

We've heard the Truth, now what about the Reconciliation?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

It only seems appropriate today to reflect on what has now, finally, been declared a day of recognition ? the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, timed to coincide with what was previously Orange Shirt Day.

Since 2013 children and educators (and many community members) have been wearing orange shirts to honour Indigenous children lost to, or survivors of, the residential school system. Of course this year, September 30, will assume a more poignant and significant meaning after the horrific discovery of an unfathomable number of unmarked children's graves. We are just starting to hear the truth of the residential school system ? marking today as a federal holiday is an important step but what happens next will reveal whether we are making any real progress towards reconciliation.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission completed and published its work in 2015. One of the 94 calls to action was to implement this National Day, a federal holiday for time spent reflecting and honouring ?all the children who survived residential schools, as well as honour and recognize those who did not return,? according to Brenda Gunn, the academic and research director at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

My first ask then, is why has it taken six long years AND the discovery of those unmarked graves, for this particular call to action to be implemented? This is followed by a second and no doubt (to some cynics) obvious second ask, would we in fact now have a National Day in 2021 were it not for terrible discovery of those unmarked graves? Given that the provinces can individually opt in or out of recognizing this day as a holiday, I remain sceptical to say the least. Private companies can also choose whether to participate. In other words, with provinces like our own here in Ontario ?opting out,? can we really consider this a ?National? Day of Recognition?

While I firmly believe we need this day to do the hard work of reflecting ?on a dark chapter in (our) history,? as Canadian Heritage Minister Steven Guilbeault refers to it, I question how best to go about it.

Much like Remembrance Day, I believe having children IN school, participating in activities that will help future generations to truly understand the significance behind the day will help us not only recognize the impact of residential schools but perhaps how to move forward in a way that is more productive. As age and grade level determine appropriateness, we should focus time and attention on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with a view to raising a generation who actually know about our past and too ? a generation of future leaders more committed to actually changing the future. In this way, we will ALL know the truth but it's what comes next that truly matters.

Indigenous people need many things in addition to recognition of past injustices. They need access to affordable housing, clean water, equal access to education and equal treatment and access to health care.

Indigenous people cannot be left languishing in waiting rooms or hallways for care that never comes, ignored and/or belittled as they lay dying. In a country that has one of the world's largest supplies of freshwater, Indigenous families should be able to turn on the tap to access clean water to brush their teeth, fill a kettle to make a cup of tea or take a shower ? no doubt all things you did just this morning without thinking twice about it.

If you were paying, as recently as June of 2021, \$29.99 for a case of water ? you might think long and hard about your access to water. Between climate change impacting the environment and access to traditional food sources in the north, Indigenous people are paying on average more than 50% of their monthly budget on food items. A can of Chunky soup on sale for \$7.29 (ON SALE!), asparagus priced at \$14.39/kg and a 900 gram box of pasta priced at \$8.79 mean it's not just fresh food that is exorbitantly priced but pantry staples too. It's hard to learn when you are hungry. It's also hard to learn, as we know only too well right here in some parts of Caledon, when you have limited access to the internet ? something that is felt more keenly in the north.

Investments in infrastructure (both here and in the north) are being made but the struggle remains and while access to broadband services has been declared a basic right for all Canadians, significant work remains to be done.

There were 94 calls to action forming the Truth and Reconciliation Act, roughly divided into six categories. They include: Child welfare, Education, Language and culture, Health, Justice, Canadian governments and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous and a Royal Proclamation and Covenant of Reconciliation. According to a published update in June of this year, a grand total of eight have been completed. I'm no mathematician but at this rate, many future generations of Indigenous families will continue to face the exact same challenges facing families today and that is quite simply, unacceptable. Each of us must spend time today, September 30, and every day, asking what role we can all play in helping to call the Canadian government to account.

Hearing the truth was hard, reconciliation will be harder ? it often is ? but it's long past the time we start the work.