

Brian Rice and Anna Snyder

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Brian and Anna have been involved in local healing and reconciliation initiatives involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on the issue of residential schools. Their contribution to this collection, *Reconciliation in the Context of a Settler Society: Healing the Legacy of Colonialism in Canada*, examines factors that must be taken into account in healing the broken relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The first factor is an understanding of the legacy of colonialism and its impacts on the political, social, and economic life of Aboriginal people. The second is an understanding of the historical and contemporary myths that have been used to rationalize Canada's policies and practices toward Aboriginal people. The third is the tremendous impact of colonization, including the residential school system, on Aboriginal identities and mental health. The authors argue that addressing each of these issues builds an additional layer of healing into the reconciliation process. They conclude with a list of issues to be addressed from structural inequalities to the revitalization of Aboriginal languages and cultures.

## Reconciliation in the Context of a Settler Society: Healing the Legacy of Colonialism in Canada

### Defining Reconciliation

When violence is perpetrated on a mass scale, national courts are often unable to process the huge numbers of claims. Furthermore, the courts are not designed to heal broken relationships within society. As such, governments are increasingly turning to alternative processes like truth and reconciliation commissions, some of which are based on principles of restorative justice with broad political goals of reconciliation or right relations. Studies of these non-litigious processes highlight the importance of healing individuals and society after the trauma of mass violence, such as the violence perpetrated in Indian residential schools. Scholars maintain that if psychosocial factors that lie at the heart of the conflict are not addressed then the conflict will continue to escalate and erupt.<sup>1</sup>

Typically, truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) assist people who were former adversaries by reducing conflict over the past, giving victims voice, and identifying key institutional problems. TRCs tend to address psychosocial factors primarily. However, according to Priscilla Hayner, author of *Unspeakable Truths*, “Where gross inequalities are a product of past oppression, reconciliation cannot be considered simply a psychological or emotional process.”<sup>2</sup> Reconciliation takes place in varied political settings; as such, consideration of context and location is critical for developing reconciliation processes.

In the Canadian context, three major factors unique to a settler society require attention in choosing methods of reconciliation: 1) the legacy of colonialism that impacts the political, social, and economic life of Aboriginal people; 2) historical and contemporary myths prevalent in Canadian society that rationalize Canada’s policies and practices toward Aboriginal people; and 3) the impact of colonization/residential schools on Aboriginal identities and mental health that adds an additional layer of healing to the reconciliation process. In Canada, societal reconciliation must address not only psychosocial barriers but also structural issues of concern to Aboriginal people.

Reconciliation is about healing relationships, building trust, and working out differences. The phrase “forgive and forget” is a popular phrase used in reference to reconciliation. However, John Paul Lederach maintains that true reconciliation is “not forgive and forget.” Nor does reconciliation involve remembering, justifying, and repeating. “True reconciliation,” Lederach states, “is to remember and change.”<sup>3</sup> Reconciliation must meet concerns

about both the past and the future. Acknowledgement of the past through truth-telling, recognition of interdependence, and desire or necessity for peaceful co-existence in the future are key elements of reconciliation.<sup>4</sup>

When reconciled, people who were former adversaries come to see each other in a different light, in accommodative ways.<sup>5</sup> A fable called *The Magic Eyes* illustrates how the offended person must find a new way of looking at the offender—a deeper truth, new insight leading to new feeling, including a sense of release and renewed empathy and goodwill toward the offender.<sup>6</sup> This rehumanizing of the enemy plays a critical role in re-establishing trust. Trust comes, in part, from a general belief in the good intentions of the other and from indications that past behaviour and/or patterns of violence will not be repeated.

In order for reconciliation to occur, the process must reflect the mutual interests of the parties involved. Without power-sharing in decision-making, a constructive outcome from the reconciliation process is unlikely. A destructive outcome results from one party imposing decisions made unilaterally with little or no consideration for the interests and needs of the other party. If the outcome is perceived as oppressive or humiliating, the parties may feel a need for further action or revenge. As such, destructive outcomes often become the basis for a renewed and destructive struggle.<sup>7</sup> The struggle also continues after an imposed “peace” because key problems or issues in the relationship that were the source of the conflict have not been addressed. Keene warns that “potential consequences for the actions of those in power can be evaded if the less powerful forgive.”<sup>8</sup> The outcome of a conflict is considered constructive if the parties find it mutually acceptable. In addition, the extent to which an outcome is constructive is reflected in the degree to which it facilitates an ongoing relationship in which future conflicts can be addressed.

### **Function of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

The role of a truth and reconciliation commission is to promote reconciliation within a society as a whole. There are five general aims of a TRC: 1) to discover, clarify, and formally acknowledge past abuses; 2) to respond to specific needs of victims; 3) to contribute to justice and accountability; 4) to outline institutional responsibility and recommend reforms; and 5) to promote reconciliation and reduce conflict over the past.

Societal reconciliation is accomplished first of all by challenging the denial of atrocity. According to a Human Rights Watch report, “if a country is to come to terms with its past and successfully turn its attention to the future, it is essential that the truth of the past be officially established. It is impossible to

expect “reconciliation” if part of the population refuses to accept that anything was ever wrong, and the other part has never received any acknowledgement of the suffering it has undergone or of the ultimate responsibility for that suffering.”<sup>9</sup> The main goal of a TRC is to uncover the truth in a joint process in order to reveal what happened, why it happened, and to prevent it from happening again. Truth about the past is critical for societal reconciliation.

Secondly, TRCs attempt to address the needs of victims of mass violence. Victims or victimized groups, collectively, must feel that their suffering has been recognized and acknowledged. Joseph Montville maintains “there is a strong case to be made that the sense of victimhood can only be relieved through the experiences of profound psychological processes by the victim group as a whole.”<sup>10</sup> For many victims, justice means revalidating oneself and affirming the sense that “you are right, you were damaged, and it was wrong.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, a public TRC gives victims voice. A distinctive element of the South African TRC was its focus on forgotten victims in forgotten places. In South Africa, the TRC broadcast victim’s stories and pain to the public. According to Minow, “the chance to tell one’s story and be heard without interruption or skepticism is crucial to so many people, and nowhere more vital than for survivors of trauma.”<sup>12</sup>

The third aim of a TRC involves an acknowledgement and acceptance of responsibility from those who perpetrated and/or benefited from the violence. In the context of reconciliation, there are two essential types of acknowledgement: acknowledgement of wrongdoing and acknowledgement of the human beings who have been harmed.<sup>13</sup> Acknowledging and accepting responsibility for doing harm and benefiting from harmful actions serve as a moral compass for the whole society to indicate that what happened was wrong, former practices are abhorrent, and this will not happen again in the future. Refusal to acknowledge wrongs is a display of political power and of impunity.<sup>14</sup> Acknowledgement also serves to affirm the human worth and dignity of the persons who were harmed. It is a declaration that the persons who were demeaned merit full and equal rights from their state and society, thereby contradicting the racist, colonial, ethnic, or religious prejudice that may have become an underlying justification or excuse for harmful treatment. The link between oppressors acknowledging wrongs and asking for forgiveness and victims forgiving aggressors is powerful. Both sides can then mourn their losses so that “a new equilibrium and a true sense of mutual respect and security can describe the relationship.”<sup>15</sup>

A fourth aim of a TRC, in addition to uncovering the truth about the past, is to influence military, police, judiciary, and political structures in order to prevent

further abuse and/or strengthen mechanisms to respond to injustice when it does occur. The South African TRC report concluded that “reconciliation requires a commitment, especially by those who have benefited and continue to benefit from past discrimination, to the transformation of unjust inequalities and dehumanising poverty.”<sup>16</sup> Despite the difficulty of promoting serious policy or institutional reforms, many truth commissions make recommendations, and some have made important contributions in advancing systemic change. Institutional change is often dependent on the will of the political and military leadership and society as a whole. Recommendations made by the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador on judicial reform focused attention and pressure on problems in the system and became the driving force behind institutional change.<sup>17</sup> El Salvador’s truth commission is one of the few commissions whose recommendations have been made mandatory in the terms of reference; nevertheless, whether or not they are mandated, the recommendations of a state-sanctioned commission tend to be more influential than reports from non-governmental advocacy groups.

The fifth aim of a TRC is to bring former adversaries to a common understanding of their history and reduce the potential for future conflict. Reconciliation of their stories requires a commitment to produce a coherent, albeit complex, narrative about the entire nation’s trauma and the multiple sources and expressions of its violence. Competing narratives may become the source of ongoing justification for conflict and violence. Inadequate identification of the problems and causes of the violence or injustice perpetuate ongoing oppression. Moreover, common understandings must be made public. Although a population may have knowledge of atrocity, general knowledge differs from publicly sanctioned acknowledgement. When general knowledge is publicly acknowledged, it is the first step in a country recognizing the horror of what has occurred and integrating the truth into the country’s history. Public acknowledgement of the harms done and full accounts of what happened become the basis on which to build a future.

Although TRCs have a similar goal, that is, to promote national reconciliation in the wake of serious wrongs, they differ depending on the context. Trudy Govier in *Taking Wrongs Seriously*<sup>18</sup> identifies three contexts in which TRCs have been needed and/or applied: 1) post-totalitarian societies, such as the Central American countries Argentina and Chile, where there were large-scale human rights abuses, such as imprisonment, torture, and forced disappearances of the political opposition; 2) cases of recent gross physical violence; for example, in Bosnia seven thousand Bosnian Muslims were massacred in the town of Srebrenica in 1995; and 3) settler societies such as Canada where peoples were displaced from their land. The mandate,

composition, length, and form of the national reconciliation process varies in each context. For example, the El Salvadorian truth commission was mandated in the UN-brokered peace accord and run by commissioners appointed by the UN Secretary-General. In South Africa, Parliament instituted the TRC, led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, after the new constitution granting amnesty to political wrongdoers had been approved.

### The Legacy of Colonialism

Three unique aspects of the settler society in Canada impact reconciliation methods. First, the First Peoples of Canada continue to experience ongoing oppression as the result of hundreds of years under colonization. The Indian residential schools were one aspect of a larger project to absorb or assimilate Aboriginal people. The legacies of colonialism and of the residential schools system continue to this day. As a result, a government apology and compensation for residential school abuse, although a critical start, are not enough to transform relations. Second, denial of the truth about Canada's relationship with Aboriginal people includes myths that rationalize Canada's continuing exploitation of Aboriginal people. Although beliefs about Indian racial inferiority have changed since the seventeenth century, racist myths continue to justify the child-like status of Aboriginal people in Canada. Third, because of the destruction of culture, language, and identity and the legacy of abuse from the residential schools, Aboriginal people must deal not only with anger towards their colonizers/adversaries, but also with internalized colonization/self-hatred and ongoing abuse in their communities perpetuated by their own community members.

The roots of the broken relationship between Aboriginal people and Canada can be traced to the history of the colonization of North America by Europeans. Initially, European explorers/colonists were dependent on Indigenous hosts and guides, but then gradually, over the course of centuries, they developed a more egalitarian relationship through the North American fur trade. By the 1860s and 1870s, Aboriginal people came to be viewed as an obstacle in the creation of a Euro-Canadian civilization and as dying cultures to be forcibly assimilated into Canadian society.<sup>19</sup> During this period of official nation-state formation, major treaty-making processes were initiated to "open up" the country to European colonization. The federal government set in place policies to ensure and enforce Euro-Canadian dominance and Aboriginal assimilation. Although many of the policies of the late 1800s are no longer in place, their legacy continues to influence Canada's relationship with Aboriginal people, which is characterized as controlling, disempowering, and exploitative.

First Nations are the only groups in Canada that have special legislation governing their affairs; laws that apply to Aboriginal people do not apply to any other people in Canada. This special legislation dates back to before the foundations of the country when it was referred to as British North America. At one time, Aboriginal people were considered to be militarily powerful and needed as allies to fight in the wars between the colonial powers—the French/British and the British/American conflicts. After the British defeated the French, they began to negotiate agreements with the different First Nations close to them in order to maintain good relations. When the thirteen American colonies broke away from the British, they needed Aboriginal allies to fight in their war. Many Aboriginal people sided with the British and maintained their allegiance when the Americans attacked British North America in 1812 because they were promised a homeland of their own.

After 1812, the importance of Indians as military allies declined. The *Royal Proclamation of 1763* had established the practice of making treaties with the Crown that preserved harvesting rights and created reserve lands protected from encroachment by settlers and entrepreneurs. The influx of settlers in Upper Canada, which would later become Ontario, created pressures to free up additional lands for settlement leading policy makers to undertake more aggressive civilization measures. The Bagot Commission, which reported in 1844, was set up to bring coherence to imperial policy. The commission's recommendations foreshadowed legislative developments in subsequent years, including the *Indian Lands Act* of 1860 that transferred authority for Indians and Indian lands in the colonies to a single official, as chief superintendent of Indian affairs. The Bagot Commission proposed to grant individual title deeds on reserve lands to encourage adoption of the non-Indian land tenure system. Restrictions on recognizing membership in bands and establishment of boarding schools to counter the influence of Indian parents also formed part of the recommendations that were later adopted. The commission anticipated that Aboriginal people who became Christian would become examples for those who still clung to their traditional beliefs and way of life. Once they left their traditional way of life, the people of the First Nations would then be phased into the dominant society and eventually disappear along with their reserve land.<sup>20</sup>

The *Gradual Civilization Act* of 1857 further tightened government control of Indians by introducing regulation of band membership. The legislation eliminated the status of Indian women who married non-Indian men. It also abolished the recognition of Indian adoptions of white settlers into their societies. Rules for enfranchisement by which Indian men could voluntarily acquire the rights of citizenship were intended to promote the absorption of



the Indian population into colonial society, a transition that proved to be very unattractive to the vast majority of Indians.

In 1867, under section 91, sub-section 24 of the *British North America Act* (now called the *Constitution Act, 1867*), authority to legislate with regard to Indians and lands reserved to Indians was allocated to the federal government under the federal-provincial separation of powers. The new Dominion of Canada began eradicating Aboriginal forms of leadership through the institution of an electoral system over which the federal government would have ultimate control. In 1869, *An Act for the gradual enfranchisement of Indians* gave the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs the final say as to who could be elected by the communities as the superintendent-general could depose any elected chief based on dishonesty, intemperance, or immorality—terms which were subject to definition by government officials in the context of Christian norms.

At Confederation, authority to legislate with regard to Crown lands was allocated to the provinces. The conflict between Indian harvesting rights guaranteed by treaties and the legislative authority of provinces that recognized no responsibility for Indians would prove problematic. The conflict would become entrenched with the *Natural Resources Transfer Act* of 1930, which allowed the Prairie Provinces to enact legislation that criminalized the exercise of treaty rights. Provincial authority over Crown lands is at the base of disputes about Aboriginal title in jurisdictions where no treaties were signed, including most of British Columbia. Isolation from the resources on their traditional territories has undermined any chance for Aboriginal people to sustain their own economies.<sup>21</sup>

By 1884, the policies became more draconian, placing further limitations on First Nations people and their cultures, such as the prohibition against Aboriginal dancing and costumes. Pass laws were invoked preventing Aboriginal people from leaving the reserve without permission of the Indian agent, although later the pass laws were deemed illegal as they were never sanctioned through government legislation. In addition, the *Indian Act* of 1876 (amended in 1881) prohibited Aboriginal persons in the Prairie Provinces from selling their wheat crops in economic competition with non-Aboriginal farmers; it would seem that Aboriginal farmers had become too successful.

Canada's residential school system was introduced following the presentation of the Davin Report in 1879, although the civilizing policy that it represented had its roots earlier in the century. Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald appointed Nicholas Flood Davin to research the industrial school

system set up by President Ulysses S. Grant in the United States. Davin was impressed with the industrial boarding schools, which separated Indian children from their parents for extended periods and were regarded as a superior instrument of aggressive civilization. In contrast, day schools were considered a failure “because the influence of the wigwam was stronger than the influence of the school.”<sup>22</sup> Following consultation with lay and church leaders in the west, Davin drew up a plan that would involve the churches as partners in what became the Indian residential school system. Throughout subsequent years, more and more policies were put in place in order to eliminate any sense of a national Aboriginal identity that would conflict with a Canadian national identity. The residential school system would have the greatest effect.

The Indian residential schools represent one aspect of Aboriginal grievances in the context of ongoing social conflict. Today, Aboriginal communities face extensive systemic barriers. Despite gains made in self-administration and resource sharing, many government policies continue to limit the economic, social, and political development and empowerment of Aboriginal communities. First Nations continue to be governed by the *Indian Act*, giving the federal government final legislative authority over reserve communities and lands. Social opportunities for Aboriginal people are constrained by substandard education, health care, and housing. In 2000, a research report revealed that chronic underfunding of Aboriginal child and family services, twenty-two per cent lower than provincial funding for non-Aboriginal children, resulted in lack of access to services that could help keep Aboriginal children within their families and communities.<sup>23</sup> The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples reported that while First Nations child and family services had stemmed the flow of children out of their communities, in 1992–93, about four per cent of First Nations children on-reserve were in care outside of their own homes, compared to a child-in-care rate of less than one per cent (0.63%) for the general population.<sup>24</sup>

The federal government has dragged out the resolution of over eight hundred land and treaty disputes while provincial governments have held on to control of natural resources, limiting the economic capacities of Aboriginal people. According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of Indigenous people, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Aboriginal communities lack the land and resource base to meet the needs of their growing populations and “the lands concerned are being denuded of natural resources before Aboriginal claims are recognized and can be addressed.”<sup>25</sup> For example, in 2006, sixteen years after the 1990 United Nations Human Rights Committee report documenting

violations of the rights of the Lubicon Cree, the committee found that the dispute over land remained unresolved, resource extraction had greatly expanded, and there had been no negotiations since 2003. Dispossession of land has been a key factor underlying the pervasive impoverishment, ill-health, and social stress that Aboriginal communities experience across Canada.<sup>26</sup> The Canadian government must make systemic changes in order to heal its relationship with Aboriginal peoples.

### Myths Supporting Systematic Discrimination

Myths concerning Canada, Canadian society, and relations with Aboriginal people impact widespread beliefs and, as such, the development of government policy. For example, the phrase “two founding nations,” referring to the French and the English, is often used to describe Canada’s history and ignores the undisputed fact that the interaction between Aboriginal peoples and Europeans has been central to Canada’s history. It supports the myth that the “new world” was an empty, untamed land in need of civilization. Belief in the superiority of European culture and Christianity, dominant for centuries in Europe and North America, is not as prevalent today as in the past. Nevertheless, Canadian society perpetuates stereotypes of Aboriginal people that justify Canadian domination and help to alleviate any sense of guilt or responsibility for Aboriginal oppression. These stereotypes strengthen the tendency to deny the truth about Canada’s historical relationship to Aboriginal people.

During the first forty-five years of encounters between Europeans and the Aboriginal people of the Americas (1492–1537) debates took place in Europe as to whether the new people of the Americas were human beings that had souls. When Pope Paul III issued the 1537 papal bull, *Sublimus Dei*, stating that the Indians were human beings with souls, the debates subsided. However, lack of clarity on the humanity of the Indians became the justification for the slaughter of thousands or, as some scholars maintain, millions of people.

The emergence of the anti-slavery movement in the early 1800s and the humanitarian sentiment in Britain that supported missions and associations, such as the Aborigines Protection Society, formed the original underpinnings of efforts to uplift native populations in the colonies by educating them to conform to British social norms. The darker economic motive of separating peoples from their territories was not acknowledged in the rhetoric of serving the best interests of children targeted for re-socialization. Later, assimilation efforts were rationalized by the theory of Social Darwinism, derived from the new science of evolution and the emerging discipline of ethnology.

Charles Darwin believed that all species, including the human being, were continually evolving from the primitive to the more advanced. Lewis Henry Morgan, the father of modern ethnology, put his own spin on the theory of evolution by categorizing groups in a hierarchy. Aboriginal people such as the Cree were in the lowest stage (savagery), while other nations like the Iroquois were more evolved (barbarism). According to Morgan's theory, Europeans were the most evolved and were thus considered civilized. The belief in European racial superiority helped to justify the Canadian government's policies toward Aboriginal people, including the residential school system.

Centuries of myths about Aboriginal racial inferiority have laid the foundation for negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people that are used to justify domination today. The *incompetent Indian* is one of the most harmful stereotypes of Aboriginal people because it is used to justify policies such as the *Indian Act*. It implies that Aboriginal people are incapable of competing in a modern society and therefore need special legislation that allows governments to control and intervene in their affairs. Exposing the role that myths and stereotypes play in conflict, past and present, is critical to the reconciliation process.

### Impact of Destruction of Language, Culture, and Identity

A major impact of the loss of language, culture, and identity resulting from the residential school system has been internalized colonization/self-hatred and sometimes mental illness in Aboriginal communities. Through the residential school system, Aboriginal people began to believe and internalize the myths and stereotypes used to justify their own domination. Many residential school Survivors must deal not only with anger towards their non-Aboriginal caretakers but also with self-hatred, complicating the reconciliation process. Because recovery of language, culture, and identity is critical to the process of decolonization, we would argue it is also crucial to reconciliation in the Canadian context.

According to Poka Laenui,<sup>27</sup> who has developed a model to describe the processes of colonization and decolonization, denying the validity or merit of Indigenous cultures is the first step in the colonization process. As a result, Indigenous people withdraw gradually from their cultural roots and may even lead in the criticism of their traditional culture. Devaluation is followed by destruction and eradication of all symbols of Indigenous culture. Next, institutions—churches, legal and educational systems, and health services—that belittle, denigrate, and insult traditional systems and Indigenous cultural foundations are imposed by the colonizers. Tokenism then becomes normalized; aspects of Indigenous culture are tolerated if they are useful to

the colonizers or if they serve to illustrate their generosity. Finally, remnants of Indigenous culture are transformed or absorbed into the culture of the dominating society, becoming popular and therefore profitable. Laenui maintains that people who have undergone colonization inevitably suffer from concepts of inferiority.

Mi'kmaq educator and scholar Marie Battiste comments on the effect of the Western education system on the mental health of Aboriginal people and, in particular, Aboriginal youth. She states, "this educational process is called cognitive imperialism, the last stage of imperialism wherein the imperialist seeks to whitewash the tribal mind and soul and to create doubt."<sup>28</sup> Cognitive imperialism occurs when people from traditional societies begin to believe the versions of their culture and history set down by the colonizers and live out the roles set forth for them by the dominant society. Overwhelming evidence suggests that Aboriginal adults suffered from the social modelling they received as children in residential schools and the colonial education forced upon them. Poor social modelling is often passed on to their children, perpetuating the social ills that result from cognitive imperialism. Often, the price is a fear and an internalized hate for anything that reminds them of their Aboriginal identity.

Added to these unfortunate realities are death due to disease and loss of lands, traditions, language, and children. The result is severe mental trauma among many Aboriginal people in Canada. Psychologists Eduardo and Bonnie Duran<sup>29</sup> maintain that Aboriginal people may experience the following five stages of post-traumatic stress disorder. In the first stage, experiencing shock from the imposition of colonial structures that become a continual source of unexpressed aggravation, people may disassociate from themselves; individuals no longer have awareness of who they are and are left feeling as if they are non-existent. During the second stage, individuals withdraw emotionally and literally shut down emotions so as to avoid the pain of being unable to provide for and defend their families in traditional ways. Many of the grandparents who went through the residential school experience suffered from withdrawal and passed this coping method down to their children and grandchildren. The third stage is characterized by denial; the person believes that he or she is able to control their circumstances or that they will be healed through some miraculous, instantaneous cure. In the fourth stage, uncontrollable anger may become focused on family and community members rather than on external forces. At this point, the internalized hate for their situation can result in hate for others who disagree with their own ideology concerning, for example, traditional practices or other belief systems. The divisive process of colonization is internalized. Finally, the fifth stage, a

healing phase, occurs when individuals realize that they and their community have been affected by the processes of colonization. They can then vent their anger towards the appropriate target and begin the process of deconstructing colonization first within themselves and then within the community. In this stage, cultural affirmation is essential for healing.<sup>30</sup>

Post-traumatic stress disorder associated with cognitive imperialism has resulted in serious mental imbalances for many Aboriginal people, and this is compounded by doubt about the viability of their own traditional healing processes. The underlying effect is a lack of self-worth and endemic suicides among the young who question the place of their traditions in contemporary society, leaving uncertainty about their own identities. Even some elders are unsure that their traditions have a place in a contemporary world.<sup>31</sup> In this context, validation of Aboriginal culture, language, identity, and healing processes must be central to healing and reconciliation methods.

### **Implications for Reconciliation Methods**

As the numbers of TRCs grow, different methodologies and approaches point to the importance of considering the societal context in the development of reconciliation processes. In the Canadian settler context, as mentioned earlier, there are three major factors that, if taken into account, will help to heal the broken relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people: 1) the legacy of colonialism that impacts the political, social, and economic life of Aboriginal people; 2) historical and contemporary myths prevalent in Canadian society that rationalize Canada's policies and practices towards Aboriginal people; and 3) the impact of colonization/residential schools on Aboriginal identities and mental health that adds an additional layer of healing to the reconciliation process.

These contextual factors shape reconciliation methods. First, the TRC must be used to publicly identify systemic changes that will address the unequal relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Although the primary function of the TRC is psychosocial, there is nevertheless a precedent for commissions to mandate institutional reform. In the context of large-scale injustice such as unresolved land claims, poverty, sub-standard social services, and lack of political access/freedom, purely psychosocial attempts to build trust and hope for a change in relations through the TRC may appear hollow or forced. Listening to Aboriginal concerns and sharing decision making regarding issues of mutual interest is an essential step toward establishing equity. How can Aboriginal people begin to see Canadians in general in a different, accommodative light when patterns of control and exploitation continue to characterize the

relationship? Hope for future peaceful co-existence is a key component of reconciliation.

Second, the TRC process must be made public and visibly led by national political and religious leaders. Without public acknowledgement from national leaders of harms done, the TRC will lack national impact. Public acknowledgement from perpetrators or those who benefited from their actions functions as a moral guide concerning what is right or wrong in society and restores the dignity and worth of those harmed, in their own eyes, and in public perception. As indicated earlier in this chapter, the colonization process had profound and prolonged effects on Aboriginal people. A fundamental sense of unreality may develop if a critical part of one's history goes unrecognized.<sup>32</sup> As a result, people cannot represent themselves and be accepted as they see themselves. Understanding the collective circumstances of one's people allows individuals to realize that they, the family, community, and nation are victims of something that occurred years before and that continues to play out negatively in their communities today. For example, public, televised acknowledgement of wrongs committed from state and religious leaders will address some of the self-doubt/hatred internalized by Aboriginal people by affirming their human value and validating their painful experiences.

In addition, public acknowledgement of historical wrongs from state leaders will help to dispel the myths and stereotypes about Aboriginal people common in Canadian society and allow a mutual understanding of history to develop. Although the Canadian public cannot be considered perpetrators of residential school abuse, Canadian individuals, communities, and businesses have benefited from ongoing exploitation of Aboriginal lands and resources. As evidenced by the "two nations" metaphor, Canadians will likely continue to rely on myths and stereotypes about Aboriginal people by ignoring the truth about Canadian history and current affairs. Denial of uncomfortable and undesirable realities reinforces the current social, political, and economic system that benefit the general public. Public acknowledgement by respected national leaders will assist in the creation of a common historical narrative that incorporates harm done to Aboriginal people and will serve as a basis for a democratic society for all peoples in Canada.

Third, in a settler context where colonialism has demeaned and nearly destroyed Indigenous language, culture, and identity, the reconciliation process must validate cultural practices and processes. According to Laenui,<sup>33</sup> the first step in the decolonization process includes rediscovery and recovery of language, culture, and identity. Rediscovery and recovery is often followed by a process of mourning within which anger may be

a component. Laenui emphasizes the importance of public debate and discussion on the full range of possibilities for Indigenous peoples, and he maintains that re-evaluation of social systems is required and not simply inserting Indigenous people into colonial power structures. Duran and Duran<sup>34</sup> agree that for healing to take place, there must be a cultural element based on hope and not pessimism.

Incorporating Aboriginal healing practices into the TRC would validate the rich cultural experience and identities of Aboriginal people and facilitate the reconciliation process. Over the years, Aboriginal people have lost some of the skills that their ancestors possessed for bringing the mind into balance and good health. For instance, in the past, within some cultures, elaborate communal ceremonies that dealt with mental anguish and grieving took place. The cohesion of an ancestral-based community is what gives medicine its effectiveness. Nevertheless, Aboriginal communities have adapted and developed restorative healing practices based on Aboriginal culture that are suited to modern-day concerns. An example of this kind of success story would be the healing circles of Hollow Water.<sup>35</sup>

During exploratory dialogues among residential school Survivors, Aboriginal healers and leaders, legal counsel, and senior government and church officials leading up to the introduction of the Alternative Dispute Resolution process in 2003, consensus was reached on principles such as self-design, full community participation, flexibility, and consensus-based decision making.<sup>36</sup> These principles became the basis for successful alternative dispute resolution pilot projects that provided the opportunity for a creative and appropriate range of remedies. Emphasizing the validity of Aboriginal culture and healing practices through the TRC will not only assist in Aboriginal healing but will help to foster mutual respect and understanding in Canadian society as a whole.



## Notes

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- 4 Lederach in Weiner (1998).
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