

Amnesias ? Historic and Otherwise

by BROCK WEIR

Orange isn't necessarily my colour, but I plan on donning a citrusy t-shirt on Saturday not out of any sartorial taste, but in my own small, individual way to combat what Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley describes as ?Canada's historic amnesia.?

September 30 marks National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a day for all people of this place we call home to come together, many wearing the aforementioned orange shirts that have become synonymous with the day, to remember the children who were forcibly ripped from their parents' arms and tragically placed within Canada's residential schools, many never to see their parents or families again.

As we have been seeing with alarming regularity over the last few years, many of the youth essentially incarcerated behind the forbidding walls of these institutions, some of which survived as late as 1996, died within, their remains hastily buried and long-forgotten ? except by the people who loved them, dedicating themselves to righting a historic wrong.

Others who were fortunate enough to survive and return home did so as completely different people, broken by the system, weighed down by the realities of the trauma they experienced, some even sadly passing their traumas down to the next generation in a vicious cycle of what was wrought.

And it was all wrought in the names of culture and religion.

As it was described in the early days of the residential school system, the mechanism that was put in place was designed to take the ?Indian out of the Indian? by systematically attempting to shatter ties with their families, the cultures, and the languages in which they were raised.

The tragic end game was to break everything they knew, respected and loved, to make room for the Euro-centric ideas that were seen as ideal in the colonization efforts that resulted in the Canada of today.

To hear their stories each year ? whether firsthand from a survivor or from friends and family members who now serve as the torchbearers for memories of victims ? is harrowing. Their experiences, while not so removed in years from 2023, seem unimaginable today. It goes without saying ? yet here we are ? that they are difficult stories to hear, but, in their own way, they are invaluable in helping us all come to terms with our collective history and, in doing so, work together to forge a path forward.

But how many will come out to listen and hear them?

With each passing year, it feels many have moved past the issue, but the discoveries of mass graves continues, but now meriting little more than a ripple compared to the watershed moment of the Kamloops discovery. Why isn't the outrage keeping pace with the numbers?

Maybe it's the idea that turning out once in solidarity is enough of a laurel to rest upon, but that is not the case. Maybe it's because, as far as outrages go, we seem to be spoiled for choice on directions to point ire.

Take, for instance, the so-called ?1 Million March 4 Children? that took place last Wednesday, September 20, in many cities and towns across Canada.

Ahead of the event, organizers of the demonstration said its mission was to ?safeguard the well-being and innocence of our children.?

?Uniting diverse backgrounds and faiths, we share a resolute purpose: advocating for the elimination of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity curriculum, pronouns, gender ideology and mixed bathrooms in schools,? they wrote on their website. ?As a symbol of our commitment, students are encouraged to participate in a nationwide school walkout on that day. Additionally, major cities across the nation will host march events. Together, we stand united to safeguard the well-being and innocence of our children.?

On the flipside, upon the announcement these marches would take place, scores of counterprotests massed to add voices of support for members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

I am not going to wade in on the specifics of the demonstrations or presume what inspired people on any and all sides of this issue to hit the pavement, but rather what I was able to see from live videos from the scene and photographs from people on the ground after the fact.

First, what struck me was the difference in signs carried by both groups of demonstrators. On the one side, the counter-protestors held up messages of acceptance, some with rhetoric more heated than others, and waving flags that represented different segments of the 2SLGBTQIA community.

In the other camp, while there were placards from parents (and, presumably, by parents) wanting to be the ultimate decision-makers in their children's education, photos and videos showed that fighting for top-billing were signs and flags representing various political movements that have cropped up over the last few years that appeared to have little to do with the demonstration's purported mission.

On both sides of the divide, children and youth were well-represented, as evidently parents took their kids out of school to take part, but some of the images I find tough to get out of my mind are those of youth, most apparently taking part in the original protest with their parents. While some held signs emblazoned with ?Let Kids Be Kids?, others were pictured holding politically-charged signs, flipping off photographers and videographers, and offering no shortage of other gestures, while their parents looked on.

I'm not sure how that dovetails into the idea of ?safeguarding the well-being and innocence of our children,? but there it was.

Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I always viewed schools ? at least in my experience ? as a stepping stone to experiencing the world before you, equipping kids with the intellectual tools and critical thinking skills they need to be informed and active members of the society we live in today.

They were institutions that were once celebrated for their ability to present a diversity of viewpoints and, with the aforementioned intellectual and critical thinking skills, allow students to develop their own unique outlook on the world and how they fit into it; as places where kids were able to find out what kind of learners they were, fields they might want to study or pursue as careers, and ultimately find out who they are and who they want to be.

It was not an extension of home, it was a gateway to the world.

Did my parents agree with everything that was taught in school? No. Did they see the value in every single field trip planned? Not necessarily. But the difference was that in times like these, when I got off the bus that day or took my place at the table for dinner that evening, they were, if not teachable moments, the catalyst for important and invaluable conversations.

As this weekend's observance approaches, we can all benefit from taking a moment to remember those kids who were literally not allowed to be kids; the children who paid the ultimate price; and the parents who never had the chance to have those important conversations and teachable moments.