

Reflections on a cleansing sunset

BROCK'S BANTER

By Brock Weir

What was remarkable was what was left behind.

Work had already begun tearing down the inner walls of what once was by the time I first set foot through its doors; doors which were, for many, symbolic of at least one of their own individual rites of passage.

Partitions, which were once presumably covered in plaster or drywall, were now bare, their bones of brick now exposed to the elements waiting for whatever was to come, but still bearing mute testimony to days gone by.

Rotary pencil sharpeners strongly bolted to the wall still held shavings that were greying through the passage of time. Charts outlining everything from the alphabet, to multiplication tables, to world geography were still clinging to the wall, held by unfurling scotch tape hanging on by less than a thread, rusting tacks, or simply sheer determination.

A mobile, perhaps once lovingly made by a student for their favourite teacher, was still in place high above my head, dangling from what looked to be a straightened wire clothes hanger with one end poked into a ceiling tile. There were long-forgotten assignments mouldering away in equally long-forgotten corners.

The odd cupboard was still secured with a combination lock. A blackboard here and there still had some visible writing on it, including one farewell message from a teacher to her students as they prepared to close one chapter in a storied building to start their educational journey anew elsewhere.

Now lovingly restored into a luxurious complex of lofts, the former school's brown brick and white-columned façade was backlit by the orange glow of what seemed to be an extra bright sunset on Thursday night, a glow which only served to amplify the orange shirts worn by many of the more than 200 individuals who came out to mark Canada's National Truth & Reconciliation Day.

While the focal point of the evening was rightly at the Band Shell at Aurora's 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 there 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.