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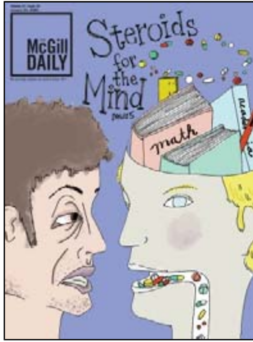

Truth and Forgiveness

CUP Quebec Bureau Chief Misha Warbanski asks if a Truth and Reconciliation Commission can heal the wounds in Canada's First Nations communities

By Misha Warbanski
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Audrey Redman sits down in front of the microphone in the tiny booth at CKLN, the community radio station at Ryerson University in Toronto. She puts on her headphones, adjusts the levels, and slides up the master volume. For the next hour, Redman's show Honour the Earth, a mixture of news and spoken word, will broadcast across the city. She puts on her headphones and waxes poetically – and sometimes angrily – about Canada and her life as a Dakota Cree.

"They'd rather listen to a story about Africa or Burma than a story about Six Nations," Redman says about Canadians. People want to "act globally," but in doing so it's easy to overlook human rights abuses in your own backyard.

Redman looks younger than her 56 years. But her youthful looks conceal a brutal childhood. When she was six years old, Redman was plucked from her home in Saskatchewan's Qu'Appelle Valley and sent to residential school.

And while many of her friends are cashing in their share of the federal government settlement for residential school survivors – $10,000 for the first year attending a school and $3,000 for each additional year – Redman has sent in her opt-out forms.

"You can't put a price on my suffering," she says. "You can't buy healing."

Killing the Indian, saving the man

Redman spent the first six years of her life living on the Standing Buffalo native reservation.

"I remember open plains. We had all the freedom that any child could want," she says.

The children had the run of the prairies, but were also the water-carriers and fire wood gatherers. They had their own important place within families and communities.

When she left for the residential school, Redman didn't know where she was going. While the children all waited in line outside the strange building, she held on tight to a stranger's hand for comfort. It became dark as they entered the school. The sun didn't penetrate the maze of shadowy stairwells and endless corridors.

This was her life for the next seven years. Run by Catholic Grey Nuns from Montreal, St. Paul's Residential School was about 10 miles away from the reserve, near Lebret, Saskatchewan. Although it was close to home, Redman recalls, life in the school was a world away from life on the reserve.

“We ate in lines, stood in lines, slept in lines,” she says.

Some 130 Indian residential schools were established across the country, many before Confederation. Catholic missionaries established the first in the 1600s. Before Confederation, the schools were prescribed under the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857.

Assimilation policies continued post-Confederation with the Indian Act and other legislation, while federal funding pushed the schools into the 20th century. Native residential schools were a way for the Canadian bureaucrats to deal with the so-called “Indian problem” by remaking Aboriginal youth to fit the cultural norms of white culture.

Most closed in the seventies, though the last school shut its doors in 1996 – the same year the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples shed light on abuses that occurred at many of these schools. The schools were highly regimented and negligently funded. Children died from disease at an alarmingly high rate, and they suffered from rampant sexual and physical abuse.

Over 3,700 claims have already been settled against the government, seeking compensation for physical or sexual abuse. In 2005 then-Justice Minister Irwin Cotler called the residential school system “the single most harmful, disgraceful and racist act in our history.”

A cultural limbo

At Concordia’s Centre for Native Education, director Manon Tremblay says not all schools were created equal.

“Some schools were not as bad,” she says. “Some residential schools were the only schools for miles around and they also took in non-native kids.” There may have been less abuse, Tremblay says, but the cultural loss was still devastating.

At Redman’s school, all the children’s hair was cut and their clothes from the outside world were taken away. They were punished if they spoke, but especially if they spoke their native language.

“I remember Mrs. Town. She was the first white woman I’d ever met. I remember her yelling at me, ‘sauvage,’ and I wondered, what is that word?” says Redman. Still, the way the word sounded, she knew what it meant. “I don’t remember one kind word, one kind act.”

The children were allowed to go home for a few weeks over Christmas and during the summer months. Although Redman’s siblings and mother had all gone to residential school, no one ever talked about it.

The cultural effects of the residential school program had started to appear by the time Redman and her siblings started attending. Redman grew up speaking English; even on the reserves, native languages were already losing hold. It was common for families to suppress culture and language because of the shame cultivated at residential schools.

Tremblay says the same thing happened to her family. Her grandparents refused to teach her parents Cree.

“In the first generation it doesn’t work so well. In the schoolyard, children have ways of communicating, and in the fields,” Tremblay says. “But that generation of parents are going to teach their kids English to protect them. It was a gesture to protect the family. They intentionally didn’t pass on culture.”

Her knowledge of English afforded Redman some protection, and she wasn’t targeted for physical abuse. But her brother was raped, and her sister was beaten and eventually ran away from the school at age 15. Other native youth coming out of the schools were stuck in a cultural no-man’s-land. Their childhood wasn’t steeped in the culture of their people, yet the white establishment didn’t accept them either. Redman and her siblings ended up in Regina, but had nowhere to go. “No one would hire an Indian,” she says. Her brother was in and out of jail for the next 30 years. His biggest offense, Redman says, was being Indian. He contracted HIV in prison and died of AIDS. After a hard life, with time on the streets, her sister also died young.

“I feel like I am an exception to the rule. I was able to escape the violence and the

alcoholism. I really count myself as more than lucky. I don't know how it happened," she says.

Genuine reconciliation?

In the late 1980s, the residential schools entered the public eye when a number of prominent Native leaders confessed to being sexually abused in the schools. Later, the 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples paid particular attention to the schools. In 1998, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation was established with a budget of $350-million to be distributed to community-based initiatives.

But as more and more survivors of the schools came forward with stories of abuse, the Canadian government had to do more. In 2005 Supreme Court Justice Frank Iacobucci was appointed "to negotiate a fair and lasting resolution," according to federal government documents. About 80,000 people who attended the schools are still alive.

The eventual settlement had several parts. It involved a cash pay-out called the "common experience payment" for anyone who attended residential schools, a separate process to compensate those who suffered abuse, as well as a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Setting the record straight, it is believed, will allow the healing process to begin.

The settlement also included the need for commemoration of the past and support for healing.

Among its functions, the TRC will travel around the country and collect stories. The process has been used in a number of Latin American nations, and perhaps most famously in post-apartheid South Africa, which saw its TRC led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

The Canadian commission will have three commissioners, at least one of whom must be aboriginal. The selection committee gathered more than 300 applications by the August 2007 deadline, and hopes to have a shortlist ready in the coming weeks. It's a slow-moving process, but the TRC has garnered more attention recently. The call for applications appeared prominently in major Canadian newspapers and in his Speech from the Throne earlier this fall, Prime Minister Stephen Harper reiterated his government's dedication to the TRC.

"Indian residential schools have affected a huge portion of the aboriginal population in Canada and mainstream society is largely ignorant," says Seetal Sunga, a representative from the interim office of the TRC. "[The school system was responsible for] interrupting families and communities. It's fundamentally race-based and has affected how aboriginal people are included in the social fabric of Canada."

Sunga says the TRC is about nation-building and differs greatly from other commissions. The exercise is not about writing a report that will sit on a shelf, but about promoting participation, learning and healing, she says. "One of the big challenges is to raise awareness. We're going to have to be a bit of a megaphone."

Critics of the TRC say that the process has more to do with bolstering the government's image than concern for the continuing plight of aboriginals. Kevin Annett, an activist and former minister of the United Church, says that any reconciliation process should be driven by indigenous people themselves. He also calls for a UN agency or similar external organization to lead any investigations.

"I'm not hopeful that something set up by government that committed these crimes will help anyone but those who committed the crimes," he says.

But Sunga insists that, while the TRC can't force healing, it might make the space for reconciliation available.

"I put the challenge out there to everyone – all Canadians – to make this a living commission, to bring life and spirit, not just dry academic exercise," says Sunga. She says the mandate of the TRC is broad enough to allow individual communities to voice their specific needs and describe what reconciliation means to them.

The two co-chairs of the commission are big names in the realm of aboriginal rights. Former BC Supreme Court Justice Thomas Berger has been a commissioner for several

inquiries, including the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, and has done human rights work internationally. Marlene Brant Castellano is of Mohawk origin and was heavily involved in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples as co-director of research, which ran from 1991 until 1996. She is also a professor emeritus at Trent University.

What money buys

The class-action settlement called on Canada to provide financial resources: $60-million for the TRC, $20-million for commemorative events, and $1.9-billion for common experience payments. Still, with the average payout of $25,000, the money has made little difference for the many who live in poverty. Redman says it's difficult to directly access support from many of the government and non-governmental organizations that should be there to help her.

"Some people say the lawyers are the real winner in this," says Tremblay from her office at Concordia University. In November, Canada paid out $45.6-million to the lawyers involved in the class-action suit on residential schools. The CBC reports that this is one of the largest legal bills the government has ever paid.

Spurred by the Oka Crisis, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Peoples ran for five years and produced some 400 recommendations. Few have been implemented. In 2001 the Assembly of First Nations published a progress report and gave the federal government a failing grade due to a "lack of progress on key socioeconomic indicators." Recommendations that range from developing a network of healing lodges to the abolishment of the Department of Indian Affairs have been largely ignored, according to the Assembly report.

Most recently, the government common experience payment has come under criticism. Concerns were raised in The Montreal Gazette that $82.6-million earmarked for the settlement agreement was transferred to Human Resources and Social Development to defray costs of the summer jobs program. In an attempt to allay concerns, Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl responded in the House of Commons that everyone entitled to compensation would receive it.

Lasting legacies

At the Interim Office of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Seetal Sunga is still optimistic. She hopes the process will work for people like Audrey Redman, suspicious of the common experience payment.

"Ultimately the story does belong to the survivor," says Sunga. "If someone wants to come before the TRC, it's based on residency, it's open to anybody. It doesn't matter if you've opted out [of the settlement]."

While thousands are no longer alive to tell their stories, Sunga hopes this history can also be collected from stories passed down. At the end of the TRC, a public archive on residential schools will be established. Sunga says this will be one of the lasting legacies of the commission, and will play a role in heightening public awareness and education.

Back in Toronto, Audrey Redman is going through her own healing process. Aside from the radio show on CKLN she is an avid writer, documenting her experiences and the movement towards healing. "I didn't feel comfortable going to a government agency for counseling and help," she says. Poverty has almost forced her to the streets on more than one occasion, but Redman was able to raise her five children and the head back to school in her forties.

"I put a lot of years into giving them the childhood that I didn't have. Putting that time with them and doing the best I possibly could," she says. "In the circle of life we have all our family around us. [Through residential schooling] they took everyone out and now we stand alone."

She is now employed with the Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO), a service that matches volunteers with community organizations and helps with finances and governance. Now that lumps of settlement money from residential schools are reaching survivors, CESO is organizing volunteers to help people with everything from budgeting and money management to writing wills.

Redman says her spiritual life is strong. She takes part in drum circles every week and

has gone through traditional healing processes like sweats and fasts. “We have to do the work – recognizing the pain, recognizing the loss. And as we get older, the creator helps us. We can become whole human beings again,” she says. Forgiveness may be difficult, but healing is possible.

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