



## Feature Issue: Reconciliation Workshop Experiences

# The “Ah Hah!” Moment

interview with Lyn Marie Manitowabi

“**Y**ou can only take people as far as you’ve been yourself” says Lyn-marie as she reflects on her experiences as a participant in the reconciliation workshop in Winnipeg earlier this year. “The universe offers opportunities for healing and there was Returning to Spirit. I was ready to challenge my spiritual and emotional development.”

cation and listening. Ironically, Lyn’s epiphany came through the blue eyes of another participant [see story Page 5]. Her eyes were like those of a nun who cared for the boarding school students. “I was triggered and I realized what I’d lost in not being with my brothers and my sisters, and the longing I’d had to be with my family.”

Going through the Returning to Spirit workshops meant delving into her past. Both her parents attended residential schools, “but their experiences were very different,” says Lyn. Her mother took the experience in stride. “Mom does not understand why so many people have bad memories; she’d say ‘they should just get over it’. She became a teacher and remains a Roman Catholic.”

“It was this ‘Ah Hah!’ moment when the bells went off and I got it! We can connect with our past experiences and take what’s happened as teachings. Our individual stories impact the way that we interact and communicate with one another. When we realize our story and needing to be right, it opens communication. We have the power to choose to see the other’s spirit.”

Her father though, had bad experiences and later developed a drinking problem. “I grew up in a violent home” says Lyn. “My mother took a lot of beatings. Because I was the eldest sister, I was always trying to make sure my brothers and sisters were safe. I struggled a lot. Even at the school, I was made to feel less, I’d hear words like ‘dirty, poor little Indians’.”



“I came to a place of better understanding of the other’s perspective and a willingness to be open to conversation. I’m also better able to cope with the stresses that come my way.”

“I ended up going to a boarding school run by nuns. It was a mixed experience. In one way it felt like my saving grace. I had my own room with my own bed. I was conditioned to work by my mother, so the rules and chores didn’t bother me. But most of all I escaped the violence at home.”

Lyn also came to better appreciate her father’s knowledge of the traditional ways through their Odawa ancestry. “After he quit drinking, he took up traditional ceremonies and practices.”

“Education was important to me and through the years I thought I dealt with the pain of my childhood. But despite all the knowledge I ended up repeating some of the patterns that I’d learned. I chose a husband who was like my father—violent and in pain.”

Lyn’s new insights apply very directly to her professional work as a Project Manager with the Family Healing program at Sioux Lookout First Nations Health Authority. They also enrich her personal relationships with her eighteen-year old daughter, who has mental health challenges and also experienced violence growing up.

“The first week of Returning to Spirit involved learning with a group of Native only participants. We learned how we each have a story and we are right by it, which impacts our communication. In the Reconciliation workshop we learned about communication and how to resolve conflict. We were brought together with the non-natives to use our communi-

Finally, she sees immense possibilities for Returning to Spirit helping natives and non-natives seeing one another more clearly. “We have a choice to be compassionate with one another. The voices of First Nations can help in the Western world. With the influx of global consumerism it makes sense to keep traditional values in mind. There are other ways to provide guidance than through [Western] medication. It’s through the spirit.”

**Returning to Spirit cross-Canada workshops empower, transform and unify Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups, spiritual and religious**

### Also in this issue

Souls Unite	2
The Truths We Hold	3
Lest We Forget	4
Getting to Know You	5
Workshop Schedule	6

"All my life, I have believed that in our world there is no place for love. And in a place where there is no place for love, I thought that there was no place for me. The workshop of Returning to Spirit helped me to discover the love around me. Returning to Spirit made me feel that I belong to a community, it made me understand that we can work together to create a space of dialogue, respect and love, a space where life is possible, a space of hope where I want to belong and flower."

*Maria Fernanda Arentsen*



## Souls Unite

by Teresa Hanlon



*"If we want to support each other's inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard. If we want to see and hear a person's soul, there is another truth we must remember; the soul is like a wild animal – tough, resilient, yet shy. When we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding. But if we are willing to sit quietly and wait for a while, the soul may show itself." Parker Palmer*

In the week of the Returning to Spirit reconciliation on a Ktunaxa reserve near Carnbrook, British Columbia we un-nervingly sat in a former residential school. First Nations and non-Aboriginals alike "sat quietly" before one another and "waited for awhile." Now, the St. Eugene Mission Resort's walls and halls shouted out memories of pain, brutality and loneliness. The voices echoed through the corridors of many inter-generational lives.

In regular cross-Canada schoolrooms the education curricula has been agonizingly silent about the history of residential schooling in Canada and the plight and strengths of the First Nations survivors. The week at St. Eugene's in early November, 2012, we acknowledged our ignorance. We looked inside to reconcile ourselves with a painful history. Those representing church, government, teachers and others came forward with some trepidation, but highly motivated to reconcile, connect and begin anew. Both sides fully embraced a higher way of communicating – as soul listeners.

We left St. Eugene's with the hope that others might also come to know this state of grace. Each of us has seeds of hope and possibility in our pockets, nurtured through the knowledge and resolution of the Returning to Spirit trainers. Through sharing: who we are, our shyness, our pain and our healing we will continue to grow. Our hope and prayer is that others take the opportunity to "return to spirit" across Canada and everywhere.



# The Truths We Hold

by Susan Campbell

A small, simply carved wooden horse with a beaded first nations rider resonated most for me. The Aboriginal participant who brought the figure recalled how it was discovered in the 1990's in the walls of the former residential school, St. Eugene's. Here we were, in the same place where it had been lost. St. Eugene's been converted into a resort. The horse and its rider now had prominence in the sacred circle. Its newfound freedom spoke poignantly of the darkness and losses of the many young children who were taken from their families.

Assembled for the workshop were Aboriginals sent to St. Eugene's as children as well as priests and ministers; the bishop from the local diocese; and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social workers, educators, counselors and community members. The legacy of the Indian Residential Schools was a source of suffering to all—the pain manifested itself in different ways.

As a non-Aboriginal contemplating the residential school legacy, I was pained by how blinded we've been to our supposed "truth." Christians profess that God is loving and compassionate to all, slow to anger and rich in mercy. How then, can this same God justify harsh punishment, alienation from family and culture, and forced compliance to a foreign way of life?

The belief that Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life" was used to damn those who didn't believe it. The church was complicit in the systematic removal of vulnerable children from their homes, and carrying out the explicit government policy of assimilating aboriginal peoples into a European-based society. Discrimination and intolerance resulted, glaringly evident today, on or off reserves across Canada.



Some of the Aboriginal participating in the reconciliation experienced brutality at the hands of their caregivers. Some didn't. All spoke with immense sadness about their forced break from their families, their cultures . . . their selves. This ultimate loss of self was what denigrated and damaged the most. One participant recalled listening, as a young girl, from her dormitory window, to the music coming from her nearby native village. Her family and community were celebrating a New Year's feast. Being shut out from that celebration stripped away a part of her.

What I came to learn through these workshops was that what we thought was the "truth" wasn't Truth at all. Paradoxically, we learned this through the reconciliation. The real Truth is far deeper, richer and all-embracing than the "truth" imposed. It came through conversation.

It's the task of the whole community to discern and move toward the fullness of Truth. When we ask ourselves, "Am I open to listening to those experiencing truth in a different way from my own?" "May they have something to contribute to

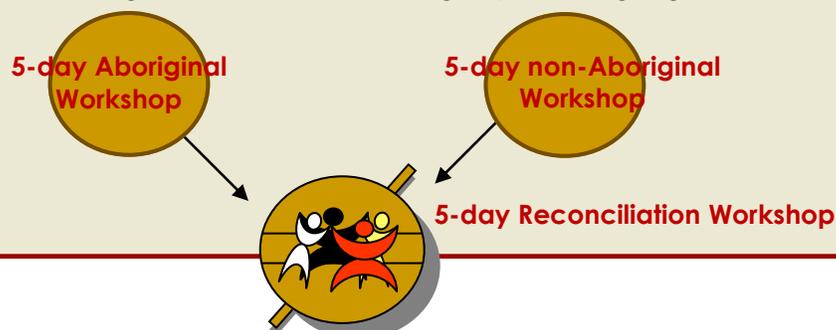
my conversion of heart, mind and will?" "Am I willing to discern that a greater Truth may be realized?"

I am grateful for all of the moments created through Returning to Spirit. Through these moments of listening and embracing the other's perspective we are able to move into reconciliation and partnership and a larger Truth. It's a place of forgiveness and healing for all.

*Susan Campbell is the Director of the Diocesan Pastoral Centre, Diocese of Prince George, British Columbia*

## How Returning to Spirit Workshops Work

Returning to Spirit is a two-part training program. It begins with identical 5-day workshops—one for Aboriginals and one for non-Aboriginals. These are followed by another 5-day Reconciliation workshop which includes 2 days of communication training and 3-days of the two groups coming together.



# Lest we Forget

by Joyce Beattie

One of the workshop participants said, "We must never forget what happened with the residential schools so that it's never repeated." That statement stuck with me and helped reinforce the memory.

Our group had some feelings of apprehension in talking to the clergy and the non-Aboriginal group. We were asked to listen, and not to make unnecessary comments. It was helpful to remember that we all have our stories. We often act and speak as if we already know what the other has experienced.

I experienced loss of my entire family as a child. I grew up not knowing my relations nor my Dene roots and culture. This reconciliation experience helped me to forgive the church and the government, but not to forget. The government's plan to educate and "civilize" First Nations people arose because they wanted our lands and resources. Our communal way of life and customs and traditions were foreign to them.

But by educating us, we were better able to protect our people. Many of the young people who went to residential schools became our political leaders, spokesmen and negotiators. I am thankful to now know that we have inherent rights; we have a voice; we can participate in the political process. Myself and others are now determined to keep our traditions and ceremonies and Native languages alive, and to dispute the colonial rulings of the Government of Canada and the Indian Act.

I am now happier and more confident with my own healing journey to my culture and my self, through this workshop. I've built friendship with Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike; enjoyed being with the Elders; had lots of laughter and words of wisdom. Thank you to all of the trainers and to Mary Richardson and June Forsythe and the committee members for inviting us. You are magnificent and caring people.



# Getting to Know You

interview with Bohdina Cook

**T**he youngest participant in the Reconciliation workshop held in Winnipeg, 20-year old Bohdina Cook, proffered a unique lens on the process and outcomes, in part because of her youth and also because of her appearance. An Aboriginal with French-Canadian ancestry, she has fair skin and blue eyes. Growing up in Hollow Water First Nation she experienced what could be called a reverse racism. "They called me 'the white girl' growing up," she recalls.

Bohdina's young life journey has had its share of traumatic twists. Her mother was murdered walking home from a relative's wedding. An Aboriginal man was charged and imprisoned, with the motive unclear. She's alienated from her father. "I don't see him much, or bother him that much. He's an alcoholic."

Bohdina and her brother were raised by her Grandparents at their Hollow Water reserve. "My Grandma went to residential school, and she told me she kept running away back to the reserve. She didn't have a bad experience there, it was just that she wanted to be with her mother, especially when [her mother] was dying."

"It was my Grandma and Auntie who encouraged me to go to Returning to Spirit," continues Bohdina. "I'd graduated from high school and was working, and with the money I earned I was doing stupid things, like drinking alcohol."

"The first Aboriginal-only workshop was held right in Hollow Water. It was really interesting. The people who participated were people that I see every day, but I had never gotten to know them. I started having new and different perspectives about everyone.

I began to realize that everyone has problems. I started changing my behaviour, and quit drinking."

"A lot of the [Aboriginal] people were upset and angry with the residential school experience and the church. I felt badly for them, and I sort of felt out of place. Some were worried that the non-Aboriginals wouldn't listen to us. But I said, 'the church people are learning to communicate too.' It was important that we kept an open mind."



"In the reconciliation it was interesting that the non-Aboriginals were hurt too. They talked about how they were hurt by their own people."

Just as Bohdina had experienced reverse racism amongst Aboriginals who thought she was too white, she met a young white woman at the reconciliation who talked openly about how racist her friends were, against Aboriginals.

"She told me that when she decided to help Aboriginals, and better understand them, her friends would ridicule her. She was confused

as those friends were important to her and she didn't want to lose them. I said to her, 'You don't have to do things for them. Do it for yourself. It's important that you stand your ground.'"

The workshop experience had a profound impact on Bohdina. Asked what she'd like to do next with her life she says "I'd love to be a Returning to Spirit trainer. I'd also like to be a veterinarian . . . or maybe go into psychology . . . that would help with working for Returning to Spirit!"

With her perception, intelligence and compassion, she'll go far in whichever direction she chooses.



# Workshop Schedule

Month	Aboriginal	Non-Aboriginal Canadians	Reconciliation
May	May 6—10, 2013 Canoe Lake First Nations <b>Facilitator: Norman Opekokew</b> norman.opekokew@returningtospirit.org	NA	May 27-31, 2013 Prince George, British Columbia <b>Facilitator: Jean Marie Lehtinen</b> jean-marie@pgdiocese.bc.ca
June	NA	NA	June 15-19, 2013 Yellowknife, NWT <b>Facilitator: Sandra Sanderson</b> diocese.mackenzie@theedge.ca

Visit our website ([www.returningtospirit.org](http://www.returningtospirit.org)) for more information on future workshops.



“Song of the Butterfly” by Jackie Traverse, a Winnipeg-based artist.

If you are an Aboriginal Canadian artist and would like to profile your art, we would love to do so in our publication. The art will ideally reflect, in some way, the idea of harmony and peace, be it between diverse peoples, nature or within an individual.

Returning to Spirit (RTS) is a non-profit organization that designs and delivers workshops and training programs for reconciliation and empowerment, within the context of the divisions created by the residential school legacy.

Our focus is on moving people forward through the principles of personal empowerment. This defines all our work, including coaching sessions and consulting, which are designed to support individuals, families, organizations and whole communities to move forward in life.

Our work goes beyond healing. It provides conditions for personal, family, community, and organizational transformation. We welcome donations. Please go to:

<http://www.canadahelps.org/CharityProfilePage>

## RETURNING TO SPIRIT

[info@returningtospirit.org](mailto:info@returningtospirit.org)  
[www.returningtospirit.org](http://www.returningtospirit.org)

**Winnipeg Head Office**

4820 Portage Avenue - Unit 3  
 Headingley, Manitoba R4H 1C8  
 Address Line 4—204-889-4579 FAX—888-224-1286  
**Toll Free—1-855-244-3963**

Contributors: Lyn Marie Manitowabi, Maria Fernanda Arentsen, Teresa Hanlon, Susan Campbell, Joyce Beattie, Bohdina Cook, Nikki Croft. Please send your news, stories, insights, photographs from past or current RTS workshops to:  
[Jacques.lafrance@returningtospirit.org](mailto:Jacques.lafrance@returningtospirit.org)

