

Reconciliation Reflections

We have heard much this year about Truth and Reconciliation. One overarching theme of recommendations of the formal government-appointed commission is that understanding is a precondition of reconciliation with our indigenous neighbours. The Twinning sub-committee of Mission & Outreach and Rev. Stewart Folster of the Saskatoon Native Circle Ministry have offered opportunities to learn and to understand. This commentary, reprinted with permission of Saskatoon-based Eagle Feather News, offers another.



Reflections: Tonight I fear for my grandchildren; tomorrow I'll be strong

By Maria Campbell | April 20, 2015

The landscape is gentle. The tiny church nestled against the aspen trees reminds one of the old Christian folk song: "There's a church in the valley by the wildwood no lovelier place in the glen."

The cemetery, carefully cleaned several times over the summer is pretty and people driving by have often been heard to say, "What a beautiful, peaceful looking place."

For those who go back to place flowers on graves, to pull weeds, to say prayers or to put another family member to rest the memories are sometimes overwhelming, the pain un-bearable. There is nothing beautiful or peaceful here only a reminder of poverty, violence and senseless deaths. Perhaps the words spoken by an elder at a recent funeral in a nearby community expresses best the sad narrative of community life.

"We are sorry," the elder said, as he began his eulogy, "that we are not able to cry over the passing of our brother but we have no tears left. This is the twenty- fifth funeral in our community since January. Of the twenty-five deaths, twenty -one were young people under the age of twenty."

We were all silent, remembering and trying not too, all the new graves we had passed as we drove past the church to the community hall. Several days later as I sat with a woman by her son's hospital bed she talked about the number of violent deaths in our

communities. The numbers are staggering. "Fifty, in one community, thirty in another, the numbers go on and on, she said and I am afraid my son is going to be another one."

"It is not unusual to have three or four suicides in a matter of days." Women who have joined us tell me. "Not unusual for kids to OD or get killed over a small bag of crystal meth, or be beaten to death with a baseball bat."

Not all the deaths happen in the community the women say, but all the dead are brought home. "These are just our young people, then there is also all the missing and murdered women and we haven't talked much, at least not yet, about the missing and murdered men. There is so much death everywhere it's hard to know what to do when you are trying to deal with just keeping your family together and even harder to know where to begin."

How do we talk to a leader who believes the violence is of our own making? The women ask. How do we talk to Canadians about history, tell them that racism is not confined to Winnipeg that it is all around us and that it has to stop?" I don't know I tell them. I don't know how to do that without sounding negative, angry or crazy. "One of those people who is always dredging up sad stories."

It's really hard to lighten up. I have been trying for almost 70 years. I was about five when I first heard someone say, "what a pretty little blue eyed squaw, it's too bad she has to grow up."

I never forgot that nor did I ever forget the woman who said it. She was considered a "nice lady" who taught bible class to native children every summer at a nearby camp. Today I realize she just didn't know any better but it was my first encounter with violence.

Why am I saying all of this anyway? You all know this stuff. Many of you have worked for years and continue to try to create a better life for us. Maybe it is because today I am feeling really vulnerable. I have beautiful great grandchildren and I fear for them and I wonder what I could I have done different to make a safer world for them and what else can I do?

I will be okay tomorrow, be back to my strong fierce self but tonight I am really afraid.