A soft sole on a rough road

by BROCK WEIR

When the unmarked graves were discovered on lands associated with a residential school in British Columbia, people expressed their grief in different ways.

Some chose anger, others tears. Still more found their outlet silently.

It could have been leaving a stone in a special place in memory of someone known to them, or, tragically, someone long since forgotten and lost to history. Some painted these rocks orange to drive home a point that should be universal: that every child matters.

Others still gathered shoes, sandals, and footwear of all kinds to represent the lives lost, the steps on the path to get to that point, and the steps on the path to true reconciliation.

From a personal perspective, the placement of shoes, although a gesture that sounds simple at first blush, were among the most evocative images to me. They are, in my mind, inextricably linked to that point in time not all that long ago when the BC discoveries opened our eyes to just a small fraction of the true breadth of a very dark chapter in our own history ? and this week, as another chapter begins, these objects symbolic of the steps that we must all take, are more evocative than ever.

The images flashed through my mind on Monday as Pope Francis issued his historic apology to victims of the residential school system. At the start of his remarkable speech, the Pontiff reflected on a pair of moccasins given to him earlier this year by First Nations delegates to the Vatican as a symbol of the suffering experienced by Indigenous children and their families during this shameful period in our shared history.

The traditional footwear has a storied history for reasons not only practical, but as functional pieces of art. How they are made is emblematic of the respect our First Nations have for the resources the earth provides. It's a lesson that is evergreen, passed down from generation to generation, but, under the residential school system, a tradition that was intended to be systemically ripped from tradition-keepers present and future.

But these traditions thankfully survived and are as potent as ever.

The ones presented to the Pope are now a symbol of the steps that had to be taken to get to Monday's historic moment and also the next steps on the road ahead ? steps that are getting ever-clearer, despite still seeming just beyond reach.

?Those moccasins?speak to us of a path to follow, a journey that we desire to make together,? said the Pope. ?We want to walk together, to pray together, and to work together so that the suffering of the past can lead to a future of justice, healing and reconciliation.?

Speaking of picking the most disastrous fork in the road, he continued, ?When the European colonists first arrived here, there was a great opportunity to bring about a fruitful encounter between cultures, traditions and forms of spirituality. Yet for the most part that did not happen. Again, I think back on the stories that you told: how the policies of assimilation ended up systemically marginalizing the Indigenous peoples; how also through the system of residential schools your languages and cultures were denigrated and suppressed; how children suffered physical, verbal, psychological and spiritual abuse; how they were taken away from their homes at a young age, and how that indelibly affected relationships between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren.?

Describing residential schools as a ?deplorable evil,? the Pope asked for forgiveness, correctly noting that doing so is simply a ?starting point.?

?Today, I am here in this land that, along with its ancient memories, preserves the scars of still open wounds. I am here because the first step in my penitential pilgrimage among you is that of asking forgiveness, of telling you once more that I am deeply sorry. Sorry for the ways in which, regrettably, many Christians supported the colonizing mentality of the powers that oppressed the Indigenous peoples. I am sorry. I ask for forgiveness, in particular, for the ways in which many members of the Church and of religious communities cooperated, not least through their indifference, in projects of cultural destruction and forced assimilation promoted by the governments of that time, which culminated in the system of residential schools.?

This historic statement was greeted warmly by victims of the residential school system and their families; still others found them hollow and were indifferent to mere words. Some spoke afterward how the church leader's words re-opened wounds that never ? and will never ? fully heal, while others rejected them outright.

Looking beyond our borders to see how this historic moment was viewed from the outside looking in, I was struck by one quote from 80-year-old survivor Henry Boubard, via CNN, that seemed to sum it up: ?You took away my education, you took away my life, you took away my marriage, you took away my identity, you took away everything I wanted to be. Now it's nothing and you say ?I'm sorry.'?

No words can adequately make up for the horrors that transpired, but now that the symbolic statement has come, it can only be hoped that the next step on this much-desired journey will be more concrete.

We've had the Truth & Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action in front of us for many years now, but that is just a starting point for all of us. For the Catholic church, where do ?we? (used in the most collective sense of the word) go from here? ?Sorry? itself can only go so far and can never repair the damage done, but outlining a clear plan rather than an elusive and metaphorical journey can go a heck of a lot further.

An apology is just the beginning, and until there is something more, we will continue to be stuck at the starting gate.

Until the church comes up with something, I think one simple thing we can all do is once again revisit the TRC's Calls to Action and look at what each of us can do as individuals to put a paving stone down for this ?journey? forward. After all, somebody's got to do it.

Another simple thing those of us from a non-Indigenous heritage can do is listen, recognize and accept: listen to survivors' stories, recognize the long-lasting impacts of the residential school system, and accept that taking full stock of our national faults over the last 155 years, and even before Confederation, does not weaken who we are.

Recognizing where we have come from, for better or worse, and recognizing where we need to go, can only make us stronger as we forge ahead on a path to being better.