

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, June 2015

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There can be no reconciliation without justice

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission hosted its final gathering in Ottawa and the commissioners presented their final report to the survivor's of Residential Schools, the Canadian public and the federal government.

And that, my friends and relatives, is probably, pretty much the last we will hear of it and them, as I am certain, if past commissions are an example, this one will also end up in a shelf in some closet.

Nor should we hold our breath waiting for its recommendations to be a priority for the Canadian public, for this government or whoever gets elected in the near future.

I know I sound cynical but I am not really. I am just being realistic. It is going to take more than a Supreme Court Judge using "the words" cultural genocide to make me look outside of our own circles for change because that is the only place it is going to happen and is happening across this country as I write.

I just got home from Sagkeeng First Nations in Manitoba, where I attended a Rites of Passage ceremony at Turtle Lodge for 20 young people between the ages of 12 and 14 who took part in and completed a four-day fast.

I felt very blessed to be a part of the circle gathered there to celebrate and honor these young people, who, in their short lives, have suffered and sacrificed to live a semblance of the good life, miyo pimachihowin, that many of us take for granted.

While at Sagkeeng, I also attended a Water Ceremony that was conducted by grandmothers who came from Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Arizona, Texas and California.

They carried not only their ceremonial bundles but also a jar of water from their territories. The ceremony led by the grandmothers of Turtle Lodge was moving and very powerful.

The combination of teachings, stories, laughter, good food and ceremonies celebrating young people, honoring community leadership and a working together of all the people to heal the lake which is listed as endangered, was not only healing, it was also inspirational.

Turtle Lodge came from a vision that David Courchene Jr. had while fasting many years prior, to the actual building of it. "A grandmother Turtle came to me while I fasted," David recalls. "She told me I was to build a lodge in her honor so we could bring the children home. Home meaning from wherever they have been placed by Social Services or left by us. She told me that we had to take responsibility for our children if we were to survive as a people

"She also told me that this was a movement and had to be grounded in Spirit, that it was not an organization.

"Everyone, she said, must be welcomed into the lodge but it was our duty to establish inclusive leadership. I didn't begin the work of establishing the Lodge until many years later as I was not sure how or where to begin, but not doing anything really bothered me.

“That Grandmother Turtle was always with me reminding me of the work I had to do. Finally after several years I went to an elder and told him about the vision. He told me I had to begin the work immediately and that it was an honor to be chosen. He also told me it would be hard work, often painful.

“He was right; it has not been easy but it has been healing and fulfilling. The actual building of the lodge began in 2002 with a group of people who did ceremony together. Money came by holding fundraisers, and from private donations. Lots of people and especially young people donated their time and labor. I could not have done it without them.”

The lodge is a lovely building. It is set back in a small clearing surrounded by poplar trees and willow bushes. The design is in the shape of a Turtle and can comfortably house up to 100 people.

“It is not quite finished,” one of the grandmothers tells me as she shows me around and introduces me to the young people who are preparing the meals and cleaning up under the supervision of older women.

“We are building a big kitchen next. We need more space because the kitchen is also a teaching place where we share stories and knowledge about food and where we teach our young people to cook.”

The Lodge and the lodge grounds are immaculate and throughout the day young people are busy cleaning, picking up, as well as making sure everyone is comfortable.

The dozens of children run around or play quietly both in the lodge and outside. “They can do just about anything they want,” the grandmother explains, respectful and considerate of others.”

Everything, ceremonies, cooking, storytelling, drumming and singing is a teaching opportunity and although it is done in the language of the Anishnabe, there are translators who translate everything including the songs so no one has to wonder what is happening or feel left out.

All four days were peaceful, laid back and stress free. No big rules or regulations. No lateral violence. It was a “kind and gentle” four days.

As a child, David was very close to his grandmothers and mother. They were his first teachers, they influenced his life and this is reflected in the structure and ceremonies of Turtle Lodge.

“It was a Grandmother Turtle who came to me, not a Grandfather,” he says. “This is her lodge and the grandmothers who come here represent her, this is also the old way of our people. Women and children were central to the nation. If they were okay then everything was okay.”

Thank you, David, for your powerful vision. Thank you Justice Murray Sinclair, Wilton Littlechild and Marie Wilson for your work, commitment and kindness to our people.

And to the federal government and the people of Canada, know that there can never be reconciliation if there is no justice.