

The impact of Canadian Residential Schools on the Inuit who attended them

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To fully connect with the spirit of the Conference we recommend that you also listen to the audio recording of Jack Anawak's key-note.



In September of 1959, I was to go on a journey that would irrevocably change my life. I was going to a Residential School, in my case, a Catholic Mission School, situated in the community of Chesterfield Inlet, on the western shore of Canada's Hudson Bay.

I was excited and sad, all at the same time. Sad, because it would be the first time that I would be away from my father. Excited, because I was going to school and I was an eager to see what this was all going to be about. If I had known the impact this would have on my life, I really don't know what I would have done.

We had no power to resist; religious forces, combined with the influence exercised by the rest of the non-Inuit power elite, who had made it clear to Inuit that, if they did not send their children away, as early as five years of age, there would be serious consequences. Everybody knew who had power and who did not.

And so, I boarded the same plane as my friend Peter Irniq that year, as my peers did, from our small community of Naujat, Repulse Bay on the Arctic Circle, unsure what to expect, full of wonder and uncertainty; feeling anxious and vulnerable.

Unbeknownst to me or to our parents, the Church-run facility I was headed to had previously negotiated a long-term contract with the Government of Canada to provide

residential accommodation and educational services to Inuit. Through the absence of any monitoring system and lack of accountability, it was more or less left up to the church personnel to run things as they saw fit. This would prove to be both dangerous to life and limb and to the human spirit.

Only later on – in fact years later – did some of my peers, now much older, actually get to view this contract between the Federal Government's Dept. of Indian Affairs and the Church and noted, with great consternation, the fact that the terminology utilized within the document refers to and specifies the number of "inmate beds" that were to be provided. The fact that we innocent, little children were referred to in this manner was a strong clue to how we were seen and, sadly enough, how in many ways we were treated.

Paternalism wears many faces. Racism has many looks, tones and inferences. Zealotry and fanaticism to save and re-form people into what you think they should be carries with it the development of inappropriate and unusual attitudes and actions that were a heavy burden to bear for many young recipients.

People in positions of authority viewed us as young Inuit needing to be altered, to be changed forever and re-formed in a variety of ways. The premise that we were too different, lacking in so many ways, too unruly, in need of spiritual, social and linguistic intervention and a thorough, sustained and complete re-moulding, resulted in very questionable treatment of the children in their care.

Many of these authorities in our young lives agreed with one another that all effort should be made towards the complete re-wiring of our very being! This, of course, made for actions, policies and attitudes on their part toward us which ranged from inappropriate to bizarre.

It is well understood that children, in their formative years, require a safe haven; predictability, security, unconditional love, a sense of wellness and balance, encouragement, praise and the passing along of insight and wisdom by trusted others, further along on life's path.

As we awoke to conditions like we endured, day in and day out, year after year, there was very little to cling to that was supportive and enriching; indeed, we were caught up in a cyclone of deprivation, mental, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, de-personalization, hopelessness and helplessness, both as individuals and as a group.

Having grown up in our Inuit culture, a child's personal autonomy is recognized at an early age and the values of respect, generosity, connectedness, sharing and helping support collective progress and development are taught and deemed to be critically

important.

I and many others were ill prepared for the persistent and on-going verbal battering, strange and injurious disciplinary tactics, cold-hearted, isolating strategies and lack of individual worth and recognition that was so very apparent.

Coming from one world and being cast into another, very early in one's life, without a method for interpreting what you are enduring, without someone to advocate for you, to protect you, to stand up for you – without reference points for the abhorrent behaviour you witnessed and experienced has had long-lasting effects – that only recently have been recognized and shared by residential school children.

In many cases, the little child within is still in great pain and suffering continuing disharmony. No matter how many years have flown by, no matter how tall we became, how old we were, how much more autonomous we believe we are now compared to then – many of those who attended these educational institutions are only now coming to realize the full enormity and the long lasting and pervasive consequences.

These days there is a growing body of concern and thought on the effects of young people having to face horrific circumstances. Now, everywhere around us, we note an increased awareness of the long term impact of trauma, neglect, de-personalization, abuse and the loss of family ties, security, belonging, and self-esteem. It is common these days to see strategies and response planning developed and implemented to counteract or mitigate these harmful effects.

Early intervention is seen as key to reducing such potentially injurious side effects; supplying capable, empathetic and well-trained personnel to render both short-term and long-term assistance has become the gold standard; helping those affected develop an emotional vocabulary and reference points for that which has been endured is also viewed as extremely important in the processing, ownership, healing and survivor journey.

But this is now and our story was back then. No one could have imagined, at that time, what was going on in this Mission School, much less the wounds that would be carried through time.

We students, were awakened very early, each day, and forced to pray to an alien, all powerful force that these "God people on earth" – as our captors liked to refer to themselves and purported to represent. In being told this "almighty being" had powers beyond what anyone on earth could do, it was no wonder we children were of the belief that this God wasn't going to be much help to us if he was on *their* side.

One indignity piled on top of another; we witnessed strange and frightening acts of violence, corporal punishment we had never previously experienced and words and phrases spat out at us which were cruel, judgmental and totally demeaning.

According to them there was nothing about Inuit beliefs, language and culture that was of *any value*. We were forbidden to use our own language, aware of the penalty of being caught "*thinking like ourselves*".

We were separated by gender and rarely had an opportunity to see our own siblings and other relatives. People who, previously we would have interacted with, lived in close contact with, travelled with and loved were now denied to us. As little children we were told this was being done as we were all sexual human beings who had to be kept apart.

Any slight opportunity to form a support system was therefore prohibited. All we could do is hope to catch a glance of them when a door was opened to the other side or hope someone would overhear something about how they were doing – even though *we all lived in the same building for ten months a year!*

We were denied our possessions and individuality, forced to wear non-distinguishable clothing, non-attractive haircuts and force-fed food that was rancid, ill-prepared, hard to digest and foul-tasting while those in authority dined royally in an eating area closely situated to us.

Meanwhile, back home, our parents endured the absence of their children and tried to carry on without them, always counting the time until we would return, if the ice conditions in the late spring or early summer would permit our small plane to land.

Unaware of our plight and trusting in the wisdom of the "God People" who had taken us, on the premise of preparing us for a better life, they could not be expected to know about our level of suffering, only come to be increasingly familiar with and accepting of their own.

When we could finally be together for a short while each summer, they did not suspect and so could not ask; we on the other hand, did not have words for this pain, so could not tell.

When we did climb down the plane steps to home, we rarely, if ever, alluded to or indicated anything was wrong in our little world; our subjugation was complete; we neither believed anyone could understand nor stop what was happening to us.

We lived deeply buried within ourselves. We rarely spoke to our peers about what *we were all* going through – it was borne individually, with little commentary, reflection, insight or perspective. We reacted and reacted and reacted, rarely, if ever, initiating any

thought or responding in any particular fashion to all that rained down upon us.

While there was a consensus on our part, in the ensuing years, that the level of formal education provided to us was in itself of high quality, this did not make up for the lack of safety, security, decency, respect and the continuous blurring of boundaries that occurred.

The years have flown by. In early 1993, a small Organizing Committee, made up of Peter Irniq, Marius Tungalik and myself decided to create an opportunity to bring together as many former Mission School students as we could identify and contact. In the end, one hundred and twenty people were contacted; flights and accommodation were arranged in Chesterfield.

One by one, the small charter and scheduled aircraft landed. Eyes peered out and mixed feelings were evident. On the one hand, people were looking forward to seeing old friends and school mates after twenty-five years. On the other, however, was apprehension and fear, as they returned to the scene of a crime and all the suffering that it had entailed

We followed a brief welcome with reading aloud the list of all those former students who were no longer with us, dying from numerous acts of violence and suicide which served to illustrate the desperation and misery that many had come to know.

My spouse, who had training and certification in trauma, addiction, grief and bereavement, suicide prevention and sexual abuse was invited to attend – to help begin the long and delicate process of speaking to the assembled group and providing them with terminology, cause and effect examples and linkages between what had been experienced and how people ended up managing, acting out, repressing or medicating that substantial amount of historical trauma and pain.

Slowly, the stories began to emerge, as wounded adults found the courage to walk the short distance to one of many microphones and patiently wait in line to share a part of their lives that had been closely guarded and deeply hidden.

The isolation of each began to be shattered, as, one by one, hour after hour – for four straight days and evenings – they came to understand and appreciate the full horror and listen to the stories and perceptions of others. Learning details, often for the first time, of incidents that were strikingly similar to their own and hearing the strain in their voices, seeing the tears, the bent shoulders, the weight and the rawness of the experience, carried for so long, becoming heavier and heavier with the passing years.

Reflecting on the scope and the impact, many former students, for the first time,

were able to describe what they had gone through and come to understand and link up more recent behaviours they had developed in a desperate attempt to outrun, avoid, deny, re-interpret or minimize that horror.

One by one participants spoke of their inability to trust authority figures, disdain for organized religion, sexual identity confusion from contact with male pedophiles, non-fulfilling or shattered relationships with partners, unpredictable or uncontrollable anger, lack of ability to parent and know and set boundaries, perfectionism and inability to handle change, unreasonable fears, sleep difficulties, addiction and, in some cases, a psychological fear of speaking Inuktitut – our own language – that had resulted in our not even ensuring our own children were competent speakers.

The tears shed for the lost years and the lost child within were many; the bond strengthened as people came to realize that some of their most shameful secrets had in fact been events and incidents also experienced by others.

A deeply felt resolve developed to no longer turn away from or deny the experience, as painful as it was.

Meanwhile, through the presence of the press, elderly parents of these former residential students, who were back home, in communities within the Northwest Territories, Nunavut and Northern Quebec, were hearing on CBC Northern Radio, in searing detail, for the very first time, what their children's early years had been like.

The wave of alarm, shock and grief for what they had had to go through was palpable; when these former Mission school students began their journey back home to their communities, they were met by groups of others, coming to the local airports they passed through, to indicate they had been heard and finally understood; to show empathy for them and whisper encouragement and show solidarity.

Today, as I stand here, I am aware that the work we have to do to address this chapter in so many lives is far from over.

As difficult as it is we must persevere and face our challenges and not let those years be buried again and crawl back and live deep inside of us.

I believe there many are things that others can also do to assist us on this journey.

There is a pressing need to document and capture this history, to help others realize its significance, its scope and impact and explain so much about the people we became.

It is critically important that younger Inuit come to understand their parents' story

and what they had to go through.

It is important for historical preservation, health and wellness, health promotion purposes and for research purposes that we turn our attention to and not away from what occurred.

Many of you here listening today may have this experience in common. Others who are here may have the ability to focus funding and personnel to address these challenges and work in partnership with us to explore further what happened and why it should matter.

I challenge those who listen to me and who care about our people to take a minute to focus on what you might be able to do and invite you to consider offering your assistance.

We all have a very long way to go to recover. While some of the former students may be easy to spot as they grapple with their addictions and bear their burdens and challenges more openly, others may appear, at first glance, to have done fairly well for themselves.

I suggest to you, however, that may be a frail attempt on the part of some to "maintain the outer shell", at the expense of honesty and openness about how it really feels to be them.

I hope what I have shared may touch a nerve among some who can appreciate this pressing need to marshal resources, capture this experience, render aid and research and document it's many truths and effects.

I invite you to reflect on this and resolve to get involved in ways that you are comfortable with and promote a greater understanding, assist in reconciliation and offer training and support under the guise of the many hats that you may wear.

Thank you for listening and showing the respect and interest you have in our people.

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