

“Creator we give you thanks for all you are and all you bring to us for our visit within your creation...give us your strength to live together with respect and commitment as we grow in your spirit, for you are God, now and forever. Amen”. [A Disciple’s Prayer Book]

My name is Melanie Delva and I am the Archivist for the Anglican Diocese of New Westminster and Provincial Synod of BC and Yukon, a position I have held for ten years this December.

I would like to start by acknowledging that we are a church worshipping on stolen land of the Coast Salish peoples. I am profoundly grateful for their continued presence and witness to those who inhabit their lands.

Thank you also to Lynne for the invitation to speak at St. Clement’s today. There are people of this parish who are very dear to me, and I have followed with great respect your work with refugees and more recently, your engagement with the Truth and Reconciliation process. Lynne asked me to share some of my experiences of truth and reconciliation with you, and as I am not a theologian, I don’t see this as sermon but a reflection or thinking out loud.

I grew up in a racist family. As you can see, I am white - in fact my brothers say that I am so white I actually glow in the dark. I was raised in a very rural community in Manitoba that was near to one of the larger Metis communities, and quickly learned the insidious lessons that I would argue all colonial Canadians are taught from an early age: that "Indians" are at best lazy, unintelligent, dirty and ungrateful and at worst, sub-human and not worthy of a continued presence on the earth. That my family and the rest of the white settler community failed to make the distinction between Metis and First Nations people is but a small kernel of ignorance indicative of the vast and stunning level of ignorance that undergirded the entirety of their views on their Indigenous neighbours.

Although through so-called "higher education" and life experience I came to tidy up those beliefs to make them more presentable and palatable to the growingly politically correct world in which I found myself, my thoughts

really only moved from an overt racism to what I now believe to be a much more subtle and dangerous form of racism - that is, a pity for what I saw as a hopeless and helpless sector of society who - if we intelligent, sophisticated, educated and motivated dominant society could find time and compassion to stoop to help - would really benefit from our intervention and assistance. I did not and perhaps could not see that in fact, the exact opposite was the truth. As the gospel of John reminded us today: "He was in the world...yet the world did not know Him... His own people did not accept him".

I still feel residual shame as I say these words.

My internal world started to shift the first time I set eyes on a file of correspondence in our archival records regarding the death of a 7 year old boy in St. George's Indian Residential School in Lytton. The correspondence was between the principal of the school, the Indian agent, and the family of the boy. The family wanted to know what had happened - how the boy had died and what had happened to his body. The principal and the Indian agent were going back and forth trying to decide for themselves what had happened, and how *or whether* to present the information to the bereft and desperate family. The **truth** of the matter was that the boy had died of influenza and been buried in an unmarked grave on the school playground. But to my knowledge, the parents were never told this. I read the file, vomited, and sat shakily at my desk without moving for about 20 minutes. Then I put the file back in the box and took out the next one and began reading. File after file. Box after box.

This was the beginning of a journey of devastation and I believe redemption for me. In fact the only reason I have hope for reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples on any level let alone a national or institutional church level is that I see my own journey of reconciliation and movement into the Light as a microcosm of what is possible when we no longer fear the light, and begin to accept the "grace upon grace" that is not only possible but unavoidable when Word becomes flesh.

I have worked with hundreds of survivors and former students of residential schools in the last ten years. Some of the work was helping survivors and

former students prove they attended the schools, as the onus was on them to do so in order to receive compensation under the settlement agreement - though the vast majority left school without so much as a name tag, let alone report cards, yearbooks or photographs that they could produce to prove that they had attended. Beyond compensation was the need to bring Truth into the light, and although the archival record can only ever tell a shard of the whole story, for many simply seeing their photo or name in the records was the piece they needed to externally validate the truth they held inside. Some of the work was searching for the missing children - ones who never came home. I took this work upon myself because of the story of the boy buried on the playground. I couldn't sleep at night and when I did, I often dreamed of the children whose names and faces I saw in the records. I refused to stop searching for them until I had exhausted every possible source I could lay hands on. I found graves for some of the missing. Some I found alive. Some I could not find at all.

For some survivors, calling me in the archives was the first contact they had had with the church since leaving residential school, and the fear, pain, and sometimes anger was infused in their voices. This was not lost on me. To me, it was sacramental to set aside the many tasks that were on my desk in order to take the time to listen as a survivor told me his or her story over the phone - desperate to be heard and believed and witnessed. Not witnessed TO - witnessed AS... As the sacred child of God he or she already was - not that which the institutional church wanted or needed him or her to be.

The work was hard on a level I am not sure I have yet accepted or processed - particularly through the pilot process of the TRC when we were involved in document discovery and the enormity of the atrocities and attempted genocide became more clear and undeniable. But the pain and difficulty was more than simply being faced with the evil that others had been capable of in some sort of distant history separate from me. It was about facing my own capacity for the evil of seeing fellow human beings as anything less than inherent and unconditional children of God.

But here is where reconciliation happens, although I think "reconciliation" and "resurrection" are interchangeable here. Spoiler alert: here is where Christ shows up. Here is where Word becomes flesh. The survivors saved me. The very people the church I work for tried to eliminate came around me and held me up. They were gracious and patient as they helped me to

understand the depth and breadth of the evil they had endured. They did not judge me when I got stuck in "white guilt" and tried all kinds of weird and unhelpful ways to un-mire myself from that. They helped me to pick up the pieces of what was left of me when this process and the reality of my own internalized racism shattered my soul. And it was the survivors who laid their hands on me and prayed for me when I broke - immobilized by the extent of the atrocity I was witnessing both in the records and in the hundreds of survivors who told me their stories – whose stories I now carry in my very cells. They showed me Christ - the light that shines in the darkness and that the darkness does not overcome.

I was in Ottawa a few weeks ago for the closing events of the TRC. I want to tell you a story that, to me, embodies what reconciliation can look like. Word becoming flesh.

Ron Stott was a 23 year old newly minted RCMP officer when he was tasked with going to a First Nations reserve and taking children from their families in the back of his police car to the residential school. At the Ottawa event, he told his story publicly for the first time in 50 years. For 50 years he had held inside the images of him forcibly taking a 4 year old girl from her mother's arms as both mother and daughter were screaming and crying. He conducted this task several times before he was so horrified that he resigned from the RCMP. He had been silent for almost 5 decades until he started having panic attacks when hearing about the TRC process. His therapist sent him to a First Nations friendship centre where the Indigenous people heard his story, forgave him, and led him through healing ceremonies that he says saved his life. As Ron was speaking, I began to weep. One might say uncontrollably. Sitting next to me was my friend Sheba. She is an Oji-Cree Anglican woman of about my age from Kingfisher Lake in Northern Ontario. We met at General synod a few years ago and keep up a friendship over Facebook and Instagram. As I began to cry, Sheba took my hand and held it. Generations of Sheba's family attended residential schools. After Ron's talk, we went to speak to him, hand in hand. She told him she had never heard anyone from "the other side" tell their story, and she thanked him for his vulnerability. They hugged and cried.

It is in these microcosms that I come to believe that reconciliation is possible. It is an absolutely overwhelming task to think that we have an

entire nation and 500 years of damage to undo. But there are microcosms all around us. This may come as a shock to you, but being an archivist is not a glamorous job. My colleagues and I like to joke that we are plankton or krill on the food chain of the institution. But the plankton and the krill in large numbers feed the blue whale...the largest mammal on earth...and exceedingly beautiful!

People ask me how they can pursue reconciliation. I tell them I think each person needs to find their own way in their context and in a way that allows them to act with the highest degree of integrity. I always encourage people to go inward and look at their own understandings and assumptions. If non-Indigenous people act out of a place of shame or guilt or because we feel we know what it is that Indigenous people supposedly "need" from us, what we do will go awry in the same way that "good intentions" led to the residential school system. Some feel called to tackle government policy and public leaders (not literally!...please don't tackle your MP!) - fighting to see the legal frameworks that created this heinous system repealed (Indian act, doctrine of discovery) and to help realize the necessity of the full embrace of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Some feel called to local action. Here in BC we know of many grassroots movements around climate justice and resource extraction.

Personally, I believe and feel very strongly that we as a church can no longer claim that we have pursued truth and reconciliation while excising ourselves from indigenous justice. One of my greatest fears at this point is that we as a church will congratulate ourselves for our good work in this whole "TRC business" and then go back to doing what we have always done. To me, this would be a devastating failure.

Whatever we do, we need to realize and understand that the fates of our peoples are intertwined and aligned. Non-Indigenous people need to act and pursue reconciliation not because Indigenous people need us to, but because WE need to. Because we are broken and ill and it is only in reconciliation that the Body is made whole. Let's be krill together and watch in wonder and gratitude as the Word becomes flesh in ways we may have never dreamed possible. The end is just the beginning.