Truth and Reconciliation:

a personal view from 60 years of learning Cree culture

2023 Sunderland P. Gardner Lecture

Richard "Dick" Preston

Canadian Quaker Learning Series

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About this Pamphlet

Sunderland P. Gardner (1802–1893) was an outstanding figure among Canadian Friends. He ministered with great plainness and vigour. Day or night, he was ready to travel in all weather to be with those who were sorrowing. He left behind a legacy of great tenderness. (adapted from *The Quakers in Canada: A History*, by Arthur Dorland)

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Good evening, Friends. It is a privilege to be able to share a retrospection on my career, by Zoom, with Friends in this series of annual Sunderland P. Gardiner lectures. So, my sincere thanks to those who made this happen. I do have something that I want to say, and now, I will respectfully get on with my story.

In June of 1963 we flew into the James Bay Cree settlement of Waskaganish. With us in the Norseman aircraft was Eddie Diamond, a young Cree high school graduate, and Father Jean Bergeron, a middle-aged Oblate Priest. I was a 32 year-old graduate student, and my family at that time was my wife Sarah, and the first three of my children, Cathy, Alice, and Susan.

Eddie Diamond was coming home for a wedding, Father Bergeron was returning to his mission, and I was going to an unknown community to learn some of the basics of being an anthropologist. The ethics of fieldwork had been an urgent concern at the time, but so intellectualized that I chose the simple attitude that we go somewhere and make friends and treat them like friends. I still prefer that fundamentally respectful approach, and it has served well. Eddie is retired now, after being an electrician and then a manager for the Grand Council of the Crees of Quebec with a series of increasing responsibilities, and finally twenty-eight years as Director General of

the Cree Regional Authority. Still friends, we check in with each other every month or two.

Our mandate for truth and reconciliation towards all people has always been a part of Quakerism. But the Canadian national policy specifying Indigenous relationships came late, just a few years ago. For my family, in 1963 any awareness of Quakers was also yet to come. But as the storyteller Stuart McLean used to say, "Now, don't get ahead of me." This essay is precisely about truth and reconciliation between Indigenous people and Quakers, set in the context of my experience of sojourning in the James Bay region, and thinking about it alot.

As the aircraft's floats skimmed the water, we looked out the windows to see where we were landing. Waskaganish in 1963 was a small settlement of 500 Crees and a dozen Whites, founded in 1668 and named for the "little house" built there by Englishmen who first came to trade for furs. (waskigan means house and ish means little) Because Quakerism was involved, we will pause for a closer look at this important bit of history. The English first wintered there 355 years ago and exchanged axes, knives, and other goods for beaver skins, other furs, and meat. Their success led to a royal charter for the Hudson's Bay Company. Curiously, the Company's first "governor" in Canada was a Quaker, Charles Bayly. He had been imprisoned in the Tower of London when he was chosen, presumably for his Quaker honesty and his ability to live many years in hardship conditions. He came by this latter ability honestly.

Prior to the Tower of London, Charles Bayly had been imprisoned for two years in Rome for trying to convert the pope. He was paroled on the condition that he go straight home and not try to convert anyone. He made it as far as France before violating his parole by trying to convert the French.

Released from prison there, he went to Bristol, and to a Quaker home to inquire of the situation of Friends. There he was arrested and required to swear allegiance to King Charles. Since Quakers refused to swear, on the principle that their words were reliably truthful, Bayly was sent to Newgate prison.

While there he wrote a broadsheet letter to the king, warning him that "ye Lord god is Coming, And thou amongst ye Rest, o King, will not be exempted; but, the whirlwind of ye Lord god is coming on ye Nation," and "naked must thou appear before ye King of Kings…" when Charles would have to answer for the excesses of his court. Even today, Charles II and his court remain notable for their excesses.

Bayly's letter of apocalyptic warning may have amused Charles, for he was transferred to the Tower of London. While there he befriended the governor of the Tower, who was one of the original "company of adventurers"—investors in the Hudson's Bay Company—and it was he who recommended Bayly for the governor's job. At about this time, Bayly had become impatient with aspects of George Fox's moderation, and Fox deemed Bayly a failed case.

Quakers of the time did business on a "one price" basis, rather than bargaining with each customer for the most advantageous deal. I believe that this made for good—respectful—relations with the Cree hunters with whom he traded. After nearly a decade at Waskaganish, Bayly was abruptly relieved of his authority and recalled to London to answer a charge that he was doing a covert personal trade on the side. He learned this only when the annual supply ship brought a man to replace him as governor. He apparently took this demotion in stride and, since the ship was unable to return that year, he continued to work under the new governor, without much difficulty, and then resumed the governorship when the new man became unable to function. Bayly returned to London the next year and was exonerated, but he contracted a disease and died. The Company was not yet operating at a profit, but commissioned a brass plaque to be sent to Waskaganish to show the Crees that he had been respected in London.

* * * * * *

Back to 1963 and Waskaganish. Our own "little house" was a one room cabin of about 150 square feet, rented from the widow of a Hudson's Bay manager. I built a triple bunk bed in the back corner for the kids, and Sarah and I put down an air mattress in the front corner

at night. We had a small cast iron stove in the middle for heat and cooking. And there was a small porch where kids often collected. It was good enough.

Chief Malcolm Diamond had arranged for us to hire an interpreter. Willy Weistchee was my age, and fluent in English as a result of seven year's residence in the T.B. sanitarium in Hamilton, Ontario. The job was welcome for him and very fortunate for us. His crippling TB of the spine brought him welfare payments of just $22 a month. He lived in a tent with his aunt and a teenage niece.

Willy was more than our interpreter. We became friends and collaborators. He guided my introduction to fieldwork with wise words ("Don't get excited." "Never lose your nerve."), and the customary way of how to go to visit people ("Don't knock on the door, just speak to let people know you are coming in.") and helpful introductions to people I might listen to and learn from. We started with a friendly old man, George Gilpin, to see how well I would listen. George's stories were interesting, and our interview went well.

And at the last week of my stay, Willy took me to the elder whose stories were to form my career, John Blackned. He was in his late 60s, and living in an old Company house that, as a young man, he had helped to build. His wife, Harriet, and two middle-aged but unmarried sons Mark and Eddie, were his family.

John was an archive of oral tradition, as I discovered. His first story, about a man who disrespected a bear and was taught a lesson, remains vivid in my memory. John's voice was deep, expressive, and authoritative.

Bear skulls

I paid rapt attention as the story unfolded. This storytelling was an exciting new experience for me, and gave me a sense of recording something of value. But midway through, the tape on my recorder ran out. I begged John to wait, and ran back to get a new tape. It was a hot August afternoon, and I was running in soft sand, so when I arrived back at John's house I was sweating and out of breath. It drew a pleased chuckle from John, and he picked up the story where he had left off. He could see that I was very interested and respectful.

Here is the story, as I still remember it from 1963:

Two men were out hunting, and stopped to eat their lunch. One of the men noticed an old bear skull nearby, on the ground. He took his axe and smashed the skull. The other man was very surprised at this disrespect, and said so. They decided to go their separate ways. The man who smashed the skull was walking along, and got a feeling that

John Blackned, Dick's mentor

he was being followed. When he looked back, he was surprised to see a bear coming along the same path. He decided to pick up his pace a bit, and then after a few minutes he looked back and saw that the bear was still following him and getting closer. The man thought, "I will shoot him." But when he prepared to do this, he found that he had forgotten the primer pouch that he carried like a necklace, around his neck. With no primer, his musket could not shoot. This made him decide to walk quickly, in a different direction. But when he looked back, the bear had followed in the same direction. The man was now quite alarmed and began to run. Soon he thought he could hear the bear behind him. He ran to a place where a large tree had fallen over and the root-ball was big enough to shield him. He stood with his back to the root-ball and held his musket like a club. The bear came close and stood up. The man shouted at the bear, "What are you doing?" The bear paused, and then went back on all four legs. Then the bear walked away.

Back at graduate school in September, I was able to get approval and some funding to return to Waskaganish and John Blackned. Actually, I returned for five more summers, and some brief winter trips, through the 1960's, and at this point have made perhaps 20 visits to James Bay in all.

Travel has been a thread in my life. Many of my childhood trips were via the Union Pacific streamliner "City of Denver" taking me on overnight trips back and forth between my parents, from Chicago to Fort Collins, Colorado. Starting when I was about 6 and continuing till my mid-teens, I enjoyed these solitary adventures. Especially memorable was watching, from the little window in the upper berth, as the lights in farmhouses passed behind us; wondering what was happening in those houses. Other travels included military service in Korea for the winter of 1951-52.

From watching as the train passed farmhouses in the night, to a Korean mother's good-natured laugh, through struggles with philosophy (too abstracted from life) and boredom with psychology (too reduced to rats and pigeons in place of actual human experience), I finally landed in anthropology, and with a stint of psychoanalysis, got

my PhD and a long professorial career. Retiring has brought continuing collaboration with James Bay Cree friends.

Much of this was not my choosing; even less of it was my planning. Basically, way opened, often. As it has now, in this lecture.

Gerti Diamond with the Prestons

In the summer of 1964, Malcolm Diamond's daughter Gerti, the first high (residential) school graduate in Waskaganish, babysat our kids from time to time, and a friendship developed that led to our inviting her to come home with us for the winter, and type up the tapes of John's stories. Gerti's mom approved. Gerti wound up living with us for two years, and the familial relationship lasted for 50 years, until her death in 2014. She came to Sarah's memorial meeting and spoke about learning from her how to cook, how to sew, and how to be part of a family. And at Gerti's funeral Betty and I sat and ate with her son and his wife, and I was asked to speak.

Gerti and Sarah with Rick on snowshoes

Sarah Preston and Harriet Jacob. Harriet making snowshoes for Sarah

My late wife Sarah, in contrast, had travelled little and not far. But she was a trouper and adapted very well to life in Waskaganish. Later, with our five children finally in school, she returned to university and did an honours paper on Kierkegaard's notion of community and then her MA thesis on the life story of one of her Waskaganish friends. Sarah's dying of cancer was a trial for her, for me, for us, for family, and for friends. We were faced with the necessity of this dying and the inability to stop the cancer. It was a hard truth. Small and large frustrations and contentions fell away, even long-enduring blame for her father's abandoning her and her other relatives being unwilling to help. These wounds never healed, but at the end they fell away.

Dick and Betty

And as a personal sequel, two years later, at age 61 I had the great good fortune to marry Betty, a fellow Quaker, and we have had a wonderful 30 years together that nobody could ever have predicted. It's never too late for life to be kind, and I am deeply grateful.

Back again to Waskaganish in the 1960s. During the third summer, I had an epiphany. While listening intently to John's stories, I routinely (but rather intellectually) thought, "Well, that makes sense, from a Cree point of view." The breakthrough was when I felt, emotionally, "That makes sense, AND IT REALLY DOES!" At that moment, I had discovered the psychological reality of culture, based as it was in John's accounts. (I'll come back to their "truth" in a few minutes, it's complicated.) That feeling of psychological reality has been sustained in me to the present day. In six decades of thinking and writing about Cree traditions, the sense I have reached is that I have an appreciation for a large number of stories, and have touched on a wealth of thought, a traditional ethics of living in the subarctic bush, and expressions of a spiritual integrity. It has been a privileged experience, and I am grateful.

In 1969 John told me that he had told me all that he could remember with confidence. It was quite alot. It began that first summer's sojourn in 1963, when recording John's stories was not only helping me to learn about doing fieldwork, it was also a collaboration: he became my teacher and I became his scribe, at a time when the pace of rapid change had meant that people did not show much interest in what John had to say. My enthusiasm for recording was a start for our lengthy collaboration. And his voice still survives on tape. And were they true? True is not the best word for them. Oral traditions have an aesthetic integrity—depicting a world view. He believed that he was telling them just as they were told to him, and that many of them had been told for many generations. It is probably fair to say that he believed them to have truth value. I regard them as, at the very least, true to form—authentic Cree culture.

About 1970, following seven years of focussing on Cree culture, I became seriously interested in Quakerism. I believe the Crees gave me good spiritual preparation. I was recruited by a poster in the entryway of a meetinghouse, saying: "Quakers believe that there is that of God in every person. We do not know that this is true. But we have found that, when we act as if it were true, our trust is justified." Truth was not claimed. Faith was recommended. Maybe that was how John thought of the traditional stories. For me, it was just the right balance.

I believe that, for all that, I still have a limited grasp of what a tradition is and how it works – traditions in general; Cree and Quaker traditions in particular. There are good reasons.

First, because my Cree mentors (like people everywhere, including you and me) knew more than what they actually said. At the end of the sixth summer of recording, John said that he didn't want to tell me things he was not sure of himself.

Second, John knew more than he was consciously aware of at that particular time and place. Years later, when I asked John if he thought it would be appropriate to use a particular story to start a book on a history of Cree community, he said he thought I could do it that way, and after a moment, said, "There's a part of that story I didn't tell you. Then he started in as if he had just finished the last sentence of what he had told me years before. A different situation can make for a different recollection.

Third, I know my grasp of Cree tradition is limited by comparison to my grasp of tradition that I am a part of. I am a Friend, a Quaker. For that matter, I am a Quaker old man, with a few stories of my own. Including the one you are hearing now.

Like Cree stories, Quaker stories express a wealth of thought, an ethics of living, and a spiritual integrity. I only know a small part of the stories that go with my tradition, but my experience of Quaker tradition goes well beyond stories, into belonging and acting within a community, and both conscious and habitual guidance ideals for the intentions and actions in my daily life.

Fourth, there are about 350,000 Crees in Canada, and so I am speaking about a very much smaller group.

We anthropologists describe and analyse or interpret aspects of the traditions we study. Understanding, in general and abstract terms, the dynamics of persistence, loss, and transformations of a tradition is still a problem for most of us. We have a pretty good grasp of the elements bringing changes, but not of the actual processes. Borrowing a useful metaphor from Northrop Frye (1957), we can do the anatomy of a tradition, but not the physiology. Having made clear my limitations

with regard to understanding Cree tradition, I want to get on with what I want to say about Cree stories.

You may have heard of this motto, attributed to a Siberian shaman: "If you don't know the trees, you can get lost in the forest. If you don't know the stories, you can get lost in life." I like it. Stories offer life guidance, regardless of their degree of connection to actual past events. So, are John Blackned's stories lies, or truth? Or are they neither? As they say: its complicated. Let's approach the stories carefully but respectfully, by first comparing Cree and Quaker traditions.

Comparing Eastern Cree tradition to Quaker tradition is not as much of a stretch as it might seem. For a "traditional" Cree hunter, eating was a holy act, the ground of one's practical life and one's spiritual being. Eating was the tangible re-affirmation of the continuing practical and spiritual relations between humans and the animals that give themselves so that humans can live. That's religious, both in practice and in ethics. For their part, Quakers believe that there is "that of God" or "of the Christ spirit," in every person, and that this quality of spirit may be found by seeking deeply within one's self and others, and nourishing it. This is the ground of our being, both practice and ethics. So both Cree and Quaker traditions are spiritual. The ground of our being is where Crees, Quakers and many others (Tillich 2015) have their basis in faith in a fundamental truth.

And traditions evolve over time. Quakerism has a history of periodically trying to re-define its boundaries as a traditional faith community, with groups segmenting off from time to time on the basis of sometimes objectively rather small differences. These branches do not thereby intend to give up their continuities with their Quaker past, or their identity, but rather try to get closer to what they believe to be the main current of the tradition. Comparably, Cree traditions change with the advent of new technology, new work occupations, and a much increased connection with the rest of the world. While holding to Cree identity.

There are other interesting parallels between Cree and Quaker spirituality, in which people are believed to be able to participate experientially in the prophetic stream of continuing access to truth or discernment.

Quaker mysticism is usually expressed in inspired ministry. Comparable to the Quakers, Cree mysticism is through the words of shamans and others, often in dream images.

Perhaps less comparable is the Quaker conviction that prophecy enables a person's potential, through discernment, to seek to do God's will—witnessing to the world—both inwardly and through action (healing and correcting the wrongs of the world). Yet Cree shamanism also enables a person's potential to know the intentions, and influence the actions, of other-than-human persons, and ideally enjoins humans to act respectfully towards all kinds of persons.

The practical reason for me to make this comparison of Cree and Quaker traditions is that I have some understanding of both traditions, and find that the comparison is congenial and productive in many ways. Especially appealing to me is that I can be sure of sustaining a thoughtful and respectful treatment of each by holding it carefully up to the other. It may also be useful for you, since this comparison expands the context for your own comparisons to traditions that you are a part of.

I believe that a respectful attitude is at the core of reconciliation.

What do I mean by the word respect? It is not deference, or a show of courtesy. I will say that it is a feeling of connection to a person or people or to some other thing with due regard for the feelings, wishes, rights, or traditions of others. It encourages us to act in a friendly, trusting way towards others. Ideally, it encourages and characterizes enduring and honest communications. I believe that Charles Bayly was successful in the early fur trade because he was known for good— respectful— relations with the Cree hunters with whom he traded. In the vocabulary of the fur trade, he met the people well and "gave good measure"—a fair price—in trading for furs.

The importance of respect is something that Crees and Quakers have in common, and I invite you to consider this a little more thoroughly. It is normally learned in childhood. Listening to stories, Cree children learn that it is respectful to be quite still—even in funny or scary places—until the story is finished. Interrupting the speaker is

breaking into the sequence of events, so you wait until the end of the story. Even if it is just to laugh at something that was funny. I would hazard a claim that Cree is a listening culture. Of course, that's a big oversimplification, but there is a kernel of truth in it. I vividly recall a visit during the 60s by Eddie Diamond's mother.

Josephine Diamond

Josephine came into the house with a small child, and sat down. After several minutes of silence, she started speaking about something that interested me, so I spoke up in response. But I was interrupting her. Josephine seemed to not listen. She kept right on talking without a pause while I was talking, until she was finished. And she did not make any response to my attempt at a friendly intervention. I was embarrassed. Whatever I had said was out of place and out of mind. What remains in my mind is "listen." Or better, "be still, listen."

To act with respect is to make a personal choice.

For the Crees, respect has origins in the feelings that the first humans felt for the kindness and capability of a mythic bear who showed them how they might survive in their new world by showing how some of the animals got their living. He exemplified a respect for the animals, in showing the humans (and us) how they lived. (Louttit et. al., 2021) Here is the story:

The Bear remained with them to teach them how they could survive and live in this new place. He taught them to learn through observing what the other animals did to get their food to survive and

So, the animals were on Earth before the humans, and the humans learned from the animals.

live. He first took them to observe Amisk, the beavers. They saw how beavers lived in a sturdy house that they built from sticks, with soft wood shavings on the floor for comfort in their sleeping area. They saw how beaver families cared for their young, teaching them how to be alert for dangers while they find food for themselves, and how in the evenings they gathered in their home to talk with each other.

First Man and First Woman were impressed with how the beavers worked industriously at building their homes and their dams, using their front teeth as chisels to cut trees down, trim the branches, and pull them to their pond. They noticed how the smaller branches, that were the beavers' food, would be preserved by being stuck into the earth at the bottom of the pond, so that the water would protect this food from spoiling until it froze over when winter came . They observed that young beavers were taught to be careful to keep their food low enough in the water so their food would not be frozen in the ice, where they could not get at it. If the young were lazy in this work, they would suffer the consequences when the ice thickened. So the young learned. The beavers' efforts to provide a good home for their family with enough food to keep them when winter made travel on the land very difficult was truly impressive. First Man and First Woman respected the beavers for teaching them these skills, and for showing them how they could live well together in families. They appreciated the idea of the older and more experienced parents looking after the young until they grew into adults and were able to look after themselves and start

to raise a family of their own. First Man and First Woman thought that this would suit them, too, but they wanted to live near the water, not in it. They wanted to live on the land.

The Bear also showed First Man and First Woman how caribou lived in larger groups, without houses, grazing over larger areas for the rock lichens that were their food, and using their hooves to dig through the snow for their food in winter. Beaver families seemed to have a better way of living, although it required the effort to build and maintain a home.

First Man and First Woman realized that a bear was the only one who could live through the winter by sleeping in hibernation. But they thought it better to be able to live together and help each other, as beavers did. Bear mothers had their young with them in a den, but the fathers slept alone. While they respected Bear for his strength and wisdom, they thought beaver families were the best example for them to follow.

So, the animals were on Earth before the humans, and the humans learned from the animals. This made the relationship between people and animals very special, as they respected their teachers and kept a close bond with them.

For the Crees as for us Quakers, respect has its basis in awareness of the unity of all creatures. Survival is the primary concern; all living things have to eat. This fundamental fact of living means that being able to find food and eat it is the foremost task. The old time Cree hunters believed that there was an unseen person of some kind who was the provider of all the food animals. They let their tracks be found, but once found, they made an effort to avoid being killed. The hunters had to show close attention and should feel gratitude for finding the tracks, and then show skill and force of will in the pursuit, in order to be successful. In this complex relationship, failure brought hunger, and success brought gratitude for being given the chance to eat and survive. However, it is no simple matter to show respect toward their relationships with the animals.

Respect is shown in the many ways that their food-animals are regarded, and how they are treated. Respect is shown in hopefully

seeking their tracks, and shown in the hunter's skillful tracking and killing actions that follow. The animals might be sung to. The hunting songs sounded to me something like solo Gregorian chants, and might be thought of as prayerful. (Preston 2002, Louttit 2005) As the tracks are found and followed, the singing is sustaining and perhaps guiding the chase. When the pursuit reaches the point of making the kill, some effort is made to limit the suffering of the animal they are killing. Then the dead animal is treated with species-appropriate care in bringing it home to the family. Their care is a way of showing gratitude. When their food is cooked, a piece would be put in the fire, to show appreciation for the food they have killed. We might compare this to a very widespread custom of respectfully saying grace before a meal.

* * * * * *

We can better understand respect when we see what happens when respect is ignored or violated, and then has to be restored. I'll tell you a little story. This was brought into my view in a series of personal choices by Chief Malcolm Diamond, Isiah Salt, Marshall Campion and a visiting man, buying a pack of cigarettes at the Hudson's Bay store. Here is a respect story, writ small.

A man of Moose Factory—we will call him Fred—was a mature WW2 veteran, who decided to bring his family by canoe to Waskaganish to visit relatives. They took the option of cutting through a gutway—a canal across a peninsula. The gutway was several inches deep at high tide—saving hours that would have been required if he had chosen to go around the whole peninsula. He timed the tide wrong, and the canal lost its water while they were midway. Nothing to be done but wait for the next tide, and be plagued through the night hours by clouds of mosquitos. When they finally arrived the next morning at Waskaganish, their night's suffering was quite visible, and Fred's pride suffered.

In reaction, he drank some homebrew, and then walked to the store to get cigarettes. He went in and asked Isiah Salt, a middle-aged Cree who manned the cash counter, for the cigarettes—to be charged to his account in Moose Factory. This was unreasonable, a drunken demand

for deference. It did not impress Isiah, who went into the office and told the acting manager, Marshall Campion. Marshall was not a Cree and had little patience or respect for a drunken stranger making such a demand. He came out, and physically gave Fred the "bum's rush" out of the store. Fred was now both drunk and publicly humiliated. He went to a nearby house and phoned the chief with his complaint. But Marshall had already phoned the chief with his complaint. What could be done?

Malcolm walked to where Fred was waiting, took him into the store, and purchased a pack of cigarettes, paying with his own money. He turned to Fred, handed him the cigarettes, and said, "You are a guest here." And went out.

What he did was to exemplify respectful action. Fred had just received an unexpected gift— an act of generosity, and realized that he could have made a more reasonable purchase. Isiah could have done what Malcolm did. Marshall could have done what Malcolm did. They had each acted disrespectfully, and now all three knew this, as did the onlookers in the store. Fred's demand for deference had backfired and his humiliation was fairly permanent.

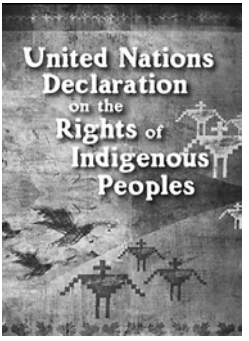
* * * * * *

This was a small, unimportant event, but serves as an exemplary case of respect being ignored and then restored. It also happens at large, important events. When a Cree delegation went to speak to Premier Robert Bourassa about the recently announced Baie James hydroelectric project, Chief Malcolm Diamond was the elder who was delegated to make the representation. He began to speak, in Cree, and was shown gross disrespect by not being listened to or even looked at by Robert Bourassa. In fact, Bourassa spoke to assistants while Malcolm was speaking to him. Malcolm recognized the impasse, and spoke to his son, who was fluent in English, saying that Billy would now have to take on the responsibility to make the Cree case. (Richardson 1975) Billy wisely chose the Canadian justice system and a very good law firm as the way to restore, or better, to create a relationship of respect. This resulted in extensive legal proceedings and the formation of a Cree political

Grand Chief Billy Diamond

organization – their own government. It was a slow and difficult process. Billy told me later that he discovered that it was one thing to successfully negotiate The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (1975), and another thing to implement it. The consequences of this loss of respect are very great: the Baie James project has the face of Bourassa's insult, and the way to restore respect relations has been very challenging. It was possible for the Quebec government—and we as settlers—to make better choices. But they didn't, and we didn't, back then. And it was not until 2007 that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted at the UN General Assembly, and it was 14 years later, in 2021, that Canada adopted federal legislation to ensure the implementation. We are still waiting for action.

But that is another story.



The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Truth

Now for the complicated part. It is documented that the Catholic missions worldwide had a motto: get the children "under the bells." There they could be taught to be civilized Christian youth, and the world would become a better place for everyone. Residential schools for Indigenous people in Canada were a part of this global mission. Being sequestered for this "religious truth" had profound consequences, including that the children did not learn parenting—what they would have experienced in their families if they had grown up within those nurturing relationships.

This was a success for the missionary effort to civilize Indigenous people, and a failure for the children who grew into adult parenthood without having adequately learned the feelings and actions that would appropriate for their situation as parents. That is a hard truth. I can recall children coming home to Waskaganish and proudly speaking English to each other, but also to parents and grandparents who could scarcely understand or reply. The children thought it a mark of their success in becoming sophisticated. And more independent of parental guidance.

And yes, the schools were usually crowded and vulnerable to diseases, and abuses. (Metatawabin 2014) Parents and relatives had little or no knowledge of how their children were, and even their deaths might not be acknowledged. This was hard truth for the children and for their families. Now it is a hard truth for the rest of us to know about. Christian residential schools did not respect the language, culture, and intimate family contacts of parents with their children. Re-integrating was sometimes difficult, slow and painful for all concerned, and some aspects, especially the emotions that mature with marriage and parenting, can take generations. Abused children, of course, sometimes become abusive parents.

On the other hand, just stereotyping the individuals' experiences and their outcomes is too easy, and too unfair. Children, Christian denominations, schools, staff, and health risks all varied, of course. Some Crees have had positive memories of their school years, sent their children there, and felt that inspite of the challenge of surviving

Truth and Reconciliation commissioners (L-R):
Chief Wilton Littlechild, Justice Murray Sinclair, Marie Wilson

abuses, their lives benefitted. (Highway 2021, Metatawabun 2014). Billy told me that he would not have been able to negotiate the James Bay Agreement if he had not had his schooling. But the bottom line is that, however they were remembered, their experience was at a great emotional cost. Billy told me that when he was asked to give an encouraging speech to a graduating class at the high school he had attended, his legs started shaking when he walked through the entryway doors.

The Pope in Canada

The problem, then, is that what underlies "civilizing" children is a profound disrespect for the culture that is being undermined, and for the emotional maturing of the children. And all the graves being uncovered. As Pope Francis has declared, it is genocide.

Our Quaker schools, and residential schools anywhere in the world, have parallel situations. Without knowledge of the situation, I will hazard that Quaker residential schools in the past and today have comparable goals and comparable deficits. The difference would be in the need to transform children into persons who are radically unlike their parents. That is a very big difference, and a hard truth.

Peoples of the Moose River Basin workshop

Beyond respect to practical actions for reconciliation

Respect can lead to collaborations and friendships. But what does this mean in terms of practical action that supports reconciliation? Since my first sojourn to Waskaganish in the summer of 1963 there have been many opportunities, and I will give as examples some of the significant collaborations I have undertaken with indigenous communities in northern Ontario and Quebec. With one exception, these have had tangible positive results. They range from providing testimony at a sentencing hearing of a shy young mother who had a psychotic breakdown while feeling too isolated in a northern railroad town, to conducting an impact assessment of hydroelectric developments on two communities and assisting a third in its relocation. Along the way I tape recorded John Blackned's stories and advised a CBC production crew producing a feature-length documentary, "The Cree of Paint Hills". I served as an expert witness on behalf of the Slate Falls Ojibwa First Nation at the

Ontario Superior Court, led a multi-year university-based study on Technology Assessment in Subarctic Ontario, co-edited a recently published "people's history" on the Peoples of the Moose River Basin, and recently advised on a book about Cree communication from prehistory to the present.

I have been fortunate to have a particularly long association with both the Society of Friends and people in northern Indigenous communities. As an academic I had access to resources not readily available to others. My examples of collaborations should not be seen as prescriptive or as actions to emulate — they serve only to give some sense of what our call to reconciliation of Quakers and Crees means in practical action. And while these examples may look like a lot, in fact they were spead over 60 years. Doing some useful collaboration every four years (on average) is not all that much. I have been fortunate to have some skills that were useful in situations that opened to me. Everyone has life experiences that develop skills that may be shared. What I am recommending is a spirit of collaboration.

I hope this presentation might open our way, as Quakers, to examining Indigenous traditions, not only as defined by a few exemplary traditional individuals, but also by middle-age people, young adults, and children, who (so they say), know little about tradition themselves. Knowing a great deal of the content of one's tradition, its stories and skills, makes the basis for becoming a great teacher. But looking across any community, we will have people who don't know many, or even any traditional stories, or who are not even fluent in their mother tongue. This begs another question. Where are the boundaries—the limits—of people we may consider part of a traditional community? And bear in mind that there are fourteen Cree communities on James Bay, and they differ in some ways from each other. They all share in a larger, regional tradition, though particular communities may be regarded as more traditional than others.

We have the comparison case of Quaker tradition. A Quaker Meeting community will also show a good deal of individual variation, including some middle-age people, young adults and children who

(they say) know little of Quaker tradition themselves. Still, we are members of a Quaker Meeting. Our tradition might be transformed into something else if many new people started to attend at about the same time and, instead of enculturating themselves into the Meeting, they developed a consensus to move radically in some other direction, beyond the boundaries of our tradition. Historically, this has happened, but it is fairly rare.

Similarly, the Cree tradition might be transformed by an influx of new people through immigration, marriage, or adoption, if these people did not become enculturated into the community.

And so, who embodies a tradition? The answer seems curiously inclusive and generalized. Both the Crees and the Quakers draw a line around their communities as enduring groups who all, each in their individuality, share in this heritage, as persons in relations with each other being defined by a shared tradition. Enculturation is the main process or experience that maintains the traditions shared by these groups.

In response to reading my almost-final draft of this talk, my friend and long-time collaborator Stan Louttit, a Moose Factory Cree, wrote:

"Was also thinking that the collaborations and the relationships you've built up is important for Cree and non-Crees to see. For that is very important and I think you'd do it even aside from current narratives of how to do reconciliation. That is just who you are. But in the context of reconciliation, your collaborations with Cree are very important in that it builds understanding and says that there are those that are not afraid of the truth and want to change processes. That non-Cree don't have to see collaborations as losing control or giving up something. But it means, like you said, respect for others, that both can find a better and more progressive way to share the land, resources and make life better.

I think the parallels you've made between Cree and Quakers is good and I like that you're observing through a lifetime, that no one group knows the "truth." And as you say, where that idea has gone wrong is the residential school system. Now, in the aftermath of that, we need to understand that they're many "truths", none better or worse

than another. But we have to be careful there too because claims to truth backed by power can and still have the potential to create extremism."

Stan's views are very perceptive, and encouraging.

Thanks, Stan,

Because we have much in common, our mandate to reconciliation is not too obscure. Respect is the baseline, and I urge you to find ways of starting collaborations and creating your own stories. Sharing concerns, supporting initiatives – and ways may open. They did for me, and I wish you well.

Well, that's my story. Thank you for listening.

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"I believe that a respectful attitude is at the core of reconciliation."