

# “The Path of Reconciliation”

Maya Ferguson-Klinowski  
& Rev. Shawn Newton  
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## Maya's Reflection

Hello, everyone my name is Maya. I am a settler living in Toronto, known as Tsi Takaronto in Kanien:keha - Mohawk Language. My roots are in Scotland, Ireland, Ukraine, and Poland. I call Toronto my home and this city is where my immediate family and community lives.

Friday September 30th is the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation. On this day we mourn and reflect on the recovering of the graves of over ten thousand children who never made it home from residential schools. Residential schools officially began with the Mohawk Indian Residential School, the longest running residential school, in 1831. The last government run residential school closed in 1996.<sup>1</sup>

On Friday we are asked to listen to survivors' truths and work towards reconciliation.

We are asked to acknowledge the ways that racism and colonialism are at the foundations of Canadian law, education, and religious systems. It's clear when we see over-incarceration of Indigenous people and the hugely disproportionate impact of climate change on Indigenous Communities. It is clear to me when one of my Indigenous classmates tells me her professor in another department used anti-Indigenous slurs in his lecture that racism and colonialism shows up in our day-to-day interactions. The work of truth and reconciliation has only just started. Over 150 years of oppression cannot be undone by focusing on truth and reconciliation for one day of the year.

It starts with looking at the truth. Teachers in my elementary school classes touched on the subject in a sort of abstract sense. I think they were unsure about how to broach the subject with children.

In my grade 10 year, our history teacher went on parental leave and his substitute taught us exclusively about residential schools. Her teaching centered around survivors' experiences and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to

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<sup>1</sup> This is one of many articles which contain this information. The article may be triggering for some audiences.  
<https://www.tvos.org/article/felt-throughout-generations-a-timeline-of-residential-schools-in-canada>

Action.

It was sobering.

The room full of 15-year-olds was silent after her presentation. You could hear a pin drop.

I could tell that a lot of us in the class really heard her. Her teaching changed me. Over the past two years classes at the Indigenous Studies Department at UofT have centered around the truths of residential school survivors. We have talked about intergenerational trauma as well as the incredible resistance, resilience, and flourishing culture within Indigenous communities.

“Class introductions” are incredibly present in my mind right now, because they punctuate the first few weeks of September. In the Spanish and English departments we ask each other our Major. In Indigenous Studies my professors invariably ask us to introduce ourselves by saying something about where we are from.

I have the privilege of not standing out at the University of Toronto. I don’t need to defend my belonging because of my racial or gender presentation or physical ability. For the most part, I can pass without anyone questioning whether I “should” be there.

So, being asked, “Where are you from?” took me by surprise the first time. Ummm. I’m a white. I have a lot of roots, spanning across a lot of European countries.

As much as I was interested, I could not pinpoint when my family members came to Canada, or what that meant.

When I realized that I would likely get asked this question again I got right to chatting with my grandparents.

My Papa-Hat, my dad’s dad, told me a bit about his incredibly linguistically talented mother. She would learn any language she had to, and quickly. She settled in Alberta in the 1930s from the state Roumania, which is now part of Ukraine. My Papa-Hat and dad have a similar dark, straight faced way of making a joke and a stoic outlook on life. The whole line of us love borscht and perogies with cream. My dad’s maternal grandparents settled in Ontario just after the second world war. My Nana Colleen told me about my great-grandpa Russ’ teaching jobs which brought him and the family between Ireland, England, and Canada.

Talking to my mom and her mum was challenging. I uncovered a line of intergenerational abuse. Seeing this for what it truly is has helped me to understand the ways that trauma impacts my mum and her brothers as well as me and my cousins. We all struggle with mental health in different ways.

We are also unapologetically loud when we are passionate and make the goofiest jokes, which we proceed to laugh at like there is no tomorrow.

I have reflected on my wonderful mum's dad, my Papa Eldon's life and everything that he loved about Scotland, the place his grandparents called home.

My grandparents made the lenses from which I see the world. The way they lived informs the way I live, whether I saw it playing out consciously or not.

We introduce ourselves by saying where we are from it gives us a sense of the lens we see through.

In relation to each other  
And in relation to the knowledge we are about to share.

I grew up with eight loving grandparents, and two great grandparents. I am aware that the exploration at UofT of my relatively straightforward "simple-settler story" comes from a place of immense privilege.

Many of us do not have simple stories which can be easily unwrapped like I just did.

Some Torontonians are not here by choice. Some of us have been displaced from our homelands by poverty or violence. Some of us are not connected with our biological families. When we look back there is always complexity and often there is pain.

And we are all here together.

I am a white settler living in Toronto. I am a settler in Toronto. I am in Toronto. What do I do now?

For me, I share. I listen, and ask questions, and listen and ask where I fit in. And listen and listen and listen,  
and listen some more and hear.

I can read and expand my understanding of the history and present realities.

I can have brave conversations with my family and peers about the legacy of residential schools.

There are things we need to see now, things we have to understand now, issues we must acknowledge and respond to right now.

And there is a long run. Once marches are attended and policies changed, someone needs to be there to keep the conversation going. New issues will arise, relationships will change, we will change.

We can practice being in relationship with one another. We can become more understanding of ourselves and of each other.

We can listen and talk and act.  
And keep listening and talking and acting.

Now, I'm going to ask Margaret to come up and we are going to have a little talk.

### **Questions with Margaret Newall:**

Where are you from? This can be where you grew up but also where your parents, grandparents, great-grandparents etc. are from.

When did you first learn about residential schools? How did you learn about them?

How did it impact you? How has your understanding changed over time?

So, in the spirit of keeping the conversation going I'd like to ask you to ponder these two questions. I'll give you a minute of silence.

Then I'll invite everyone to join either duos or trios for a few minutes of conversation. I encourage you to share if you feel comfortable. Practice stepping forwards into these brave conversations when you feel safe and stepping back once you have shared for around a minute. Those of you in the sanctuary can turn to your neighbor or two neighbors and if you are joining from Zoom you will be placed in a breakout room for a few minutes.

### **Shawn's Reflection**

I hope these questions brought about insightful conversations for you all.

For myself, I am from the United States.

I grew up in Texas and New England.

With all but one Irish line, through my father, my heritage is British.

Most of my ancestors,  
aside from the Irish ones who arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,  
came to North America very early on, with many of them traced  
to the founding colonies on this continent.

They were Puritans, Presbyterians, and Anglicans.  
Many of them ministers.

It is a charitable reading of history to say  
my ancestors, in the 1600s, displaced the Indigenous Peoples  
in what would come to be called Massachusetts and Virginia.

In most cases, I lack detailed knowledge of what many of them did individually.

But having read various histories,  
and given the relatively small numbers of settlers at the time,  
it's not a stretch to imagine my direct relatives  
were involved in the sins wrought by colonization—  
if not by violence, certainly through the economic enrichment that came  
from claiming those lands and exploiting their natural resources—  
all the while believing and preaching  
that what they were doing was blessed by God.

Before moving to Canada, I had only  
the vaguest sense that there had been residential schools here.

I mistakenly thought they belonged to the distant past.

When the federal government apologized to Indigenous Peoples  
in the House of Commons in 2008, I began to learn so much more.

And it seems we all have.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission gathered and enshrined and shared  
stories that Indigenous survivors had been telling for generations.

Stories that were hard to hear.  
Stories that too many wanted to forget, or ignore, or deny.

But stories that became palpably real

when the unmarked graves of hundreds of children were discovered—  
graves that, if the country had been listening,  
we would have known were there all along.

For the many months our flags were at half-mast last year,  
we were reminded at every turn of this nation's deepest shame.

Those feelings were not misplaced.

If anything, it was important in those months  
that we had to sit with the deep discomfort over our past—  
especially since it didn't match some of the rosier stories  
we like to believe about ourselves as a country.

If there's ever any real hope of genuine reconciliation in Canada,  
we must come to know and accept our full and unvarnished history,  
for there is no real reconciliation without the truth.

While that history involves many terrible and shameful chapters,  
feelings of shame will only take us so far.

Our Indigenous neighbours aren't asking for settlers to feel shame or guilt.  
Because it does almost nothing to actually improve their lives.

What they are asking for is change.

Change that honours their inherent worth and dignity.

Change that acknowledges the ways our fraught history  
is directly linked to the challenges Indigenous peoples face today.

Change that questions why racism towards them persists.

Change that asks why they are disproportionately  
represented in the prison population.

And change that recognizes Indigenous people are so much more  
than the problems they face—and are, instead,  
powerful cultures with so much to teach about human resilience,  
and, for that matter, so much to offer  
when it comes to learning how to live more sustainably on this planet.

All of this means that, on some level,  
many of us are being asked to change.

To change how we hold the story of this country.

To check the ways we operate out of unconscious bias.

To grapple with what is really being asked of Canada in this moment,  
and to find, in whatever ways each of us is able,  
our own part of the path towards reconciliation.

That's why Maya asked us earlier to reflect on our own origins,  
and about our knowledge of the residential schools.

While each of us carries different stories,  
some as settlers and others as not,  
all of us who call this land home  
have a part to play in the work of reconciliation.

So learn.  
Deepen your understanding.  
Where needed, change your perspective.

Embrace Indigenous cultures.  
Accept invitations to go to pow-wows and other events.  
Read Indigenous writers.  
Watch Indigenous films.

Seek out moments when you can take some meaningful action,  
and listen for how you may be being called to do something differently,  
to raise your voice, to show up in support, to advocate for justice.

On Friday, across this part of Turtle Island we now call Canada,  
we will observe the second National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

If we listen carefully, we will hear a sacred call in the name of this day itself.

It is not a national day OF truth and reconciliation,  
but a national day FOR truth and reconciliation.

So may we use this day, this week, this month, this year  
for just that.

For the deepening of our understanding of the truth.

And for making real the healing work of reconciliation

that I believe this still-great country is more than capable of.

May we live to make it so.