

Introduction to First Nations Studies

Reflection Paper

By Cheryl Unruh

A few years ago, my daughter, who was twelve at the time, had her annual school photo taken by a local photography company. When our order arrived in the mail, approximately half of what we requested had been delivered. I phoned the photography company to follow up on the remainder of the order, and spoke with a very pleasant lady in their Customer Service department. I asked if the rest of the order would be coming separately. The lady requested that I kindly hold for a moment while she brought up my daughter's photo and order details, as, she said, quite often an order could be split into two deliveries, depending on what I had ordered. I could hear her typing as she clicked on my confirmation number to bring up my daughter's photo.

There was a pause, and the lady's tone changed. She became abrupt, and asked if I had filled out the order form correctly. Did I know how to fill out a form? If I didn't fill out the form properly, there wasn't much she could do. She would also have to check with Accounting to see if my payment went through; my credit card may have been declined before they "caught" the order going out to us. I was stunned by her words and condescending tone, and becoming abrupt myself, I said that I had been a lawyer for over 25 years and knew how to fill out a form. Now she was confused ... because the photo on her screen was of a young girl of Haitian descent. When it became apparent that my daughter is Black, I became, in this woman's mind, a single mother of limited means, education and no doubt ambition, and she was entitled to speak to me as if I were an inferior being. I have no doubt that this woman would never consider herself to be a racist or see her reaction as anything other than appropriate. This is one of many

strange experiences our family has encountered because our children are not Caucasian, but the sting and clarity of this one remains with me.

My daughter is not Indigenous, although my son is. Twelve years old now himself, he is a striking blend of Cherokee and African American. He has lived similar experiences of discrimination and diminishment. My husband and I, two Caucasians of European descent, feel angry and powerless that our children are so often judged because of their heritage or skin color. For all the popular talk of equality and justice, they seem destined to shoddy service. Yet, I am often told, we are lucky to live here in Canada, because “there’s no racism here”.

As a result, I had at least some idea of the damaging effects of prejudice, discrimination and racism when I began this class. What I was not aware of however, and what has impacted me dramatically, are the magnificent riches and history of our country’s Indigenous culture and spirituality, along with the massive scale of the efforts by the dominant European culture to diminish and destroy them, including our own governments, churches and citizens.

Until participating in this class, I was not aware of the beauty and sacred nature of Indigenous stories and oral traditions. I did not understand the humour, complexity and very effective teachings of the creation stories. I was unaware of the many similarities and parallels of Indigenous creation stories and spirituality with my own Catholic faith. I did not understand the depth of Indigenous wisdom, focused on preserving and enhancing all aspects of creation, none at the expense of another, and the inherent respect for all creation that flows from this worldview.

I was likewise embarrassingly unaware of the deliberate, well-defined and systematic efforts to subvert and destroy these gifts. Nor was I aware of the scale of the pain caused to

those whose culture, spirituality and even children were taken from them. The very numbers of individuals and families who suffered (and continue to suffer) boggles my mind. Regardless of the professed “good intentions” of those who designed these systems of discrimination, awful decisions were made and terrible things were done. In a recent talk by Rev. Naomi Tutu, presented jointly through the University of Alberta and the Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life, Reverend Tutu discussed a particular aspect of her work with her father, Archbishop Tutu, in the South African Truth & Reconciliation Commission in 1996 (“Truth & Reconciliation in a Time of Crises”, presented September 28, 2020). In addressing the question as to how the horrors of apartheid could have happened, she stated (I paraphrase here) that it is a *choice* to harm one’s neighbour, just as it is a *choice* to look away and pretend it is not happening. It does seem that our own Canadian governments, churches and citizens *chose* to look away while so many of our Indigenous brothers and sisters were wounded and destroyed. It is not enough to say that we meant well at the time, or did not really understand the implications of what we were doing. There must always be some reference to principles of morality and basic human rights.

And yet, many Indigenous persons remain open to dialogue, hoping for some kind of working relationship with the culture that has betrayed them. That any kind of interest in reconciliation remains must be a testament to the deeply-held Indigenous belief that we are all, somehow, connected.

I have learned much from this class and am still absorbing many of the lessons. I have enjoyed the readings and classes more than I could have imagined, and my impressions of Indigenous wisdom and our country’s history have changed dramatically. My current role as a semi-retired lawyer and volunteer RCIA co-ordinator at our quite homogenous parish leaves me

struggling a bit at the moment to understand how I will best put what I have learned to use. I have a strong sense, however, that what I have begun to learn here is vitally important, and that something more tangible will flow from it “in the fullness of time”. I certainly feel called to follow the path of learning I have begun, so that I might understand more. And while I began this reflection with thoughts of frustration and anger toward those who prejudice and misjudge my own children, I now reflect on some of the Indigenous teachings that for all our flaws, differences and peculiarities, we are mutually important parts of Creation, coming from the Creator. We are all connected. This brings me peace.

Therefore, I will reshape the heart and soul of the world by saying “Yes” to continuing my journey of learning about the gifts of Indigenous peoples and culture. I thank you very much for the opportunity to participate in this class. It has been a wonderful experience.