



Truth and Reconciliation

On June 2nd, our country will be receiving the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission concerning the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada.

We will hear about the way in which their cultures, languages, sacred places and forms of worship, and land were stolen from them by the “Doctrine of Discovery,” which the European explorers and settlers used to dominate and control this vast nation. We will all be asked to look honestly at how the issues of racism, colonialism, state, and church conspired to rob our Aboriginal brothers and sisters of their heritage and dignity.

Following the defeat of apartheid in South Africa, and under the leadership of President Nelson Mandela and Chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established.

What can we learn from their experience to prepare ourselves for Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission report?

In drawing on the work of Dr. Fanie Du Toit, Director of the Institute for Reconciliation and Justice in South Africa, we can apply his suggestions to our situation in Canada as citizens and also to our work as family therapists.

Reconciliation starts from the premise that we are interdependent: the turning point in the reconciliation process in South Africa was the moment that the parties involved in the conflict became aware of the fact that they couldn’t become a society without the other. In South Africa, there is an African concept of ‘Ubuntu’: I am, because you are. This holds true for families as well as for nations and is particularly important when families break down and children need their parents to work cooperatively.

The one condition for reconciliation is truth: we have to live with each others’ truth. Societies, organizations, churches, and family relationships often look good outwardly, but more often than not, there’s a hidden undercurrent.

Canada has a broken history in our relationship with First Nations peoples. This truth needs to be acknowledged.

Families often have broken histories in relationships, and in therapy we frequently work to help bring that truth out into the open to make space for healing. Truthful communication is as essential for families as it is for nations.

We have to settle the future before we can settle the past: in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a follow up to the establishment of a democratic state. Democracy was the joint future perspective that was needed to be able to acknowledge the painful past. We can only become fully aware of our history if there is an appealing perspective for the future.

Yet history has often shown that those who don’t deal with their past are destined to repeat it. We see this in communities and also in families where abuse, neglect, sexual assault, violence, addictions, rejection, economic control, and prejudice destroy relationships. For true healing to occur, members need to learn both empathic listening as well as a new vision that grounds them in hope, allowing them to face their pain with a promise of renewal.

We need to recognize that we look through a mask: our images about our fellow Canadians, neighbours, colleagues, or family members are only images. We need to check our perceptions: what do we say about others when they are not around? We may have to be willing to change how we see the other in order to reconcile with fellow citizens, as well as with our partners, children, in-laws, parents.

Many times people say no to the journey of changing themselves and so block the possibilities for true reconciliation.

We need to actively show what's important and not just talk about it: Dr. Du Toit said:

“One leadership lesson that we can learn from Nelson Mandela is that he didn't preach about living together, he put it into practice and showed people what living together could look like.”

We all need to learn to live authentically and to let our actions reflect our beliefs. If there is a vision for healing and hope, then we — whether as Canadian peoples or as family members — can take the necessary actions to move towards that new vision.

By remaining curious about the other, we can find ways to grow and learn from one another. This is a truth we know as therapists when working with couples and families, and it is a truth we can learn from being open to the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Together we will need to seek wisdom to forge new attitudes and new relationships with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis — and to claim the truth of our interdependence.

Will we as a nation, as fellow citizens, rise to this invitation, to this challenge?

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