



## Spiritual Reflections

# Confronting the Truth: Yes, We Do Need to Keep Talking About This!

By Cameron Fraser

*"We know that many within our church will still not understand why each of us must bear the scar, the blame for this horrendous period in Canadian history. But the truth is, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors, and therefore, we must also bear their burdens... We are in the midst of a long and painful journey as we reflect on the cries that we did not or would not hear, and how we have behaved as a church."*<sup>1</sup>

On Tuesday, October 27, 1998, then Moderator of the United Church of Canada, spoke, on behalf of the church an apology

"for the pain and suffering that our church's involvement in the Indian Residential School system has caused... You were and are the victims of evil acts that cannot under any circumstances be justified or excused."

This was the second apology officially offered by The United Church, the first having been offered in 1986 addressed colonialism and Christian superiority in general, while this second apology specifically named the United Church's involvement in Residential Schools.

While Phipps named on that day that the evil acts of Residential schools cannot be "justified or excused" it is not uncommon to encounter in conversation with United Church folks attempts to do so, or even more commonly, attempts to deflect and avoid talking about things that "happened long ago" because "we weren't there" wondering "how long do we need to keep talking about this?"

Perhaps you have encountered something similar within your own community?

Of course, reading, listening, and learning about horrific and intentional acts of abuse and genocide is not pleasant, but seeking to stifle these

conversations is more than an attempt to avoid discomfort. We seem to operate under the assumption that were we personally around "back then" that we would have done differently.

But when we listen (if we are willing to do so) we hear that troubling reality that *cries that we did not or would not hear* have not ceased and that while the last Residential School has indeed closed (in 1996 mind you) incarceration, child apprehension and a legion of institution, systemic, and pervasive attitudes continue to demean, devalue, and outright endanger the life of Indigenous communities and specifically children of whom more are currently living under state care than were involved in the whole history of Residential Schools.

Killing the Indian in the child is a very present reality.

While it is true that the United Church (and other denominations who formerly operated Residential Schools) no longer participate in the admiration of these new systems, we too often act as chaplains to a culture that allows this to continue.

Perhaps our resistance to "keep talking about this" and our attempts to locate these things as simply "something from the past" that has "nothing to do with us today" is not that we believe ourselves to be so radically different than those who came before us, but in fact that we fear it is true, that we, like them



are participating (even if only in our inaction) in a continuation of the horrors of the past.

What if courageously (as in with all our hearts) confronting the past might give us strength to listen, and actually hear cries for justice today? Could mourning and grief unlock us from our inaction?

*Jesus said, "You'll know the truth and the truth will set you free." I believe that. But then David Foster Wallace said, "Yeah, sure, the truth will set you free—but not before it's done with you." – Nadia Bolz-Weber<sup>2</sup>*

If we can confront the truth, that Residential Schools were indeed unjustifiably horrible and intentionally malicious in its intent, that people like us knew and ignored the suffering, and that indeed, had we been alive then, we likely would have done the same because we are doing the same thing now.

This truth can shatter our assumptions about ourselves, but if these assumptions are built on falsehood, this is in fact good news. Our illusions of goodness are stripped away, but we ourselves are not annihilated.

This truth makes new truth possible.

We can shed our defensive denial, our apathetic enabling and our unconscious benefiting from systems that enshrine unequal relations and we can actually listen with whole hearts.

We are not just descendants, those who inherited a past we did not participate in and a system we did not create, we are also ancestors, who will pass on to those who come next the conditions in which they will live their lives.

Yes, we need to keep talking about this because that will (if we work with it) give us the inner tools, the structural awareness, and the prophetic imagination to see the truth of our past and present and the possibility of a future.

And the truth will set us free.

The truth is not yet done with us.

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## Questions for Reflection

1. What struck you most?
2. Fraser states, "Truth can shatter our assumptions about ourselves, but if these assumptions are built on falsehood, this is in fact good news." After reflecting on Session 7, what are some past injustices that your community has to come to terms with? How might acknowledging these truths help create "new truths"?
3. Share a quote or insight that sticks with you.

## References

<sup>1</sup> The Right Rev. Bill Phipps. "To former students of United Church Indian Residential Schools, and to their families and communities" General Council Executive, 1998, The United Church of Canada. <https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/reconciliation-and-indigenous-justice/apologies>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.theisolationjournals.com/blog/nadiabolzweber>