What is Ours To Do?

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First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
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There is a quote, attributed to Maya Angelou, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better". I have to say, this seems key to my work, and quite likely your work as we start this week. Tuesday, Sept. 30th is the **National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.** The day honours the children who never returned home and those who survived residential schools, as well as their families and communities. Public awareness and recognition of the tragic and painful history and ongoing impacts of residential schools is a vital component of the reconciliation process.

So today our service focuses on the work of Reconciliation. If you are anything like me, there has been a slow creep of awareness of harms done to our indigenous neighbours and their culture…

We, from the relative comfort of 2025, can look at history and find much to criticize in the policies and actions of earlier governments. We tell ourselves we know better… and that we have the commitment to do better. The Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its 94 calls to action are 10 years old. Of those 94, 38 are underway or complete. 17 are not yet started and 29 are in the planning phases. Clearly, we, today, have not yet arrived. There are still, it seems, many opportunities for us to do better.

Part of the work of Reconciliation is an honest and sometimes courageous accounting of the harm that has been done. Unpacking some of what we learned about Indigenous peoples vs the reality, seems like something we can all do.

I'll tell you a bit about what I was taught, not always explicitly, but what I was taught about the indigenous people who lived and who now live in what we call Canada.

I have a memory, of a souvenir, that I had as a child. I think it may have been purchased while my family was at Niagara Falls. Now keep in mind, I grew up in Hamilton and Burlington, Niagara Falls was about an hour from our home… the souvenir, a small leather tipi Do any of you remember seeing these in gift shops? It was easily a decade later, when I was in my teens that I gained any kind of awareness that tipis were not a 'now' thing, and that they certainly weren't a 'here' thing. Nothing in my upbringing challenged the idea that indigenous culture and customs were not, nor had they ever been a monolith. I suspect that same souvenir shop sold miniature totem poles too. I watched TV, I played with kids in the neighbourhood. For my 5th or 6th birthday I received a cowgirl outfit. I'm sorry I don't have a photo to show you. I LOVED

it, and it was all I needed to claim the hero role in neighbourhood play, protecting innocent children and villages from harm. Old TV shows so often portrayed indigenous people as sneaky, untrustworthy and violent… Again, nothing in my culture was designed to educate me. Kids grow up, absorbing the messages that their culture reinforces. In the absence of a trusted adult telling me that what I was learning wasn't accurate, those were the messages I absorbed.

When I was a bit older, I hurried to open the evening paper that arrived at our house. After I read the comics, and Ann Landers, I looked for a column that was in most editions, Today's Child. I was fascinated by this column. I remember reading the descriptions of the children, most often at least 3 or 4 years old. The accompanying picture was usually of a child, sometimes a sibling group, and who most often was indigenous or an African Canadian child. The text described these hard to adopt children, often providing details of a troubled home life or a series of foster homes. The column ran until 1982 – I'd long lost interest by then. But sometime around the time I was 11 or 12, I remember wondering why so many brown skinned children end up in our newspaper. The conclusion I drew for myself was based on the earlier stereotypes I'd learned. My assumption? Their parents were not capable and loving… I'm a bit embarrassed to share this with you, but only a bit. Nothing I learned in school or read in my paper or in any of the books I read had any different information. I believed what I was seeing. I didn't know better. The language of the Sixties Scoop was not known to me. Recent research suggests that between 1960 and 1990 suggests upwards of more than 20,000 First Nation, Métis and Inuit children were removed from their homes. The policy of forced assimilation shifted, but remained intact.

What did you learn about indigenous people? Now, we in this room, are different ages, come from different places, and had different families. My bubble of ignorance may be unique to me – but I suspect some of you can identify with at least some of my recollections.

I invite you to pause for a moment. Think back on what your childhood understanding of indigeneity was. It may make you a bit uncomfortable. That's ok. Just notice the discomfort.

However that was for you, I want us all to take a deep breath. Are you, like me, a bit embarrassed? Or were you supported in learning about the real story of what it was like to be indigenous in Canada.

Like I say, I didn't know better. Many of us didn't. But I've come to understand, our ignorance was the product of a system of oppression. One that made it tough for us to know the truth, or if we did know, minimized it, suggested it was for the best. "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better". One of the

challenges of reconciliation work is that the idea of what better was, seems from today's vantage point to be so very wrong.

Duncan Campbell Scott, wo served as Deputy Superintendent General of the Department of Indian Affairs, for most of the 1920's, in advocating for compulsory placement of indigenous children in Residential Schools, stated, "I want to get rid of the Indian problem. . . Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill." Don't get me wrong. I find Scott's statement reprehensible and shocking, and maybe I'm naïve, but I do believe that he thought he was advocating for something better…

Another problem with Angelou's 'When you know better' concept is that there is a difference between systemic and individual knowledge. Earlier this week, I attended a screening of the film, Silent No More. It is a virtual tour of the former Mohawk Institute Residential School, now the Woodland Cultural Centre. The Centre's Executive Director, Heather George, said she often hears people say, "We didn't know…". The problem is we, or at least we collectively did know better. In 1907 Dr. Peter Bryce inspected quite a few of the schools and sounded the alarm regarding the conditions the children were living in, the report stated, "we have created a situation so dangerous to health that I was often surprised that the results were not even worse than they have been shown statistically to be." What was the government's response. They fired Bryce and buried the report. However the report was leaked, and many Canadian papers highlighted some of its findings… People had the information in their homes. If we are committed to putting truth and reconciliation, it is important to acknowledge that many Canadians were presented with evidence of the horrors of the residential school system in the early 1900s yet chose a course of inaction. Canadians read about Bryce's findings in their newspapers but did not effectively lobby their church leaders and government officials for change. As a result, many Indigenous peoples – children and youth – continued to suffer and even die in residential schools across the country for another 90 years. The collective we did not value indigenous lives and experiences enough to shake off our indifference. It seems that knowing better, doesn't always lead to doing better. Or at least it hasn't.

As has been noted, Sept. 30th, Tuesday, is the **National Day for Truth and Reconciliation**. I know that you, like me, aspire to make good on our current commitment to Reconciliation. But I want to hit pause for a moment. As I said, I think this work requires courage, and honesty and vulnerability. So, in the interest of truth, I think it important to note that Reconciliation may be too generous a term for what we are trying to achieve. Re-conciliation suggests that those in the settler culture have ever been in right relationship with indigenous peoples. I'm not sure that is true. Ever since settler-colonialists arrived on this continent, they, for the most part arrived as Christians

and as such arrived with the Doctrine of Discovery in their back pockets. The Doctrine of Discovery was a principle first articulated in 1455, before John Cabot, Francis Drake, Samuel Champlain and others arrived here, claiming territory for their sponsors. In short, they came with legal and religious authority for Christian empires to invade and subjugate non-Christian lands, peoples and sovereign nations, impose Christianity on these populations and claim their resources. It has only been two years since the Roman Catholic Church rejected this former teaching. Perhaps it would be more honest to say we are working on truth and conciliation – I with my English and Scottish heritage, feel it is important to be honest with myself.

So… all of this begs the question, the one I used to title my remarks this morning. What is ours to Do?

At the personal level, I think each of us could spend some time with the troubling history of Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop and the resulting intergenerational trauma. I think we are well served when we remind ourselves to question what we think we know about history, and the experiences of indigenous people. It is hard to read our Eight Principles with a Truth and Reconciliation lens and not feel that for us Canadian Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists we have a faith based imperative to do this work – as congregations and as individuals. In case you need a refresher, here they are:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.
- Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions

What this looks like for you, for me, for us, beyond a tough look at reality and history, and beyond a rejection of indifference, is something that we need to figure out. You may have heard me mention my grandson (just about every week). One of the things I can do is provide books, and stories and information that ensures he doesn't grow up

without knowing about white privilege and settler-colonial cultural norms. Happily, his parents are completely on board – I don't need to be THAT grandmother… That is just one thing. There are so many. Our Reconciliation Working Group has created many resources for us - you'll find them on our website. In his very recently published book, "52 Ways to Reconcile", David A. Roberston wrote,

There is no question you have a role in this work. Reconciliation is a community effort, and for it to work, its all hands on deck. As individuals we have considerable influence. If we are complacent and do nothing, other people will do nothing. If we are active and do something, we will inspire other people to do something. And there is so much to do. This movement is far reaching….

-he continues –

This is not to say that you should feel guilt or same, but it is to say you can and should act. If there is one thing I've learned, its that Canadians want to do the right thing. The barrier is that there can be a fear of doing the wrong thing. It's a conundrum. That's how we learn, though.

It is a conundrum. We learn when we do things, and when some are right and when some are not. As I say, I don't think we are reconciling, I think we are learning what it means to be conciled with our indigenous neighbours… we are new at this. We will, at times, feel, we've really messed up. For me, another essential element of the work is to resist the urge to shy away from it, because we don't really know what we are doing.

I quoted John Luther Adams a few weeks ago. Adams a Unitarian theologian of the last century said, Church is where we practice being human. We practice, because we need the practice. We are learning. And too often we allow our self-consciousness to get in the way of practicing with others. As Robertson said though, this is a community effort. We need to do it with others. One of the ways *we* can muster the courage to do that with others is to remember that ours is a covenantal tradition. We honour each other and aspire to hold one another in affection, to extend grace and gratitude, even as we promise to gently encourage and at times hold one another accountable – so that we become closer to our aspirations each day.

So Tuesday, Truth and Reconciliation Day, and every other day of the year… we have work to do. Look at the 94 Calls to action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report. Are there any you can engage with? Can you encourage elected officials, friends and neighbours to do any of the work. I think Robertson's book, 52 Ways to Reconcile is a great starting point.

We can't undo history. We can know it though, and we can start today, taking steps to lessen its terrible legacy.

Edward Everett Hale, an American Unitarian Minister – and Robertson uses this quote at the start of his book – wrote, "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something, and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do"

I look forward to travelling this path with you.