

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, April 2015

This article is copyrighted by the author Maria Campbell and can only be used for reference purposes.

Tonight I fear for my grandchildren, tomorrow I'll be strong

The landscape is gentle. The tiny church nestled against the aspen trees reminds one of the old Christian folk song: "There's a church in the valley by the wildwood no lovelier place in the glen."

The cemetery, carefully cleaned several times over the summer is pretty and people driving by have often been heard to say, "What a beautiful, peaceful looking place."

For those who go back to place flowers on graves, to pull weeds, to say prayers or to put another family member to rest, the memories are sometimes overwhelming, the pain unbearable.

There is nothing beautiful or peaceful here only a reminder of poverty, violence and senseless deaths. Perhaps the words spoken by an elder at a recent funeral in a nearby community express best the sad narrative of community life.

"We are sorry, the elder said as he began his eulogy, that we are not able to cry over the passing of our brother but we have no tears left. This is the twenty-fifth funeral in our community since January. Of the 25 deaths, 21 were young people under the age of 20."

We were all silent, remembering and trying not to, all the new graves we had passed as we drove past the church to the community hall. Several days later as I sat with a woman by her son's hospital bed, she talked about the number of violent deaths in our communities. The numbers are staggering.

"Fifty, in one community, 30 in another, the numbers go on and on," she said. "And I am afraid my son is going to be another one. It is not unusual to have three or four suicides in a matter of days."

Women who have joined us tell me: "Not unusual for kids to OD or get killed over a small bag of crystal meth, or be beaten to death with a baseball bat."

Not all the deaths happen in the community, the women say, but all the dead are brought home.

"These are just our young people, then there is also all the missing and murdered women and we haven't talked much, at least not yet, about the missing and murdered men.

"There is so much death everywhere it's hard to know what to do when you are trying to deal with just keeping your family together and even harder to know where to begin.

I drove home from the hospital thinking about all that and thought about the prime minister who believes that "we have no history of colonialism in Canada." And who also believes that we can have reconciliation without justice, that all we have to do is forgive.

Obviously no one in his family has ever been taken for a midnight ride on a cold winter night or had a carload of young white men throw Dairy Queen milk shakes at his grandmother as she walked down the street with her grandchildren on a Sunday afternoon.

Has never been followed around a store or asked to leave because "you obviously you can't afford what we have to sell." And has never had to fear for the lives of his daughters and sons.

“How do we talk to a leader who believes the violence is of our own making,” the women ask. How do we talk to Canadians about history, tell them that racism is not confined to Winnipeg that it’s all around us and that it has to stop?

I don’t know I tell them.

I don’t know how to do that without sounding negative, angry or crazy.

“One of those people who is always dredging up sad stories.”

It’s really hard to lighten up. I have been trying for almost 70 years. I was about five when I first heard someone say, “what a pretty little blue-eyed squaw, it’s too bad she has to grow up.”

I never forgot that nor did I ever forget the woman who said it. She was considered a “nice lady” who taught Bible class to native children every summer at a nearby camp. Today I realize she just didn’t know any better but it was my first encounter with violence.

Why am I saying all of this anyway? You all know this stuff. Many of you have worked for years and continue to try to create a better life for us.

Maybe it’s because today I am feeling really vulnerable. I have beautiful great grandchildren and I fear for them and I wonder what I could I have done different to make a safer world for them and what else can I do?

I will be okay tomorrow, be back to my strong fierce self, but tonight I am really afraid.