

Collective goals and maintaining momentum

by BROCK WEIR

As August started to draw to a close earlier this week, I was heartened to see an orange banner hoisted on Parliament Hill.

The orange pennant is known as the 'Survivors Flag' and is intended to honour those individuals who were forced into the residential school system.

It's just the latest in a long line of ways we have collectively grappled with one of 'if not the' sorriest chapters in Canadian history 'but it's remarkable to think how far this reality check has come in the last year alone.

The August 29 flag raising came just weeks after Pope Francis' remarkable apology to victims and survivors on behalf of the Catholic Church. For some, it was a moving milestone, for others it was too little too late, but it was done 'another stone on the reconciliation path we all have to walk together.

It's also remarkable to consider how much has transpired since the first National Day for Truth & Reconciliation last year.

Taking place at the end of September 2021, it seemed like a watershed moment in our history, one that we hoped wouldn't slow to a trickle. I'm very glad to say the flow, at least in my observation, hasn't lost momentum.

On that first nation-wide observance, I was at Aurora Town Park to cover an unforgettable afternoon of hard truths and beautiful words.

As the true horrors of the residential school system were shared, it was hard not to notice the edifice at one end of the park: a white-pillared brown-brick school that operated in a parallel timeline to the height of the residential school system:

While the focal point of the evening was rightly at the Band Shell at Town Park across the street as Indigenous elders gathered behind a sacred fire to share poignant words on an almost unspeakable truth and how we might be able to move forward together, I couldn't help but occasionally turn to my left towards the former Wells Street Public School.

There was another facet to which the school took mute testimony: the privilege enjoyed by so many of us today, and for the generations preceding us.

Aurora is, by many measures, still a reasonably small town. Many people have lived here their entire lives and have gone on to raise their own children in the community they have come to love so well.

It is a safe bet that at least a few people amongst those who came out to grieve and mourn as a community had very personal ties to the nearly century-old building. At least six generations of Aurorans stepped through that whitewashed threshold as youngsters unfamiliar with the ways of the world.

When their time at Wells Street was complete and they stepped back across the threshold and out towards the park for the final time, they were, it is hoped, the wiser for it. They did so with untold promise awaiting them.

Many undoubtedly went on to great things, to use what they learned within its walls for the greater good, to make their fortunes, and maybe even return through the doors as teachers themselves to ensure the cycle continued.

But, unlike the children we were there to mourn on Thursday night, they were not snatched away from their families under the long arm of the law.

They were not victims of having their culture ripped from their souls. They were not silenced in sharing the language of their people. They did not wake up every day terrified over what horrors awaited them that day. They did not settle in at night unsure whether that night's sleep would be their last. Nor did they finish their lessons at 3 p.m. knowing that before dinner they could be forced to dig a grave for a fellow student who, for whatever reason, would not be returning to the classroom tomorrow.

They were lucky ? but did they have any idea how fortunate they were?

I would hazard a guess that many of them were blissfully ignorant that what was, for many of the brighter students, a day of endless possibilities every time they walked to school, was, for their Indigenous counterparts, another day of possibilities too terrible to even contemplate.

Never would they have been able to imagine going through the school day without the comfort of a mother tongue. Nor, as they recited the Lord's Prayer every morning, as was the custom, could they imagine a world where they would experience physical abuse if they dared to celebrate or lend voice to the spiritual teachings in which they were raised. I am, of course, giving many of these early generations the benefit of the doubt.

Given what was, sadly, a very different and dark time, some might have been aware of just how lucky they were by comparison. Others may have been tragically convinced that what was being carried out was the right thing and the country would be the better for it.

Maybe others simply didn't care.

But these generations are not limited to those who we remember today in sepia tones.

However different and dark the time was, it wasn't all that long ago.

Given the fact that the last Residential school was finally shuttered in 1996, I'm speaking of my generation, too ? and, if you're reading this, there's a strong chance it is probably yours as well. Falling into the category of the once blissfully unaware, my eyes, along with countless others, have been opened to a very dark reality that was still taking place as settler teachers came into our classrooms to give us the most cursory lessons in Indigenous culture, exposed us to bucolic falsehoods on relations between settlers and Indigenous peoples, and did absolutely nothing to prepare us for facing up to what is now our national shame.

As the orange glow in the sky last week bathed the park in the most fitting way possible, and backlit the school along the way, with the smell of burning sage and wood in the air I couldn't help but feel there was something cleansing about the experience, energizing us to collectively make a difference and move forward together ? with clear eyes and open hearts.

Now, with 94 suggestions in front of us, it is more than time to answer the Calls.

Many have since that important day, and many will continue to do so in the years to come.

But, as we begin the countdown to National Day for Truth & Reconciliation this September 30, there are still a few items we can check off our list.

Despite the milestones that have taken place in the last 12 months, some action items have indeed fallen by the wayside.

This month, see what you can do as an individual, a business, a school class, or a neighbourhood to make a list before the day itself and, most importantly, listen and learn.