

Opening our eyes to the stories around us

by BROCK WEIR

Stories are all around us if we take a few minutes to pause, look and listen.

Recently, I ventured down in the city to the University of Toronto where Victoria College was hosting its annual book sale. This sale has become something of an annual tradition for my friends and I, and due to the fact they rarely change the layout of the sale, we're able to zero in on the genres of particular interest and get in and out without breaking too much of a sweat ? carrying home the haul is another story!

This year's sale yielded ?just? seven books to take home and as I leafed through my finds on the train back, I realized that two books, published nearly 70 years apart, had come from the library of the same man ? who evidently signed the books when he got them before putting them on the shelf, hopefully well-enjoyed.

The first book, published in 1953, had a big, bold signature in charcoal grey ink just inside the cover, as if the reader's name was etched with a fountain pen with ink drawn straight from the well. It was a confident signature supported by extra, unnecessary flourishes that were undoubtedly chosen to make a statement. The second, published in 2022, bore the same name, potentially signed with the same fountain pen ? but, instead of the big, bold signature, the ink was a little fainter, the first and last name penned with a decidedly shakier, more tentative hand, and the superfluous flourishes of 1953 still present, but streamlined perhaps in the interests in time and dexterity.

While I bought the books for their subject matters, in the end I was more intrigued by the story these two signatures, 69 years apart, told.

That is, for me, part of the appeal of used books over newer volumes. While the stories contained on freshly-printed pages can prove timeless, a used volume as a whole can have a story all its own, from when it is first purchased, the places its first reader took it, to the circumstances of why it was donated in the first place, and the start of its next chapter, once it's picked up from a table groaning under the weight of others waiting to find their places in a brand-new library.

I have a similar viewpoint on heritage buildings, particularly houses and homes.

For a time, the paternal side of my family lived in a home built in 1836. We knew the broad strokes of what took place within its walls ? thanks to its documented early history as the then-village's first courthouse-and-jail combo and the tombstone that had fallen and been forgotten in the backyard ? but I always wondered about the people who lived there, celebrated milestones there, and even died there.

Each step on the creaking floorboards was a gentle step in someone else's footsteps and it fostered almost a custodial feeling for the brief time we lived there. I wonder if the current occupants, a business, ever have the same thoughts.

My thoughts, as they often do on National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, turned to our shared history ? not only the tragic history of residential schools writ large, but the individual stories of both those who were victimized by the system and never came home and those ?warriors? who lived to shine a light on cultural genocide. This year, as they have in the past, also turned to their non-Indigenous peers who likely had no idea how truly lucky and privileged they were.

On Monday evening, I was transfixed by the moving words of Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother Kim Wheatley, always a powerful voice for what's needed to achieve true Reconciliation, as she delivered a lesson we all can and should learn from.

Her voice and wisdom, combined with the smell of the smoke from the nearby sacred fire, are always transporting as they come

together to share a reality that so many find difficult to comprehend.

As the sun began to set on another National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, I was snapped back to where I was seated taking it all in by the sound of flip-flops slapping against the freshly-laid concrete of Aurora Town Square.

The carefree child, ribbons in the colours of the Medicine Wheel cascading down her back, fluttering with each slap, was Wheatley's granddaughter.

As her grandmother and her peers spoke around the fire, she was a ball of energy running circles around the space, eventually pausing with a friend to play in a couple of puddles left over from the in-ground fountains that were turned off to make way for the ceremony.

As she came to a stop to get her young hands dirty, I couldn't help but take in the setting as a whole.

This all-important ceremony remembering the victims and honouring the survivors of residential schools was taking place in the shadow of a venerable old school that has served the community for generations in one form or another.

The Church Street School was completed in 1886, more than 50 years following the establishment of the Mohawk Institute Residential School in 1834, serving as both a high school and an elementary school until 1968, nearly 30 years before Canada's last residential school was closed.

Class photos taken outside the building are widely shared in Aurora and some of those students' faces appeared in my mind's eye as I surveyed the entire scene.

Were they aware of the reality of what was happening in their fair dominion? Perhaps they were aware of the existence of residential schools, but the actuality of what the schools represented was probably swept under the rug.

Were they fed lies that these facilities were for the greater good? What untruths were they told about our Indigenous peoples?

As such, the sad question is, would they have even cared? What would they have made of the situation happening on the ground from the lofty heights of their second-floor classroom window?

Did anyone in the crowd who ever called Church Street School theirs have similar thoughts?

It's impossible, of course, to answer those questions but they are important to think about.

From where Wheatley stood, the Church Street School was immediately before her. Behind her, the Aurora Public Library ? powerful testaments to education and learning both.

While it might be intriguing to speculate on what the students of the past would have thought had their eyes been opened to a troubling truth, it is important to note that these buildings, and those in all of our communities, while their purposes and configurations have evolved somewhat, still provide nearly limitless opportunities to learn and grown.

We can never learn enough about the dark realities of our own history, but we have no excuse not to try ? and the best way we can do that is to listen, ask questions, take what we hear to heart, and look for ways to foster a better future for all.