

The Stunning Sound of Silence

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Last summer, and rightly so, many citizens across our country, across America and even around the world loudly protested the treatment of Black, Indigenous and Persons of Colour.

The horrifying truths of George Floyd's murder in broad daylight by Derek Chauvin ? then a Minneapolis police officer, highlighted the long-standing inequities in the treatment of Black Americans that exists there. It's not just south of the border however, but here in Canada too. By comparison, this summer, as we learn the true extent and horror of a genocide that has been taking place for close to a century ? we have been met instead, for the most part, with the stunning sound of silence.

When it was first announced that the shallow, unmarked graves of 215 children were discovered on the grounds of a residential school, we howled. We shook our heads and with much wringing of hands we demanded flags be lowered and Canada Day not be celebrated. We put teddy bears on our front porches and said ?Every Child Matters.?

Do they though? Because at last count, the most recent published numbers suggest an alternative figure, that anywhere between 1308 and 1412 children have been found since the original discovery and I challenge you to find a recent news story about this.

Alternatively, social media reports suggest the numbers are as high as 5,000+ unmarked graves having been discovered.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report acknowledges that 3,200 lives were lost but also states that these numbers are likely not only incorrect but could number in the tens of thousands. Because the ?general Indian Affairs policy was to hold the schools responsible for burial expenses when a student died (and) generally determined the location and nature of that burial? it is likely we will never know the true extent of this tragedy.

Additionally, even when deaths were acknowledged to have taken place at the schools, ?Parental requests to have children's bodies returned home for burial were generally refused as being too costly.? Imagine sending your child to school and never seeing them again, literally ever, without even a gravesite to visit and mourn. Where is the continued anger and outrage now? I ask if you have seen a single protest in the streets or, more importantly, if you have seen evidence of a single person, religious institution or government agency being held accountable for these crimes against humanity?

I'm left wondering why such alarming numbers haven't garnered more interest? Is it because this summer there is more freedom of movement than last summer? People have more ?interesting? things to do now that we aren't in lockdown? Is it because we don't care at all about the plight of long dead indigenous children ? or indeed the Indigenous population at all?

Why, despite an extensive search, did I have trouble even finding accurate numbers to include in this article? I'm just sad. There really isn't a better word to describe these feelings of impotence. Why aren't more eloquent minds than mine continuing to write about these stories and bring continued national attention to the issue and pressuring our government to do more? Where are the continued calls for a National Day of Mourning? Over 320,000 people have signed a petition calling for one but let's face it ? we need more, and louder, calls from our elected representatives, from the media and from us, the community at large, to make this happen.

Why do we need a National Day of Mourning? Apart from the obvious, more than anything I believe we need education. I grew up in a generation that never heard a damn thing about residential schools. We learned very little about Indigenous history at all save for a brief blurb on Louis Riel.

The mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was to document, inform and educate ALL Canadians about what happened in the residential school system. The commission completed its work in 2015. It's now 2021 and long past the time we

acknowledged the truth of our past relationship with the Indigenous community and what better way to do so than through a National Day of Mourning where the focus is on education?

I envision something where ceremonies take place in schools, where Elders are invited to share Indigenous history and where we can gather together to learn, respect and honour the lives of these children and in doing so, learn how to do better moving forward. Land Acknowledgements are not enough. It's time we acknowledged this cultural genocide for exactly what it was ? the murder of innocents ? and with such continued education and attention, learn how to prevent history from ever repeating itself again and how best we can support the efforts of the Indigenous community in healing.

As I write this, for inspiration I am burning a candle of traditional healing scents purchased at a market this past weekend supporting and raising funds for local Indigenous communities.

Organized by Lynn Giambattista, and as reported on by our own Rob Paul, the pop-up market was specifically organized to continue raising awareness and funds to support Indigenous communities. Vendor costs were donated directly to the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and individual vendors were also donating a portion of sales to various Indigenous led charities, including the Gord Downie & Chanie Wenjack Fund.

In her words, Lynn states: ?Everybody has got to step up and do something, anything to help.? If only such efforts were more widespread, more newsworthy articles than this one were being written and more focussed demands for a call to acknowledge and address our past through a National Day of Mourning were being made instead of what we are ?hearing? ? the stunning sound of silence.