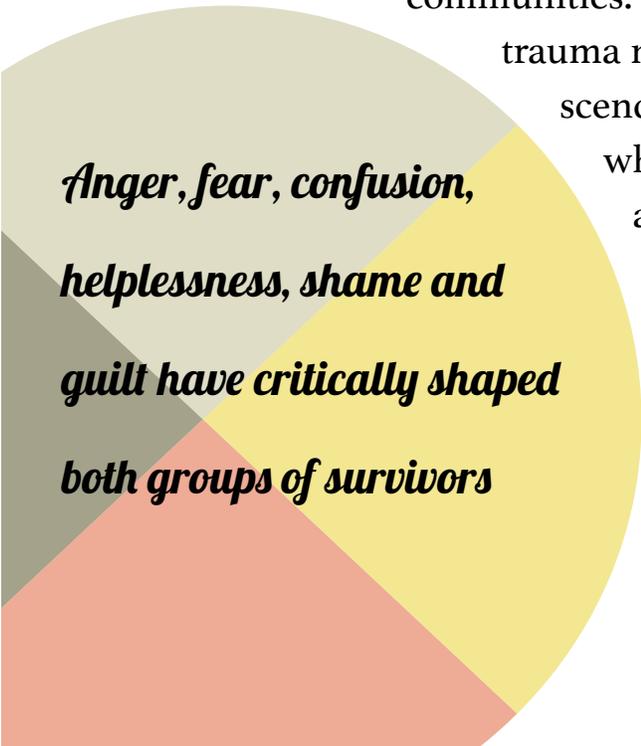
A new initiative in 2019 was a workshop on inter-generational trauma. "Impacts of Colonization and Residential School" was facilitated by Brad Marsden, a counsellor and ed-

ucator from the Gitksan Nation. Brad was raised primarily by his grandparents, Residential School survivors. He was significantly affected by the trauma his grandparents experienced. During the workshop, he shared his own journey towards healing and reconciliation.

Despite significant historical differences between the Holocaust and Canada's Indian Residential School system, Brad revealed similar disempowering feelings experienced by the two communities. Anger, fear, confusion, helplessness, shame and guilt have critically shaped both groups of survivors. Despite the impact of trauma, Brad noted the considerable resilience of both communities. Amalia Boe-Fishman, child survivor of the Holocaust was deeply moved by Brad's workshop. She said, "There is a close relationship between the children of the Residential Schools and the children of the Holocaust and their families affected by it."

Brad's workshop offered insight into the long-lasting impacts of colonization. He showed how the trauma of Residential Schools affects the second and third generations. He raised many questions for future dialogue within and between both

communities: How does transgenerational trauma manifest itself? How do the descendants of trauma survivors heal when the survivor cannot speak about the trauma? Who has the right to speak about trauma? Should it only be the person who directly experienced it? Or should the second and third generations speak?



***Anger, fear, confusion,  
helplessness, shame and  
guilt have critically shaped  
both groups of survivors***

### ***Educating about Sensitive Subject Matter: Partnership of the VHEC and IRSC***

The VHEC maintains a collection of more than 200 recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors and eyewitnesses, dating back to 1979. The entire testimony collection was digitized and catalogued between 2014 and 2019. The Centre produced supporting materials to enhance the usability and accessibility of the testimonies for research and education. Over several years, professional staff of the VHEC researched best practices for integrating sensitive personal testimonies of human suffering with other archival materials and artifacts. As they developed their collection management system, they gave special consideration to sensitivity of subject matter, personal privacy of witnesses and the restrictions imposed on use of some testimony.

The VHEC's experience led to a partnership between the VHEC and UBC's Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre (IRSC). The IRSC opened in March 2018. It is the repository for TRC records and testimonies of Residential School survivors on the west coast. The IRSC learned from the VHEC's experience in managing a testimony collection, building a collections database, and educating with eyewitness accounts. The VHEC learned from the IRSC about new interactive exhibition features and about different cataloguing practices. Representatives of the two institutions continue to share best practices about using survivor testimonies in education.

#### ***Conclusion: Questions for the Future***

Residential School survivors and Holocaust survivors have different histories. However, through the process of reconcil-

iation, the two communities have found similarities in their experiences. They have taken strength from confronting common concerns. Together, they continue to explore important questions. With a shared history of discrimination, racism, persecution and murder, how do our communities find effective ways to reconcile with the past? How do we heal from directly experienced trauma and intergenerational trauma? How do we best educate future generations about challenging subject matter in a sensitive way? How do we address the cultural and material losses suffered by our communities and pursue initiatives for restitution? As survivors pass away over time, what challenges will we face in continuing our educational work? And, finally, how can we continue to work together to further inclusion, diversity, justice and human rights?



*Dr. Ilona Shulman Spaar is Education Director and Curator at the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre.*



*Learn and teach others (Sikh)*

# Speaking with Your Neighbors: What Sikhs Can Contribute to Reconciliation

**Sukhuinder Kaur Vinning**

CANADA'S SIKH POPULATION is diverse. Spiritually, we practice a path that encourages individual interpretation. Some of its tools can be helpful in Reconciliation practices. Historically, we bring our own experiences as victims of colonialism, discrimination and genocide. As individuals, our self-understandings as settlers and new immigrants differ. Thus, we vary in our capacities to engage in Canada's practice of Reconciliation. On the one hand, the World Sikh Organization of Canada, in partnership with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has helped educate Sikhs about the history of Indigenous peoples, and some Sikhs have been receptive. On the other hand, some Sikhs are unable to be part of conversations about communities who have suffered, as their own wounds are fresh. Thus, some of us have chosen to work on ourselves before engaging in Reconciliation dialogue, while others work towards both. Below, I will briefly introduce Sikh

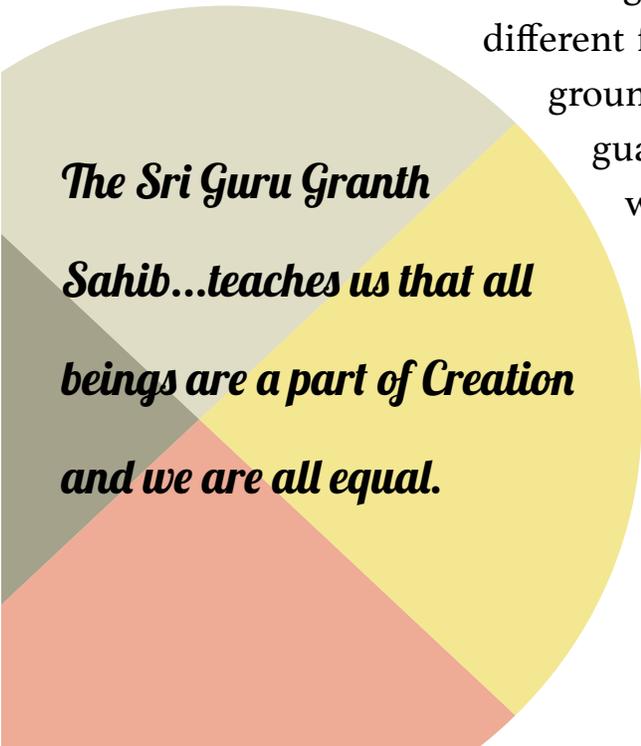
spiritual practices, present some of the challenges we face as Sikhs, and discuss our contributions to Reconciliation.

### ***Gursikhee: The Sikh Spiritual Path***

Gursikhee, the Sikh spiritual path of empowerment, is not an organized religion as we understand it in the West. Instead, Gursikhee is a way of life based upon the Sikh Teachings, the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. We Sikhs consider it our living Teacher, just as we did the ten human Gurus who developed Gursikhee from the mid-1400s to the early 1700s on the Indian subcontinent. It is our ruling Sovereign, our living and embodied text, and we strive to become like the Teachings it contains.

The *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* teaches us that we are connected directly with Creation itself, instead of a deity or a Heavenly Father. Containing over 1400 pages and almost 6,000 stanzas, it explores our relationship with Creation through a diversity of lenses, perspectives and ways of thought. It teaches us that all beings are a part of Creation and we are all equal. It emphasizes that we are not bound by the circumstances of our birth nor our genetics. It contains the writings of six Sikh Gurus as well the writings of thirty-six individuals from different faith, cultural and social backgrounds. It contains multiple languages. The wisdom contained within it is vast and diverse.

Sikh practices are also very diverse. No two Sikhs are identical in our practice and understanding of Gursikhee. We each have our own diver-



***The Sri Guru Granth***

***Sahib...teaches us that all  
beings are a part of Creation  
and we are all equal.***

sity of lenses, perspectives and ways of thought. They affect our spiritual practice and how we show up in our life. So, too, do our diverse cultural origins. Sikhs spread out across the world during the British Empire. Today, Sikhs are born and raised in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, South America, and North America. Many of us have immigrated to Canada from elsewhere. We bring our practices and understanding of Gursikhee based upon the countries where we were raised.

### *Colonization of the Sikh People*

Most Sikhs across the world can trace their roots back to Punjab, a region of the Indian subcontinent. This ancient land had its own advanced educational traditions that were thousands of years old. Due in part to a woman named Bibi Sada Kaur (1762 – 1832), both Punjabi women and men were highly educated in the 1800s. Bibi Sada Kaur, Chief of the sovereign state of Kanhaiya, helped unite Sikhs under one banner to create the Empire of Punjab in 1801. Her son-in-law, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who ruled the empire, spent more money each year on education than the British, and it became mandatory for all girls, regardless of culture or faith, to attend school.

By the mid-1700s, Britain's East India Company had brought various kingdoms on the Indian Subcontinent under the company's rule. In England, the company's conquests sparked a debate on whether Indigenous education should be allowed. Charles Grant, an evangelical director of the East India Company, passionately believed that Indians would accept British rule if they were provided with English education and opportunities to convert to Christianity. When he became a member of parliament, he supported the movement to have Christian missionaries teach English in India as they preached Christianity.



*Sikhs at 2017 Walk for Reconciliation, photo courtesy of World Sikh Organization*

The movement was successful and in 1813, the British Parliament passed the East India Company Act of 1813. The act renewed the Company's charter and relaxed controls on missionary activity in India, empowering the British to educate Indians for the sake of their religious and moral improvement. In 1835, Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General of British India, ruled that European literature and science needed to be promoted to Indians. Britain would now only fund education taught in English, and focus on educating the upper classes. In the words of Thomas Macaulay, an advisor to Governor-General Bentinck, "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."

By 1858 all of British India, including Punjab, was directly ruled by the British Crown. The British dismantled the large endowments that funded education in Punjab, decreasing the number of schools. They began book-burning programs, preventing women from teaching their children to read and write at home. With the reduced literacy rate, many Sikhs were unable to read the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and access the Teachings it contained. The equality of all was eroded and, increasingly, social opportunities depended upon one's caste, status and gender.

The British departure in 1947 left Sikhs with many challenges. Today, Sikhs make up 60% of the state of Punjab's population, but less than 2% of India's. Sikhs struggle with being assimilated into the mainstream Hindu culture. Though the Indian constitution explicitly recognizes freedom of religion, individual laws have not always given Sikhs religious autonomy. Bollywood movies often portray Sikhs as uncouth, rough, or comical, but grateful to be living in India. Sikhs have been advocating for water rights in Punjab for decades. Unemployment in the Punjab is higher than the national average. Sikh farmer suicide is at an epidemic level. Activists have criticized the government for too freely issuing liquor licences.

In 1984, in response to the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh guards, thousands of Sikh civilians were massacred in riots organized by the Indian National Congress political party. Up until the mid 1990s, Sikhs were also murdered indiscriminately by police and security forces in extrajudicial killings and illegally cremated in order to hide their deaths. Many survivors and their families have been silenced, with no way to tell the truth. Sikhs are still struggling to have a pub-

lic conversation about this genocide without being accused of terrorism or separatism.

### *Oneness of All and Reconciliation*

As Sikhs, we balance between two worlds, with one foot in the temporal or “real” world (*Miri*), and the other in the spiritual world (*Piri*). It is not enough to just pray, meditate and contemplate. We must do these as we are showing up in our lives and in the world. Nor is it enough to just live and show up in the world. We need to grow our capacity as individuals and cultivate wisdom, courage and clarity of thought. It is necessary to process our fears, arrogance and sense of entitlement. We must work to understand and practice the oneness of all.

In order to do this, we need to understand *Naam*. In Gursikhee traditions, *Naam* is one of the many words for Cre-

ation. At all times, we are a part of it, and it is a part of us. We feel it within every atom of our bodies. It soaks our conscious and subconscious. Everything and everyone is a part of us and we are a part of them. There is no us and them. There is only one us, the oneness of all.



*Janmeet Khalra at Blanket ceremony, photo courtesy of World Sikh Organization*

Many wrongly assume that the oneness of all actually means the sameness of all. They believe that we must all be the same, dress the same, act the same, or believe in the same things. In other words, we need to be as identical as possible. However, identical twins, born of the same fertilized egg, have different fingerprints and different personalities coming out of the womb. They are not identical beings. None of us are.

Appreciating the oneness of all includes many facets. It is the understanding that we are all a part of Creation and a part of each other. It is recognizing that we are all connected. It is accepting that while we have so many similarities, we will always have differences. It is working to understand each other while being different and imperfect. It is acknowledging that the person we are upset with is still a human being, just like ourselves. It is making the effort to be humane. It is knowing that we all have value and something to contribute to the greater whole, even if we don't like each other.

Hand in hand with *Naam*, is *Chardee Kalaa*, the practice of inspired resilience. As we experience suffering, challenges, trauma, and difficulties, inspired resilience helps us to continue to expand and stay connected with Creation rather than contracting and isolating ourselves. It is an ever-increasing, upward movement through dark times.

*Chardee Kalaa* is based on a deep-seated belief and trust that the Creation we are a part of will support us to make it through this darkness; that, as long as we are open, what we need or who we need will show up. Making a conscious choice to deliberately be joyous in the face of darkness will push us forward and make us stronger. We need this resilient strength to engage in Reconciliation. Some people have a tendency to

contract and disengage when we experience hardship and pain. Others become aggressive. Some of us become paralyzed with overwhelm. Flight, fight, or freeze are deeply rooted instincts we carry in our subconscious. Inspired resilience is a conscious practice that helps us overcome these instincts. It supports us in staying connected to ourselves and the people around us and being present with a humane mindset when we feel hardship and pain.

Along with *Chardee Kalaa*, Sikhs practice *Sarbath Daa Bhalaa*, working towards the well-being of all. This is a key teaching and an active practice to help us overcome our habit of “us versus them.” By opening our eyes and seeing the suffering around us, we begin to understand that we are not the only ones experiencing challenges and pain. By engaging to help someone, we get the opportunity to start to see ourselves in the other person and understand their perspective. We see the common threads of suffering in our individual pain. We see them as us and, when we do, we are able to effectively work towards the wellbeing of all.

Doing so brings us back to the practice of *Naam*, recognizing the oneness of us all. Not the sameness, for we recognize the diversity of human experience among Indigenous peoples, settlers, and newer immigrants. But specifically to the reality that all of us flourish most when we support the well-being of all—one of the key commitments expressed through the practice of Reconciliation.

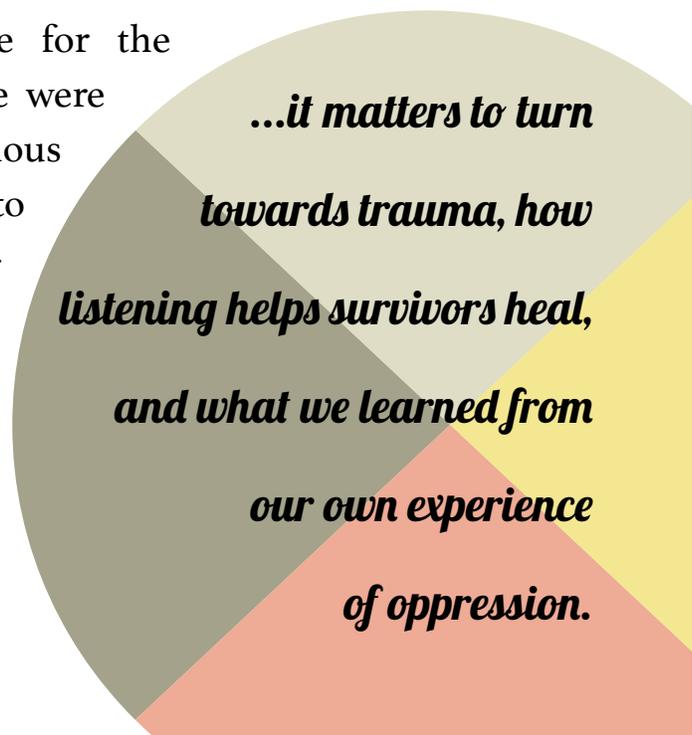
### ***Reconciliation in Canada***

In 2013, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission approached the World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO). The

TRC asked us to help educate Sikhs about the Commission's work and encourage them to participate. At the time, I was Executive Director of the WSO, and I answered without hesitation, "Yes!" WSO's board of directors agreed: as Sikhs, we are called to follow the principle of *Sarbath Daa Bhalaa*, working for the wellbeing of all. We also follow the example set by our 9th Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621-1675). He gave up his life while advocating for the religious freedom of his neighbours. Thus, we have a responsibility to be in the trenches with our neighbors and help them to extend their voice.

In response to the TRC's initiative, we produced a short film called *It Matters: The Legacy of Residential Schools*. In the film, we acknowledge that, initially, Sikhs, along with many other Canadians, turned away from the abuses of the Residential School system. We explain why it matters to turn towards trauma, how listening helps survivors heal, and what we learned from our own experience of oppression.

In the fall of 2013, the Sikh community of the Lower Mainland participated in both the BC National Event for the TRC and the Walk for Reconciliation. Sikhs presented an expression of reconciliation at the national event that shared our gratitude for the protocols and language we were learning from our Indigenous neighbours about how to deal with survivors of trauma. At the Walk for Reconciliation, Sikhs joined 70,000 participants to walk in solidarity. Rec-



conciliation Canada honoured Navnit Singh, a survivor of the Sikh genocide. This was the first recognition of a Sikh survivor in the world. Our experiences in both events have led us to begin to develop language that we can use to gently talk with our own Sikh survivors, who are still afraid to come forward.

In 2017, Sikhs again participated in the Walk for Reconciliation, in a more organized, more visible way. At the walk's destination, the Reconciliation Expo in Strathcona Park, Sikhs hosted a booth where they shared Sikh traditions. Again, a Sikh was honoured. Chief Ian Campbell ceremonially blanketed Janmeet Singh Khalra, to honour the sacrifice of his father, the late Jaswant Singh Khalra. Jaswant Singh brought forth evidence of thousands of Sikhs being illegally cremated when they were killed by Indian police and security forces. As a result of his efforts, Jaswant Singh was arrested by the Punjab police and illegally killed in 1995. The ceremony reminded us again that humanity is one family, responsible for each other's well-being.

Some Sikhs, still shaken by their family's experiences of colonization and, later, genocide, have been afraid to step forward as activists. But others have been inspired by public Reconciliation events. In 2014, WSO and the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Association of Surrey supported the "Through Our Eyes" project, which held reconciliation workshops for students. Sikh participants then attended the Edmonton National Event for the TRC and shared an expression of reconciliation. In 2016, Sikhs were adopted into the land at a Reconciliation Canada gathering in Manitoba. In 2018 Khalsa Aid, a Sikh humanitarian organization that has been participating in reconciliation with the Ahousaht Nation on Vancouver Island, pledged \$200,000

to the Nation to support their youth and their search and rescue efforts. Much can happen when we take responsibility for the well-being of others.

Listening when a community talks about its own pain is a good start. But it only goes so far. When a neighbor talks, too, and joins their voice in advocacy, the story goes farther. We Canadians can help each other through this advocacy. Every human being has a sphere of influence, whether it is family, school, or around the water cooler at work. Each of us can bring issues to the table in our own sphere of influence. A simple but effective action is to educate yourself and share the information. You can begin by asking questions. “Did you know Residential Schools closed as recently as 1996? Do you know what is happening now in Indigenous communities?” Share what you learn. You will inspire action.

*References:*

*It Matters: The Legacy of Residential Schools.* [https://youtu.be/TV2Ar\\_5IKxU](https://youtu.be/TV2Ar_5IKxU)



*Sukhvinder Kaur Vinning, former Executive Director of the World Sikh Organization of Canada, is the founder of Worldwide Shift Disturbers, whose mission is to create an intergenerational community that takes action for inspired positive change.*



*Educate youth in history, dialogue, and  
critical thinking (Bahá'í)*

# **Advancing the Conversation on Reconciliation as Spiritual Process**

## **The Bahá'í Community of Canada**

BAHÁ'U'LLÁH (1817-1892), founder of the Bahá'í Faith, taught that the religions of the world come from the same Source, and are successive chapters of one religion from God. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh challenges humanity to reject division and embrace a unifying vision of the future of society.

The Bahá'í Faith has been present in Canada since 1898. It has grown to more than 35,000 people in more than 1000 localities. The Bahá'ís of this country reflect the diversity of Canada itself. Our community includes Indigenous peoples, first-generation immigrants, and multi-generational Canadians of English, French, and other national backgrounds. Indigenous people have been members since the 1940s, and part of our national leadership since the 1970s.

For more than a century, the Bahá'í community has been committed to embracing the role of Indigenous people in society. In 1917, even before the Bahá'í community in Cana-

da included Indigenous members, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called on us to “attach great importance to the indigenous population of America” because of its potential to “enlighten the whole world.”

Many Bahá’í concepts overlap with the sacred values, teachings, and practices of Indigenous spiritualities. As varied as those Indigenous values and practices may be, many common features resonate: the nobility of the human being, the wisdom of divine providence and creation, the individual welfare held in trust by the community, unity of the collective, and careful attention to justice.

Thus, in 1994, the Bahá’í Community of Canada submitted a statement to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. In 2013, the community submitted another contribution to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And in 2015, the community produced *The Path Home*, a short film commemorating the formal conclusion of the work of the TRC. These formal acts complement the work of many local Bahá’í communities. For decades, they have reached towards friendship, partnership, dialogue, and new ways of working together between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

### *Reconciliation as a Spiritual Process*

Fundamentally, reconciliation is a spiritual process. It aims to realize the fundamental oneness of humanity in all dimensions of life. Reconciliation invites us to engage with one another in a spirit of selfless love. In this spirit, we overcome misunderstandings through patient and respectful dialogue. We use our cultural differences as opportunities to learn from one another. Many Indigenous cultures and the Bahá’í teachings

agree: love includes cooperation, reciprocity and mutual aid. We should think of all people as relatives. As the Bahá'í teachings put it, "Shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity." We should "not be content with showing friendship in words alone," rather, our hearts should "burn with loving kindness for all who may cross [our] path."

Respectful love is not just a state of mind and heart. It involves the whole of society. The project of building relationship relies on every individual, family, group, business, cultural body and level of government. Together, we need to gain greater awareness of our history, acknowledge harms that have been done, and take practical steps to redress injustice and its inter-generational effects. Practical matters include land and

*Photo Amber Green © 2020*

*Together, we need to gain greater awareness of our history, acknowledge harms that have been done, and take practical steps to redress injustice and its inter-generational effects.*



resource ownership, public decision-making, and educational curricula in schools and universities – just to name a few. The way forward must be led by Indigenous peoples and organizations. At the same time, non-Indigenous people must make changes in their mindset, language, and practice.

Genuine reconciliation is a challenging process. The issues are complex. The task overflows any one-dimensional approach. It will take time to see measurable success. So, it is helpful to understand that we are collectively walking a path of social and personal learning.

### *The Role of Education*

From our experience with youth across Canada, we feel strongly about investing in a new generation of youth. From childhood up through the early years of identity formation, youth acquire values and form their character. During early adolescence (ages eleven to fourteen), young people can be brought together in service and friendship. Together, they can experience a process of reconciliation that transcends cultural and identity boundaries. Government, educational institutions, religious communities, Indigenous organizations and other groups of civil society should work together on this education.

Schools must play a part in this process. Their teaching about history, cultures and ways of life can supply fundamental background for conversations. With shared facts, people can do more than simply trade opinions. School curricula must acknowledge both the achievements and deep scars of our history. Students should learn about early histories of cooperative relations and treaties between Indigenous peoples, settlers and newcomers. They should learn about recent steps

in overcoming harmful social patterns. But they must also study what the TRC referred to as “policies of cultural genocide and assimilation.” They should be made aware of the most negative forces of history, which are still present in different forms.

Facts alone are not enough. Critical thinking, values, and sensitivity are also important. Students should learn a vocabulary that helps them critically examine injustice and oppression. They should be taught to think beyond slogans, clichés, and rigid either-or thinking, and to discern patterns in history. Young people should also be taught to value the inherent nobility of every person. They should learn to express their values in careful listening and talking, collaborative projects, and cross-cultural appreciation. Finally, provincial and local governments must develop legislation and policy that support these new patterns of education.

### *Advancing a Conversation*

As we learn together, we will encounter others, speak together, develop partnerships and friendships. We will reach across barriers that injustice, prejudice and pain have erected. To do so, we have to nurture new capacities of courage, resolve and determined action. Early efforts may lead to misunderstanding and discomfort. But, if we are committed to learning together, we will overlook the shortcomings of others, be attentive to unconscious prejudices, and continue to work for unity despite the challenges. Over time, we hope to more fully recognize one another for who we are. On that basis, we will build greater mutual respect and understanding.

Conversation is an important tool. We need to cultivate the elements of productive conversation. These include: talking

issues through, listening carefully, thinking before speaking, and speaking as long as is necessary to be understood. This conversational ethic is upheld in many Indigenous cultures. It deserves more attention within wider Canadian society. When we attend to the process of dialogue, we acknowledge that there are no short-cuts to healing and reconciliation. We recognize there can be no healing, reconciliation or justice without taking the time to understand and be understood.

This mode of conversation prizes candour and courtesy, and respect between all participants. All participants who feel misunderstood—whether identified as egregiously wronged victims or perpetrators of injustice—may be heard. The purpose cannot be to assign guilt or shame. Instead, it is to help everyone understand the role they can play in building mutually respectful relationships. This type of conversation is part of a genuine process of seeking the truth, and creating a new community ethic. It is not a tool of negotiation and compromise. Nor is it simply an expression of protest and outrage, or the play of domination and paternalism. Conversation is itself part of the creation of new social spaces that express justice. It has the potential to generate enduring social transformation.

### *A vision of social change*

In the long-term, humanity must learn to live as family in our shared planetary home. History shows positive evidence that the diversity of peoples on the planet is gradually coming together in spirit and good-will. Together, we must continue to create workable institutions and harmonious patterns of coordination and social unity. We see the dim outlines of a new threshold of maturity for the human race. This maturity, foretold in Indigenous prophecies, has been foreseen by many

peoples. In our time, we are living through the turbulence of an adolescent age. Destructive forces still cause enormous suffering, placing many people in appalling and inequitable circumstances. We do need to learn to overcome those forces. To do so, we need to recognize past positive advances. And, looking towards the future, we need to draw on the hope and idealism our younger generations.

Finally, we need to consider the question of power. Too often, power is defined as a tool of control or domination. Politics is too regarded as a contest for power. But this model of politics is divisive and destructive. It perpetuates an endless struggle between competing groups and interests. Relationships of power that prize domination, coercion and control have harmed efforts at reconciliation.

Thus, we need to consider a broader view of power, one that emphasizes productive and generative capacities. For instance, the powers of unity, love, humble service, and pure deeds lead to strong social action. They can generate social possibilities and alternatives. So, we must properly and intentionally cultivate these powers of the human spirit, and use them to build social relationships based on cooperation and reciprocity. We seek to build a society based on truth, mutual respect, justice and unity that is sincere about reconciliation. Thus, the means we use should express these same high ideals.



*This reflection draws on Bahá'í teachings and the experience of a number of members of the Bahá'í community of Canada. Together, we seek to inform the work of our community as it participates in Canadian public discourse and works collaboratively towards a better world.*



*Meditate on your role in history and healing  
(Buddhist)*

## Reconciliation, the Mind, and Action

### **Po Lam Buddhist Community**

*“Bhikkhus, there are these two kinds of fools. What two? One who does not see his transgression as a transgression and one who does not, in accordance with the Dhamma, accept the transgression of one who is confessing.*

*These are the two kinds of fools.*

*Bhikkhus, there are two kinds of wise people. What two? One who sees his transgression as a transgression and one who, in accordance with the Dhamma, accepts the transgression of one who is confessing.*

*These are the two kinds of wise people.”*

*Aṅguttara Nikāya 2.21, translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi*

WHEN APPROACHING RECONCILIATION within Canada, non-Indigenous persons must first examine our intentions. As the Buddha taught, correct intention is the driving force of any action. In the reconciliation process, what is it that we are called to do? We are called to listen, to acknowledge our role in the harms of colonialism, and develop relationship.

Though we seek harmony and forgiveness, these cannot be our only motivations for reconciliation. Instead, we must identify the true causes of our present situation. We must be willing to examine ourselves, identify our faults, and recognize the part we play in perpetuating past and present wrongs. When we illuminate the root causes within ourselves, we can start the process of reconciliation with honesty and integrity. In this process, three aspects of Buddhist practice can be particularly helpful: meditation, loving kindness, and ethical behaviour.

### *Meditation*

On the journey to reconciliation, we are called to take our place as listeners. We must hear difficult and tragic stories of pain, loss, and terror, as well as resilience and strength. But without awareness and clarity, we cannot listen to people without judgment, or understand their experiences and points of view. Meditation practice helps us remain equanimous in the face of often very uncomfortable truths about Canada's history and treatment of Indigenous people. When we meditate, we can observe our reactions, let them go, and settle into in the present moment. In the listening moment, we may not feel peace. We may feel guilt, shame, anger, remorse, pity, or perhaps even apathy. As these reactions appear, we are aware as they arise within us. And in this awareness, it is possible for these obstructions to naturally dissolve.

*To be mindful is to be aware, to know,  
To become sensitive to what is  
Happening right now without any habitual reactions.  
Maintain that equanimity,  
Maintain that tranquility,  
Maintain that objective observation*

*Your mind is bound to become  
Calm and quiet and peaceful.  
Way to Home, by Ven. Yin Kit Sik*

Meditation, as the Buddha taught it, brings an awareness and clarity that help us see reality the way it truly is, not the way we want it to be or wish that it were. During meditation courses and retreats, we use an analogy to describe the process of meditation. Meditation is like the act of emptying an over-full can of garbage. This garbage bin is hidden away in a dark corner of the carport or basement. Once in a while, we acknowledge its presence. If we open its lid, we quickly put it back on, not wanting to see the uncomfortable reality. Or we throw flowery perfume on it to try to minimize its stench. But it is imperative to our well-being that we see clearly what we have accumulated. So, when we sit quietly in meditation, we open that garbage can, and look inside. We take out the mind's gar-



*Indigenous Studies Program class visits Buddhist Temple in Richmond, BC, photo courtesy of Laura Duhan-Kaplan*



*Friends Doug Smart and Hubert Barton, Sr. visit Buddhist Temple in Richmond, BC, photo courtesy of Laura Duhan-Kaplan*

bage piece by piece, examine it for what it truly is, and let it go. This is why meditation is called a practice. We cannot empty the garbage instantaneously and in just one sitting. It is a process that occurs slowly and steadily over time.

What garbage do we need to filter out in order to support a reconciliation process

in Canada? We may not have perpetrated past harms directly. But where did those actions come from? Do we have their seeds within us? The Buddha taught us that we continue in cycles of suffering over and over again because we allow craving, anger, and ignorance to direct our minds and actions. If we keep reacting blindly, how can we be part of the conditions that will lead to the alleviation of suffering? If we are willfully ignorant of the effects of colonization and continued systemic racism, we continue a cycle of misery for all 38 million of us living in Canada today.

Often, when we meet one another, hatred meets the heat of hatred; craving meets bottomless desire; and darkness meets darkness. We do not actually meet at all. Instead, our anger, desires, and ignorance meet and multiply. The heat of hatred, the rose-colored glasses of desire, and the darkness of igno-

rance obstruct the reality of existence. Only when we meet without them do we truly meet. But what meets? Not you and me. Not a self, a being, a life, or a soul. Instead, awareness meets awareness. Compassion meets compassion. Loving-kindness meets loving-kindness. Unbounded and free. We strive to direct our minds to meet from within the Buddha-nature that, as the Buddha taught, we all have.

### *Loving Kindness*

Sixteen years ago, Corrections Services Canada asked us to share meditation with men incarcerated in federal prisons. At first, we did not see the link with the effects of colonization. But now we know that Indigenous Canadians are disproportionately incarcerated. As per Statistics Canada, “In 2016/ 2017, Aboriginal adults accounted for 28% of admissions to provincial/territorial correctional services, and 27% for federal correctional services, while representing 4.1% of the Canadian adult population.” These statistics speak to the tremendous ongoing pain and continued silencing of a people. But when we enter these correctional facilities, we do not meet numbers on a page. Instead, we meet people with stories of pain, isolation, and the tragic loss of family, connection, and cultural identity.

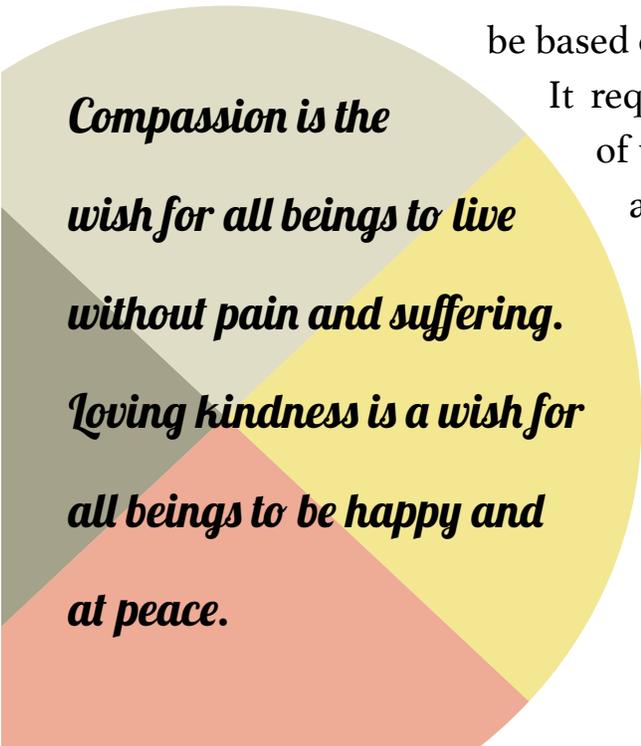
The Buddha taught that we must treat others as if we are the same body and mind. Your pain is my pain and your joy is my joy. We are the same. So, when a young man tells us his story of having to steal at the age of 6 to ensure his younger sister had food to eat while they were both in foster care, we hear the pain wrought from desperation and isolation. What do we do in that moment? We can choose to hear this pain without judgement, but also without absolving ourselves of responsibility. We can respond with immense compassion. We wish for him to be free from suffering and unhappiness.

Compassion is the wish for all beings to live without pain and suffering. Loving kindness (Mettā) is a wish for all beings to be happy and at peace. In traditional Buddhist temples in China and Hong Kong, visitors are greeted by the image of Maitreya Bodhisattva, a big-bellied, jovial, welcoming figure. Many people in the west think of him as the Buddha who bestows good luck when you rub his big belly. Maitreya Bodhisattva's belly symbolizes the vast nature of his loving-kindness, as boundless, immeasurable, and unfathomable as the ocean. The ocean can hold both microscopic life and the largest creatures on earth; both the dirtiest garbage and the most fragrant perfume. In essence, it can hold everything. Like the boundless ocean, loving kindness is able to accept everything with no distinction and no judgement. Mettā meditation is a part of our daily practice. We send out love to all beings, whether frail or strong, tall or short, big or small, visible or invisible, near or far, already born or yet to be born. No one is left out. Mettā is essential to creating and maintaining harmonious and equitable relations with others.

### *Ethical Behaviour*

But true and genuine reconciliation cannot be based on a simple desire for harmony.

It requires a mutual understanding of what created the transgression, and a promise to avoid those actions in the future. Forgiveness can be undertaken alone, without the knowledge of the other party. Reconciliation, however, is not a solo venture. It begins with trust, honesty,



***Compassion is the wish for all beings to live without pain and suffering.***

***Loving kindness is a wish for all beings to be happy and at peace.***

and integrity. Not with faith, but with trust: knowing we have begun the work. We have started a process of showing each other the reality of experiences. And now, we are building these relationships. This is walking the walk, not talking the talk.

Ethical behavior is a strong foundation required for our lives. Buddhist monastics vow and Buddhist laypersons volunteer to observe five important precepts. Through our daily actions, others can see first-hand that we do not harm ourselves or those around us. Then, they may start to trust that we will not hurt them intentionally.

The five precepts are:

*Abstaining from killing (protecting life)*

*Abstaining from stealing (respecting others)*

*Abstaining from sexual misconduct (protecting individuals and families)*

*Abstaining from false speech (speaking with truth)*

*Abstaining from intoxicants (keeping a clear mind)*

The Buddha taught that these practices are for every waking moment. Just before his death, his students asked: Who will be our teacher? Whom should we follow? This great teacher advised his students, “Let the precepts be your teacher.” For the Buddha’s present students, the precepts are our teacher every day.

### ***An Experiment in Intention***

Each day we observe ourselves and honestly examine our actions of body, speech, and, especially, the mind. For the mind and its intentions are the source of action. And, as the Buddha taught, correct intention is paramount. You can explore that with the following experiment.

Take a few moments to feel your body sitting on the chair. Feel the hardness or the softness below you, the weight of your body supported. Take three full breaths, conscious of each in-hale and exhale as your chest and abdomen move. Now, bring to your mind someone who has supported you and loved you. Someone who has guided your life in a way that you are very grateful for. Wish them to be free from fear, suffering, and pain. Wish them to be engulfed by happiness, harmony, and peace. How does your mind feel? How does your body feel?

Try to generate that same compassion and loving kindness for a person who has hurt you, or a person who you are afraid of, or towards whom you have revulsion or apathy. Can you generate the same feelings of good-will and loving-kindness? The next time you encounter that person, how will you act towards them? Will your actions come from ignorance, or from compassion and loving-kindness?

*Mind precedes all mental states.*

*Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought.*

*If with an impure mind a person speaks or acts,  
suffering will follow him like the wheel that follows the foot  
of an ox.*

*Dhammapada 1*

*Mind precedes all mental states.*

*Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought.*

*If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts,  
happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow.*

*Dhammapada 2*

Now, at this moment, where is our mind, and where will our actions lead? Is the mind balanced, full of compassion and

loving kindness for all beings? If not, as the Buddha teaches, suffering will follow. If, however, the mind is free from hatred, craving, and ignorance, then happiness will follow.

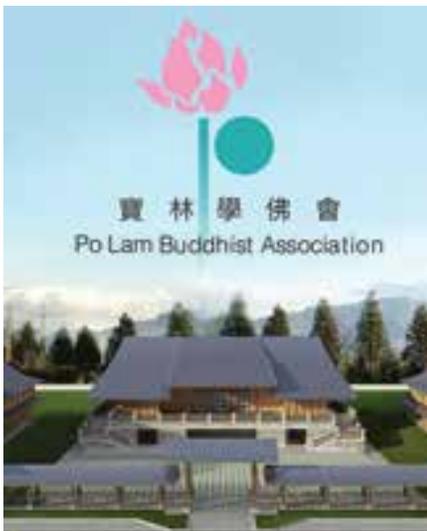
*One who by good covers the evil he has done, illuminates this world like the moon freed from a cloud.*

*Dhammapada 173*

May the wholesome intentions of bringing the authors of this multi-faith collaboration together guide us all on a path with clarity, compassion and loving-kindness. May all beings be truly free from suffering. May all of our actions be born in wisdom and compassion.

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*Venerable Yin Kit and her senior students are part of the Po Lam Buddhist Association in Chilliwack, British Columbia. The monastics in this community follow the teachings of the late Venerable Master Sing Yat, who advised and directed them to live an ethical life, follow the tenets of the patriarchs, and bring to the West a true method for cultivating happiness. "Po Lam" means "Precious Forest," a reflection of the history of this monastic lineage, and a present and future aspiration.*



*Find commonalities and serve others (Hindu)*

# Hindu Canadians: Finding Reconciliation with Canada's Indigenous Peoples

**Arun Chatterjee, Acharya S.P. Dwivedi, Nanda Gopala Dasa**

*A Growing Awareness*

*Arun Chatterjee*

WHEN I ARRIVED in Canada from India in 1998, I did not know much about the Indigenous peoples of Canada. While growing up in India, I had heard about them as “Red Indians,” but nothing more than that. I have noticed, among new immigrants from India to Canada, a similar low level of awareness. The first step in Reconciliation will be learning about one another, and beginning to develop relationships.

My own story is one of gradually growing knowledge of Canadian society and, later, relationships with Indigenous people. In 2003, I started noticing the effect of poverty in our community of Caledonia, Ontario. At that time, I met people who were customers at our newly opened business. Most of them, as far as I remember, were Caucasian. Some clearly appeared to be struggling financially. They would come to our family's retail business and ask to pay back the cost of their purchases

later. They told me that all their social welfare money had finished, and they had no money left to buy groceries. Initially, I resisted giving them any money. But, gradually, I started to know them on a more personal level. Their personal stories were filled with incidents of falling through the societal gaps. Many had difficult family situations, for example, growing up with alcoholic parents or experiencing acute poverty.

Getting to know these customers affected me emotionally and spiritually. It made me curious about the current political and socio-economic system in Canada. So, I started to lend people money for a few days. In most cases, they paid me back. Although I could not understand why, I started feeling deep empathy and compassion for them. I started reading sacred texts from Hinduism, Christianity, and Buddhism, along with spiritual wisdom from other faith traditions of the world. My family and I wanted to learn more about Indigenous traditions. So, we began to occasionally visit a nearby First Nations reserve. We spent some time talking with people there. This was the beginning of my personal relationships with First Nations people.

After we moved to British Columbia in 2008, I became involved in a social justice film society in White Rock. Gradually, I became even more aware of socio-economic matters. I started volunteering at an extreme weather shelter for the homeless. While many of Canada's Indigenous people are financially stable, I also noticed many at the shelter. Gradually, I learned about residential schools, the role of churches in the abuse, the Metis leader Louis Riel, and the role of various Canadian governments in systemic violence, racism and abuse against Indigenous people. One of the books that influenced me was

*A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn. This book taught me about western colonialism's effect on North and South America. I saw parallels with many things that happened under British rule in India. Thus, the book helped me empathize with Canada's Indigenous people and feel a kind of kinship with them. It opened my eyes about the cruelty on which North American societies were built.

In those years, I became increasingly distressed about these matters. In particular, I saw much poverty in and around my community of Surrey, in White Rock and in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. I started questioning myself as a person and re-evaluating my actions or inactions. Gradually, it became almost impossible to not do anything. One morning, as I opened the fridge to get some food for breakfast, I was hit by an intense calling to bring food to homeless people. So, in 2011, our family started a food and clothing interfaith ministry for homeless people in North Surrey. Gradually, the project grew bigger as many families joined the cause. Volunteers from many faith traditions became part of it. These community members, too, became more aware about the intersection of

poverty, homelessness, socio-economic gaps, and the history of Indigenous people in Canada. They began to reflect on their own individual roles in this present context.

***I feel a close kinship***

***with the Indigenous***

***brothers and sisters...***

***I relate to their pain of***

***being colonized.***

A few years later, I did my pastoral internship at the First United Church in the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver. In my role, I offered

spiritual and emotional support to community members, many of whom were from Indigenous backgrounds. Currently, I work as an interfaith spiritual care practitioner in a hospital. There, I work with Indigenous spiritual care providers and Elders to support patients of Indigenous background when they are in the hospital for a treatment. Each new experience has shown me how powerful it is when people from diverse backgrounds join to feel pain, love, helplessness, and compassion together. Reaching out together is one way to address the ignorance among Canadians, especially new immigrants, about the Indigenous peoples and their history in Canada.

Hinduism has a long tradition of offering one's life in service to others. We consider this one of the higher forms of spiritual and religious action. Many groups and individuals of various spiritual and religious lineages have served people. These Hindu stories impacted me as I was growing up. So did stories of service by leaders of other faith traditions, including Buddhist and Christian practices of sacrifice, love, and compassion. Here in Canada, I see my work with Indigenous people as highly meaningful, as I live with my family on their land. On another level, being of Indian origin, I feel a close kinship with the Indigenous brothers and sisters. As our country was also part of the British Empire, I relate to their pain of being colonized.

In 2019, for the first time, my service work became overtly political. In solidarity with Indigenous people, members of the Hindu tradition joined other faith leaders at an Interfaith rally in Vancouver, BC. We asked that the Canadian government pass Bill C-262, implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Several Hindu

organizations are now part of the Multi-faith Summit Council of British Columbia, whose objectives include advocacy for the marginalized people of Canada. We are hopeful that, with time, these involvements will gain more speed. Soon, many Hindus in Canada will proactively stand side by side with others for reconciliation with Indigenous People of Canada. Below, my colleagues Acharya S.P. Dwivedi and Nanda Gopala Dasa, who are also beginning this work, talk about how to involve their communities in education and outreach.

*Spiritual Kinship: Indigenous Traditions  
and Hindu Dharma*

*Acharya S.P. Dwivedi*

AS HINDUS IN CANADA learn about Indigenous spiritual traditions, we must begin with some general understanding. This understanding can lead us to recognize shared aspects of our spirituality. Then, our commonalities can motivate us to act together on urgent planetary issues.

The Indigenous peoples of North America are the original inhabitants of this nation, living in what are now all of Canada's provinces. "Indigenous peoples" is a collective name for these original peoples and their descendants. The Canadian Constitution recognizes three distinct groups of Indigenous peoples: First Nations (sometimes referred to as Indians), Metis and Inuit. There is no distinctive and overarching "indigenous religion."<sup>9</sup> The spiritual beliefs and cultural practices of contemporary Indigenous peoples vary widely. However, there are commonalities among the many creation stories and

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9 As noted by the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

spiritual traditions. These include love of nature, respect for ancestors, belief in spirit, the importance of sacred organizations, oral systems of knowledge, storytelling (with many stories including trickster characters), braiding sweet grass and expressing gratitude towards nature. The very ways of life of Indigenous peoples are intermingled with spirituality and religion.<sup>10</sup>

The Hindu *Dharma* (religion and way of life) is commonly called the “*Sanatan* (eternal) *Dharma*.” It is a supreme, eternal, scientific, continuing religion; it is a way of life. It is the oldest religion and third most popular on the earth. It, too, is varied in nature. It is not based on a single preceptor or holy book, but on the collective wisdom and inspiration of great seers. The basic scriptures are called the *Vedas* (Knowledge). The oral (*Shruti*) system, like that of Indigenous peoples, was prevalent in the beginning. Scriptures were written later.

The following six principles summarize the basic concepts of Hindu *Dharma*. All the cosmos, including its billions of stars and all living or non-living beings, are pervaded by the same divine power.<sup>11</sup> The divine is found in the heart of every human being, regardless of religion, race, gender, culture or nationality. A unity underlies all faiths. “The truth is one, the wise may call it by many names.”<sup>12</sup> All are divine. Well-being and happiness are for all.<sup>13</sup> We must practice reverence for life, including non-human life in nature. Through these principles Hindu *Dharma* and Indigenous spiritualities share many commonalities. These include teachings about nature, ancestors, and pluralism.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Faith Project: Aboriginal Spirituality, Canada*. <http://thefaithproject.nfb.ca/>

<sup>11</sup> “*Iswarah sarva bhutanam*,” *Bhagavad Gita*.

<sup>12</sup> “*Ekam sad viprah bahuda vadanti*,” *Rig Veda*.

<sup>13</sup> “*Bahujan sukhay bahujan hitay*,” *Rig Veda*.

*Indigenous peoples also show vast regard for all things produced by the earth, maintaining a sense of balance with nature and the earth.*

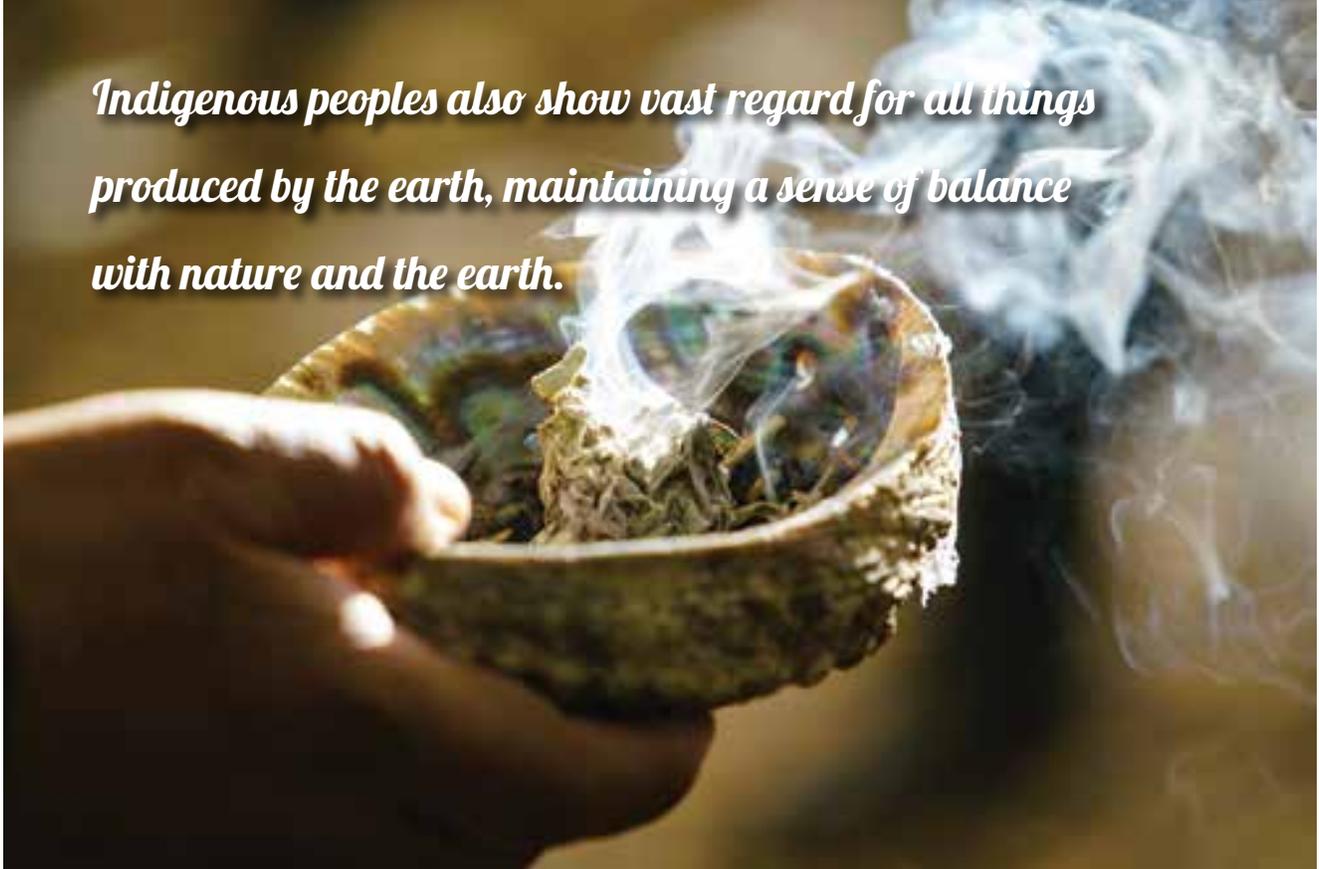


Photo Amber Green © 2020

Both Hindus and Indigenous peoples look upon themselves as part of nature. They have, they believe, psychological and spiritual bonds with the elements around them. Hindu scriptures, including the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and *Puranas*, explicitly teach that all multifarious forms of life, for example, human beings, tree, plants, animals and birds, are bound to each other. The divine expresses itself through natural phenomena. Hindu religion teaches that *Prakriti* (Nature) is composed of five elements: sky, water, fire, air and earth. When the five elements of *Prakriti* (Nature) are combined with *Man* (Mind), *Budhi* (Wisdom) and *Ahankar* (Ego), they form human nature.<sup>14</sup> Important Hindu thinkers, such as Kautilya, Yagyavalkya and Charak, prescribe specific punishments for those who pollute and harm the environment.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Srimad Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 7, verse 4.

<sup>15</sup> O. P. Dwivedi, R. N. Tripathi, B. N. Tiwari, "The Hindu Concept of Ecology and Environmental Crisis," *South Asian Horizons*, Vol. 1, p 81.

Both Hindu and North American Indigenous traditions offer prayers of reverence for Mother Earth. Indigenous peoples also show vast regard for all things produced by the earth, maintaining a sense of balance with nature and the earth. For everything they receive, they give credit to Spirit and express gratitude. Similarly, Hindu scriptures, including *Atherveda*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayna* and various *Smriti*, contain many prayers for mother earth. They prescribe reverence for the elements of nature and the balance required to sustain life. For example, the element of *Pavan* (air, wind) is given due respect in Hindu religion. “The life of all creatures depends on air,” says the legal text *Manusmriti*.<sup>16</sup> The *Yajurveda* manual of ritual worship offers the prayer, “May the winds blow pleasantly for us.”<sup>17</sup> The element of *Agni* (Fire) provides a link between *Prakriti* (nature) and human beings. In Hindu ceremonies, as in some Indigenous ceremonies, fire is given an important and sacred place. Praying with fire is prescribed by both the *Yajurveda* and *Rigveda*.<sup>18</sup> Sky is considered the space where *Sristi* (creation) began. This space caused the creation of air and fire. The god of space can bring peace and well-being to the universe.<sup>19</sup>

Indigenous people take care to honour their ancestors. Hindus, too, in their daily prayer include prayers for their ancestors. In all ceremonies and sacraments, they remember their ancestors and regularly seek their blessings. Indigenous people encourage one another to accept members of different faiths traditions. Because their spirituality revolves around the

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<sup>16</sup> *Manusmriti*, Chapter 3, Verse 77.

<sup>17</sup> *Yajurveda*, 35-38.

<sup>18</sup> *Yajurveda*, 1-5; *Rigveda*, 1:1, 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Yajurveda*, xxxvi-17.

earth, nature, and the environment, it supports a polytheistic religion. Hindus are also encouraged to respect other faiths. For Hindus, everyone is divine;<sup>20</sup> a unity connects all animate or inanimate objects;<sup>21</sup> and all human beings are members of a universal family.<sup>22</sup>

In light of our shared interests and the crises facing humanity, we need to act together. We should work to protect, preserve and care for the environment. Without respect for nature, forests disappear, water becomes foul, and air becomes unbreathable. Between humans, hate and intolerance have led to terrorism which is creating havoc. We have many reasons to establish a regular dialogue in Canada between Hindu communities and Indigenous communities. Leaders of Hindu communities locally and nationally can and should reach out to try to begin this work. One first step is education: organizing discussions of these shared subjects which are dear to us, and participating in them as spiritual and ethnic communities.

### *Spiritual Preparation for Reconciliation*

*Nanda Gopala Dasa*

EVEN AS PHYSICAL afflictions heal, mental trauma may continue. Trauma can bring a never-ending feeling of insecurity in the minds of victims. Collective trauma is much more debilitating to every individual who is part of a community that was tormented. This feeling of insecurity manifests in various psycho-social bearings. It often forms a resilient barrier to healing. Of course, fiscal and socio-economic support

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<sup>20</sup> *In Sanskrit, Isvarah sarva-bhutanam (Bhagavad Gita).*

<sup>21</sup> *In Sanskrit, Isavasyam idam sarvam (Upanishads).*

<sup>22</sup> *In Sanskrit, Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam (Maha Upanishad).*

systems greatly benefit victims. In a way, however, these give only symptomatic relief, as lingering trauma can surface at the slightest provocation. Hence, it is also important to address trauma spiritually. This important dimension of Indigenous healing is also a big part of our path within the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), one branch in the Hindu tree of traditions.

ISKCON is a spiritual organization rooted in ancient body of knowledge called *Vedas*. Founded in 1966 by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the goal of ISKCON is to selflessly spread love of God all over the world. ISKCON, a multi-racial and multi-cultural community, has millions of followers. It does not discriminate based on any material designations, including economic, political, racial or gender factors. We see all living entities as sacred spirit souls, part and parcel of the same Supreme Whom we call God. God is one, and has many names, such as Allah, Jehovah, Rama, Creator, Great Spirit, and Krishna. According to our scriptures, Krishna is the root of all existence. Therefore, by loving Krishna we can establish loving relationships with all living entities, just as watering the root nourishes all parts of a plant.

Our spiritual practice reconnects us with Krishna. We revive our loving relationship with Him through chanting His holy name, “*Hare Krishna Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare! Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare!*” This chanting



awakens the love of God. When the love of Godhead is awakened, love for all living entities spontaneously develops in one's heart. Thus, devotees from ISKCON-Vancouver cultivate an attitude of selfless service. We engage in public chanting. Our devotees distribute sanctified food through the Hare Krishna Food for Life program to local shelters, homeless camps, and student lunch gatherings. We reach out to inmates in prison. Through this work, we encounter many people of Indigenous origin. Every Sunday, our temple hosts a Love-Feast for hundreds of people, who enjoy an evening of spiritual discussions, music and dancing.

All human beings struggle with wounded hearts. Indigenous people in Canada carry a particularly heavy burden. We believe that love and care can help heal these wounds. Loving relationship is a strong medicine of reconciliation. As a community, we hope to reach more strongly into these relationships. We wish to more proactively invite our brothers and sisters of Indigenous origin to our feasts. As we build trust, we hope to be invited to learn more about their communities and spiritual practices. We hope they will help us understand how best to be in this particular loving relationship.



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*Reach out for mutual inter-faith learning (Islamic)*

# Reconciliation: An Islamic perspective

**Syed Nasir Zaidi**

## *Approaching Reconciliation*

Recently, Muslim populations have emigrated to the west on a vast scale. This has been a new intellectual, cultural and social experience for Muslims. In North America, involvement in interfaith activities has opened the new doors of realities for Muslims. Here we aim at peaceful coexistence with different cultural communities, pay respect to others' beliefs and learn from each other. Our encounter with this multi-cultural, multi-faith environment has led Islamic scholars to give special attention to the universal messages of Islam. In some ways, this perspective has divided us from Muslims who have not experienced it.

As new immigrants to Canada, we do not have a past relationship with Canada's Indigenous peoples. We are slowly building relationships through inter-faith and inter-cultural outreach. As part of our encounter with Canadian cultures, we are meeting Indigenous people, learning about their culture, and understanding their history. We have learned about

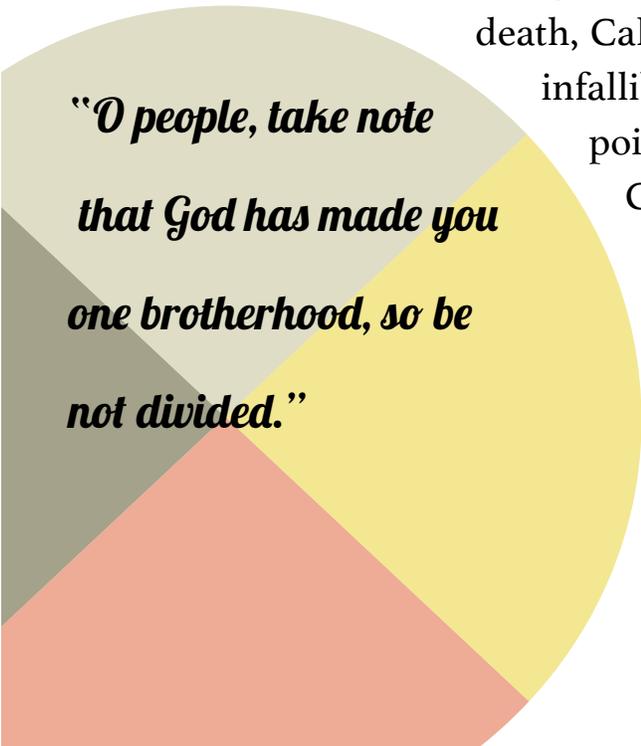
forced conversions to Christianity, attempts to eradicate Indigenous cultures, broken treaties, and continued unequal access to rights and services. As we approach Canada's Indigenous peoples, we bring Islamic spiritual virtues of unity, humility, and empathy. We share their desire to work towards freedom of faith, diversity of cultures, and equality in humanity. These fundamental moral principles, articulated by our greatest teachers, invite Muslims to play a part in Reconciliation.

### *Spiritual Virtues*

The tradition we call Islam began in 7th century Arabia, as the Prophet Muhammad shared the revelations he received from Allah (God) through the angel Gabriel. The Prophet emphasized the principle of unity among humanity and the eradication of racial discrimination. He said:

*O people, take note that God has made you one brotherhood, so be not divided. An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab, nor a non-Arab over an Arab; nor is a white one to be preferred to a dark one, nor a dark one to a white one.*<sup>23</sup>

Not long after the Prophet Muhammad's death, Caliph Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the first infallible Imam of Shia Islam, appointed Malik al-Ashtar as the Governor of Egypt. The Caliph wrote a letter to the new governor describing the qualities



***“O people, take note  
that God has made you  
one brotherhood, so be  
not divided.”***

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.al-islam.org/verses-ghadir-al-mustafa-center-islamic-researches/3-islamic-principles-sermons-farewell-hajj>

and responsibilities of a good governor. One key quality was humility. Ali Ibn Abi Talib wrote:

*Habituate your heart to mercy for the subjects and affection and kindness for them. Do not stand over them like greedy beasts who feel it is enough to devour them since they are of two kinds, either your brother in religion or one like you in creation. They will commit slips and encounter mistakes. They may act wrongly, wilfully or by neglect. So, extend to them your forgiveness and pardon, in the same way as you would like Allah to extend His forgiveness and pardon to you.*<sup>24</sup>

Ali Ibn Abi Talib, in his last will to his son, wrote about empathy, which should be practiced towards everyone. He wrote:

*Whatever you like for yourself, like for others, and whatever you dislike happening to you, spare others from such happenings. Do not oppress and tyrannize anybody because you surely do not like to be oppressed and tyrannized. Be kind and sympathetic to others as you certainly desire others to treat you kindly and sympathetically. If you find objectionable and loathsome habits in others, abstain from developing those traits of character in yourself.*<sup>25</sup>

### ***Moral and Political Principles***

The revelations transmitted to the Prophet Muhammed are recorded in the Quran. The Quran, which means “recitation,” is the sacred text of Islam. We consider it the word of God.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.al-islam.org/nahjul-balagha-part-2-letters-and-sayings/letter-53-order-malik-al-ashtar>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.al-islam.org/articles/letter-father-son-last-will-ali-ibn-abi-talib>

**Freedom of Faith.** The Quran clearly says that there is no compulsion in Islam (Quran, 2:256). No one can force another person to accept his or her beliefs. Imposing beliefs by force shows there are no good rational grounds for the belief. In addition, compulsory conversion cannot create an honest and sincere desire to seek God's pleasure. Thus, each person must use their own intellect and heart to find their faith. Benazir Bhutto, former Prime Minister of Pakistan says in her book:

*This verse lays the basis of tolerance in human conduct. This teaching prohibiting compulsion gives substance to Islam's belief in freedom of expression and lays the basis for debate and discussion, the essential traits of a democratic society.<sup>26</sup>*

**Diversity of Cultures.** The Quran states:

*Had your Lord wanted, all the people of the earth would have believed in Him! Would you then force people until they become faithful? (Quran, 10:99).*

Islam accepts that God created diversity. God did not will everyone on earth to be an adherent of one religion or a member of one culture—though God did ask all believers to act with justice. Thus, God wants tolerance of other religions and cultures.<sup>27</sup>

**Equality in Humanity.** The Quran says:

*O humankind! Indeed, we created you from a male and a female and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God fearing among you. Indeed, Allah is all-knowing, all aware (Quran, 49:19).*

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<sup>26</sup> Benazir Bhutto, *Reconciliation: Islam, Democracy, and the West* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 33.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31

This verse sets down a basic comprehensive principle of human equality. All people are the descendants of Adam and Eve. Thus, the entire human race is but one family. We have all been declared equal in the sight of God. Our division into nations, tribes, and races came about as groups resided in different zones. These differences only help us identify one another. No one is allowed to take pride or degrade others on the basis of skin pigment, wealth, rank or social status. God cares only about moral uprightness and our commitment to discharge our obligations to God and each other.<sup>28</sup>

The prominent contemporary scholar Javadi Amoli places this verse in a modern global context. At the local and national levels, he says, we are Muslims. We have our programs for living. At the regional level, we are in relationship with Christian and Jewish religious scholars and their spiritual programs. And, at the global level, we part of the global community, which has its own program of cooperation.<sup>29</sup>

**Rights of Minorities.** Speaking about life in Medina under the leadership of the Prophet Mohammed, the Quran instructs Muslims to deal kindly and justly with sympathetic non-Muslims (Quran, 60:9). Muslims must try to help fix their troubles and calamities, just as the prophet Joseph helped Egypt's general public during a drought. Non-Muslims should receive benefits from public welfare works. Above all, their lives, their wealth and their honour should never be infringed upon.<sup>30</sup>

**Religious Pluralism.** The Quran embraces all monotheist religions saying,

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<sup>28</sup> *Maarif ul Quran, tafseer surah al-Hujrat.*

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.javadi.esra.ir>

<sup>30</sup> *Dawatulquran*

*Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve (Quran, 2:62).*

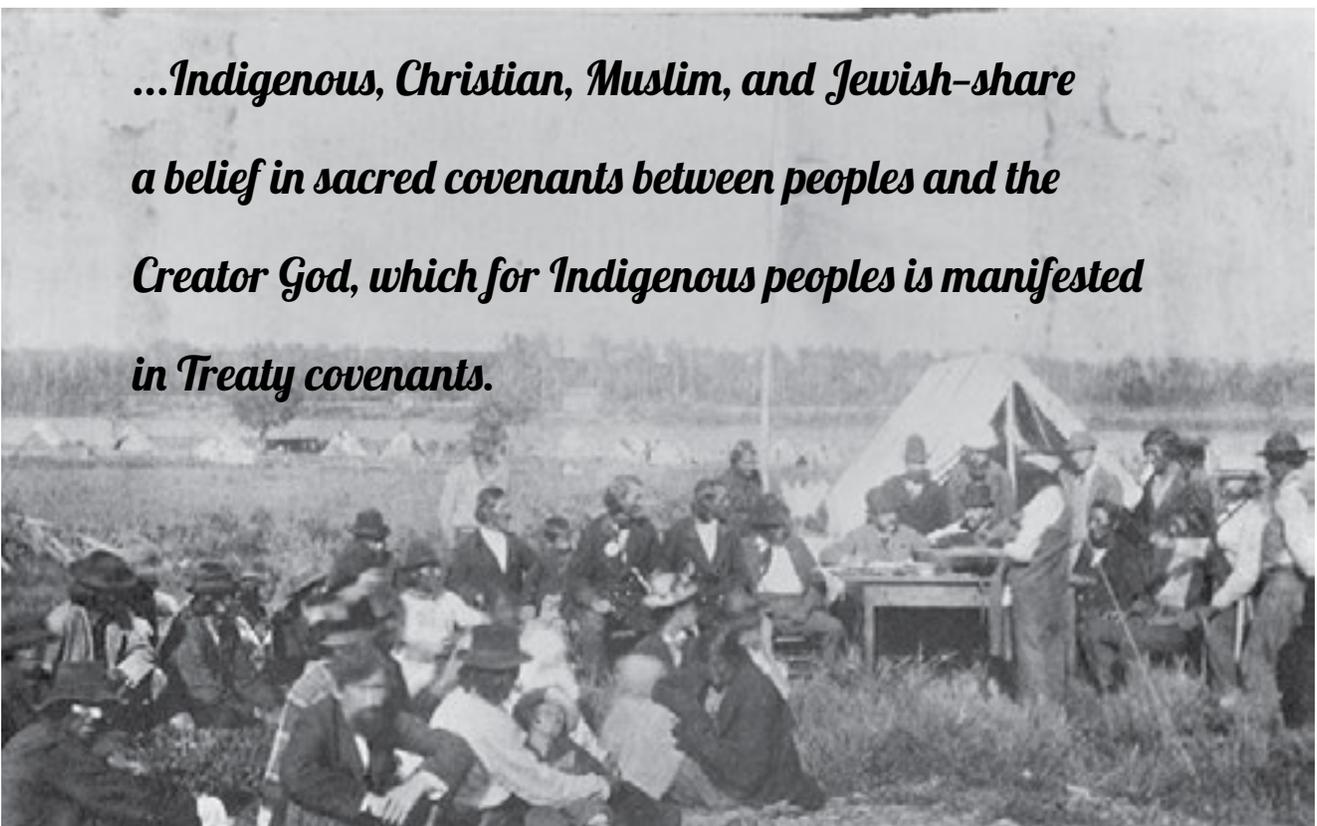
The Quran also invites Christians and Muslims to find common ground, saying,

*O People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we will worship no one but God, and that we will not ascribe any partner to Him (Quran, 3:64).*

**Respect for Treaties.** In the year 622 CE, the Prophet Muhammad established the first Islamic government in the city of Medina. Following the Prophet's reconciliation efforts, local Muslims, non-Muslims, and Jews made a treaty listing their freedoms and mutual obligations. The treaty was put into writing and ratified by all parties. Under Muslim rule, Jews would manage their own religious community and businesses. The

*Treaty Payments at St. Peter's Indian Reserve, 1880. Archives Canada C-033340*

***...Indigenous, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish—share a belief in sacred covenants between peoples and the Creator God, which for Indigenous peoples is manifested in Treaty covenants.***



two communities would seek mutual advice and consultation, refrain from making war on one another, and generally promote each other's goodness and welfare.<sup>31</sup>

In his covenant with the Christians of Najran, the Prophet Muhammad pledged to safeguard them. Muslims would protect, not demolish, Christian churches and monasteries. Christian ecclesiastical capital would be tax-exempt. No Christian religious authority would ever be forced out of their post, nor would any Christian be forced to convert to Islam. Finally, if a Christian woman married a Muslim, she would have full freedom to follow her Christian religion.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, the final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation commission noted this Islamic value:

At the TRC's Manitoba National Event, the church parties to the Settlement Agreement hosted an Interfaith Tent. During the panel "We Are All Treaty People," leaders from various faiths pointed out that many spiritual traditions—Indigenous, Christian, Muslim, and Jewish—share a belief in sacred covenants between peoples and the Creator God, which for Indigenous peoples is manifested in Treaty covenants.<sup>33</sup>

### **Interfaith Activities**

Clearly, Islamic values support the Reconciliation. Our participation, however, is beginning slowly, because Muslims

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<sup>31</sup> *Sirah Ibn Hashsham*, 120

<sup>32</sup> Ahmed El-Wakil, "The Prophet's Treaty with the Christians of Najran: An Analytical Study to Determine the Authenticity of the Covenants," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Volume 27, Issue 3, September 2016, Pages 273–354, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/10.1093/jis/etwo27>

<sup>33</sup> *Canada's Residential Schools: Reconciliation*, vol. 6 of The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 40.

are still finding their place in North America. As the TRC report notes, the European Christians who settled Canada made many “sweeping generalizations” about Islam.<sup>34</sup> That is changing however, as North American Muslims are more engaged in interfaith activities than ever before. Some of these activities have specifically brought Muslim communities into deeper relationship with Indigenous people.

In British Columbia, for example, multiple Muslim organizations are represented on the Multi-Faith Summit Council of BC, an advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening the role of faith in our society. The Ismaili Centre in Burnaby is an established religious, cultural, and social centre, embracing pluralism and building bridges of peace and understanding through public events and education. The youth of Az-Zahraa Islamic Centre in Richmond, a Shia Muslim Centre, host a yearly “Journey into Islam” program, welcoming guests from different faith traditions to an interactive tour of the mosque. The Baabul Ilm Education Society in Surrey, another Shia organization, promotes a platform for interfaith dialogue and discussion. Masjid Al-Jamnia in Vancouver, a Sunni Muslim mosque, has participated in a Muslim-Jewish teen dialogue program. Masjid Masjid ul-Haqq, another Vancouver Sunni mosque, was part of a Jewish-Muslim Feed the Hungry program. Vancouver’s Intercultural Dialogue Institute, hosted by Turkish Muslims, has organized multicultural Friendship Dinners. Representatives from the BC Muslim Association, a Sunni group, regularly join interfaith panels as a speaker.

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<sup>34</sup> *Canada’s Residential Schools: The History, Part I Origins to 1939*, vol. 1 of *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 19.



*Multi-Faith Action Society Meeting October 2016, photo courtesy of Laura Duhan-Kaplan.*

Two kinds of interfaith outreach have specifically helped us learn about and connect with Indigenous peoples. One is the chaplaincy program at the University of British Columbia, which includes Muslim chaplains from both Shia and Sunni traditions. University chaplains help members of the UBC community engage with their spirituality and faith. Chaplains offer spiritual counseling, faith-based activities, and educational activities. As a multi-faith group, they participate in student orientations, wellness fairs, and other special university programs. Thus, they benefit from UBC's commitment to educating the public about Indigenous peoples. They learn from Indigenous colleagues, the Museum of Anthropology, and the X̱wi7̱x̱wa Library in the Longhouse. They bring this knowledge into their interfaith activities on campus and in the larger Islamic community.

Another significant connection with Indigenous people is facilitated by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. This community is deeply involved in interfaith and inter-religious peace activities. Ahmadiyya communities regularly host local World Religions Conferences. These events bring together well-known scholars from the world's major religions to speak

on a common topic, each from the perspective of their religious tradition. The Ahmadiyya communities in BC recognize Indigenous traditions as a major world religious tradition. Thus, they have reached out to local Indigenous elders, and regularly include Indigenous teachers at their conferences. Out of respect for the nations whose land they live on, the conference organizers always invite Indigenous teachers to speak first. Recently, one Imam from the Ahmadiyya community was invited to participate in an Indigenous worship circle. When it was his turn to speak into the circle, he thanked his hosts for their respect and their teaching, and expressed hope that the intercultural relationship might grow. On this point, he speaks for many of us.



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# *Spirit of Reconciliation*

## *A Multi-Faith Resource*

Rev. Dr. Raymond C. Aldred & Rabbi Dr. Laura Duhan Kaplan,  
editors

What is Canada's project of Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples? It is a process of truth, compassion, and justice—spiritual virtues important to the country's many faith traditions. Each tradition brings its history, stories, symbols and practices to the Reconciliation circle. Together, we can learn to walk forward in a good way.

Are you curious about how faith communities can participate? In this book, leaders from ten communities share their experiences, suggestions, and hopes. They represent Anglican, Bahá'i, Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Indigenous, Islamic, Jewish, Sikh, and United Church traditions.

Learn from them about how you and your community can:

- Seek proper relatedness
- Learn about Indigenous cultures
- Use the prayer resources of your tradition
- Work towards social justice
- Join a sharing circle
- Share difficult stories through dialogue
- Learn and teach others
- Educate youth in history, dialogue and critical thinking
- Meditate on your role in history and healing
- Find commonalities and serve others
- Reach out for mutual interfaith learning

*A joint project of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation  
and the Vancouver School of Theology.*

