

Reflections on the Apology at Indian Brook
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While attending the ASTE 2008 in Truro, Wednesday June 11th 2008 was a free afternoon in our schedule. At lunch time that day, one of our lecturers, Ched Myers, mentioned to me that he and another member of the Seminar, were going to Indian Brook First Nation to listen to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apology to the Native Peoples of Canada for the harm caused by the Native Schools Program. After I considered this option I thought it would be something I would like to share in as well, but by that time I didn't have a chance to ask them to tag along. So, several women rooming near me and I decided to take on the adventure for ourselves. We "Googled" Indian Brook and placed a call to see if our presence would be appropriate. When I reached someone at the Band office, I explained that although we weren't members of the community, but that we would appreciate being there with them to hear the apology. The woman on the phone paused for a few seconds and then she said, in a friendly and off-handed manner, "Well, everyone is there now at the Hall. CBC and CTV are here, so you can certainly come along." Then she explained where we might find a parking place. So the four of us set off with much curiosity and anticipation.

On the drive there, I was thinking about a time several years ago when I was sitting inside a Cathedral Church during a Synod in which my Anglican Diocese voted unanimously to pay into the Residential Schools Settlement Fund. Before each of us left the building that day, we had contributed our portion of the required cost. I was moved to tears that day with feelings of remorse for the actions of some of my predecessors which contributed to such systemic and personal harm to other human beings. As I left that experience I was feeling proud of the enthusiasm of our response. I felt strong and right and responsible for a part of reconciliation.

As I was considering this, we drove into the Indian Brook First Nation and made our way to the centre of the community. I felt those former feelings recede and what emerged was an anxiousness akin to dropping in on a friend unannounced and worrying about intruding. This intensified as we walked toward the multi-purpose building. There were crowds of people standing outside the doors. I became so aware of being a stranger in a strange land. I felt the discomfort that goes along with wondering if there is an appropriate justification for my presence somewhere I don't belong. I was afraid that someone would ask me why I was there and I would have to reveal my identity as a member of the group who has hurt their people so badly.

We went inside...

Inside was a boisterous gathering of people of all ages. Groups of children were playing, racing up and down the isles between the tables where the older generations were sitting, talking, and considering what was about to happen. There were dancers from my hometown of Fredericton, dancing with hoops, and singing and drumming. They looked like beautiful birds taking flight. The sounds of their singing revealed a soulfully intense expression of the painful memory of the past, its shadow hanging over the present, mingling with the passion of youthful hope for the future. I watched and listened.

As we stood inside the door at the back of the hall, I bumped into the man standing behind me. I turned to apologize as he said "Hi! How are you?" as if he recognized me. He asked me where I was from and I told him I was from Fredericton but was living in Halifax. He nodded and I asked him what he was expecting from the apology. He said he thought people were in for disappointment but he was curious. As we continued to talk, I said something that indicated to him that I was not Native. He gasped in surprise and asked me if I was certain of this because I had a bone structure that looked Native to him.

At that moment, I wished the floor could have opened up and swallowed me whole. I had unwittingly unmasked myself and now I was going to have to answer the questions I was hoping to avoid. Who are you then? What are you doing here? What do you have to say about what your people did to us?

We had recently been reflecting on Peter's denial of Jesus in the courtyard and how easy it was to think I would never be as fickle or as weak as that. And yet there I was, hoping against hope that no one would ask me, "Aren't you one of them? An Anglican – a follower of the Christ, a member of the Church who told us we were wrong to believe as we did?" I swallowed hard and began to explain the story of who I was and why I was there that day; that I had hoped to be in solidarity with them listening to the apology and a part of making things right again between his community and mine. There was what seemed like an eternity and then an unexpected offering of acceptance and even excitement about our presence with them.

The man I was talking with went on to tell me about his beliefs, his church and his priest. He spoke of healing ceremonies, holy Native symbols and the importance of hearing the mass in his own language. He proudly pointed out his priest, who, although he was of Sri Lankan origin, had learned their language and spoke it in the services. He told me more of his personal story until the apology began on big screens at the front of the room. We focussed our attention there. On the other side of me, was an elderly woman who was standing on a chair so she could see, being supported by one of the women who came with me. As the apology was being offered, I heard in stereo audible "Wow"s from my new friend behind me and the woman on the chair. Toward the end of the speech, the old woman raised her hands in the air and shook them with a big smile on her face. Then there was silence, and it lasted so long I wondered what was going to happen next. Slowly a clap came from one corner of the room, and then another and more until many people were on their feet clapping together and whooping with relief. A wave of energy washed over that room taking with it at least some of the burden away from the community. It was so palpable that I could almost feel the downy feathers of the dove of peace and the majestic eagle – our two holy birds sweeping over our cheeks and leaving us doubly healed.

I asked my new friend what he thought after the comfortable hum resumed in the room. He admitted his surprise and relief at the good beginning and expressed his hope that appropriate actions would unfold to back up the good words that had been offered by our Prime Minister. He then took out his wallet and began searching for something in it. He told me he wanted to give me a gift. In my shock I tried to dissuade him from this, and then realizing the insult I might be causing stopped myself to listen. He said that this was a gift given to him on a very special day when he was recognized for his leadership in the community. Then he placed a silver crucifix, inlaid with green stones, in my hand. He said it was nice to meet me, invited me to return to a healing service at his parish and then left "before the reporters get back here". And with that he was gone.

Shortly afterward we, too, were on our way. As we drove, I felt embarrassed by the self-preoccupation and anxiety about how I would explain myself to them that I had carried in my heart into that tender place. I felt humbled, with dignity, by the warm reception, open curiosity and affirmation that was given to me by one who deserved to be angry with me and, certainly, suspicious at the very least. What I felt walking on the holy ground of that day was my insecurity, fear and need to hear them pronounce the God words "it is good" over me. I felt my own need to be forgiven by these children of God for my part in making a world that could have twisted their truth so horribly that it once looked to us like the devil. And that forgiveness was offered to me without me having to ask. I was thanked for my presence, for coming to them and witnessing to the truth of that day without the obligation of self-defense.

I left that place, in the company of my friends with a gift both in my heart and in my hands. I felt like crying for shame and for joy and the effect was cleansing to my spirit. I am grateful to Russell, my friend at the back door, and to the Government of Canada for being present to me in a moment of change with such potential, both for individuals, and for Nations. I share this story with you in the spirit of continuing to weave our stories together. I also share it with deep gratitude to the man who welcomed me into his community. I hope you will share it with others and tell your own stories of healing and that you will have courage to fearlessly continue our work of reconciliation. Amen.