

Conor: Welcome to the Circle of Knowledge podcast sponsored by the Edmonton Community Foundation. Today's episode is a previously recorded presentation featuring Wilson Bearhead, an elder and knowledge-keeper from Paul First Nation. He will be discussing reconciliation and education. Please enjoy.

Wilson: [foreign 00:00:16]. That Nakota for, "Thank you very much for coming today." [foreign 00:00:36] means, "I'm very pleased to see each and every one of you here." [foreign 00:00:42], the story that I'm going to tell. It came from my eyes, the things that I learned over the years. Some of the stories also are going to come from my heart, so you might see me tear up a little bit. I also want to talk about [foreign 00:01:06], my spirit. We were told by the old ones that these are the gifts that were given to us by creator, God. That when we come to this world, we are only here for a short time.

We are visitors to this world. They used to remind us through story. They taught us through story. Today I want to begin this presentation about a journey that I witnessed here in Edmonton in 2014. That gathering I witness was a gathering that took place in Shaw Conference Center. It was held by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and the people that came were the survivors of the Indian residential school. For three days, I sat, and I listened. I remember the first day. There was a lot of tears on the first day. I witness the tears. I also witness families standing together to come and hear the stories of long ago.

It was good to see these families stand together, because for many, standing together was never or hardly a practice. I also got to witness non-indigenous people in the audience. They sat and listened. You can see the sadness in their eyes, as well. As well, you can see the guilt and the shame that was being told that day. I also witness, including myself, that for the first time in history that we were hearing stories of the survivors of the Indian residential school for the first time.

Of course, it was very emotional. It also reminded me of my own family. My parents, my grandparents attended Indian residential schools. It reminded me because in the eyes of the survivors and the voices of the survivors, I could almost hear them speaking, speaking to the people there. Unfortunately, my parents are gone on now to the spirit world, and never got a chance to witness this historic day. The historic day that I'm speaking of is when Canada acknowledged the wrong-doings of the indigenous people of this country.

It would have been, for many who didn't make it, it would have been for those that weren't there. It would have been a very... I would guess I would say a relief for them to finally hear the stories of what they were going through. From that, I've heard many speakers, and the one that stands out for me are the ones that came to listen, the witnesses that were there. Mayor Iverson was one of them. Joe Clark was another. Former acting premier David Hancock was another. It was on the third day of this gathering that I start to see that there was a need to understand that word that everybody had been echoing in the last three days.

That word was reconciliation, because that was one word that was never heard. That was a word that was never, ever talked about. What does it mean? What does

reconciliation mean? I came to understand that the reconciliation that's been talked about today, it speaks to the history of this country. It speaks to how this country was brought to what we now know as Canada, and the events that happened thereafter. When Dave Hancock spoke on the last day, this is what he said. He said, "We need to educate all Canadians, we need to educate all Albertans about the history of this country."

"Our children need to learn about the treaties that were signed between two nations. Our children need to learn about the Indian Act system. Our children need to learn about the Indian residential schools that were created." To me, I felt in my heart a lot of pain being lifted, because it was those three days that I attended this gathering that I came to realize why we were treated the way we were. I came to realize why we lived on reservations. I came to realize why there was lack of opportunity for our people. I came to realize that the access to resources that we once had, that we didn't have the autonomy to access those resources.

Our people, I can honestly say that our people were resilient. They were strong. When I say that, I'm speaking about the interpretation of the elders and their communities. When they talked about how God or creator, or Wakan Tanka had given us so much. We had access to the resources. That is where we got our food and our clothing from, because God had said, "I am giving you, I am placing you in a place where the animals will give to you clothing, will give to you food, will give to you medicine. I'm also putting you in a place where trees will provide you with warmth, will provide you with shelter."

"And also the plants that grow on the ground. When you get sick and you need healing, they will help you on your healing journey." Indigenous people believed in the spirit of God, Wakan Tanka. They were given to use in this world. For that, they were put in a place where none of it could be accessed by them for their use, for their growth, for their opportunity. On the final day, as I sat there, I was thinking, "What am I going to do?" Because the commission chair, Murray Sinclair, spoke to the people at the end of the gather.

He said this. "Reconciliation. We have as a commission have been on a journey with you, and now we have come to that mountain. That's the farthest we can bring you, because reconciliation requires us, each and every one of us to find our way to climb that mountain of understanding, to find our way, to find that knowledge and that wisdom to guide us in the area of reconciliation." When I heard that, I started thinking, "We need to write a lot of books. We need to make books. We need to make videos." That was my excitement, because I soon realized that the indigenous people, they never used paper to learn.

They sat like this in gatherings. The reason why they did that, it was very important to build a relationship. As you sit together here today, the spirit that is beside you is what God created, and we are mankind. Yes, we are the human race. Yes, our skin, many of us, we have different color skin, but we are still God's children. The elders remind us of that. If you want to build a relationship, you must sit with the people. A young lady by the name of Kyla Serrell contacted me, and she invited me to come to the Island Public

Schools. She asked me if I wanted to come and work, because they were now looking at the responsibility given to them by their superintendent to engage in reconciliation.

I went, and you know the four Saskatchewan Publics, Sherwood Park, it's all a white community. You hardly see any indigenous people around there. I went. I went to this community, and they asked me, "What are you going to teach us?" I said, "I don't know." I said, "What do you want to learn?" We did good. We went to the leaders first. In any indigenous community, you always go to the elders first, or you go to the leadership first. I went to the principals and the vice principals, and the leads of each school. There's 41 schools in our jurisdiction. I talked with the superintendent of our jurisdiction.

I spoke with a board trustee. The reason why I did this was in my journey in meeting with the different schools and the administration and the children from kindergarten to grade 12, in that journey, there was a few questions that I wanted to know. These are some of the questions that I asked the kids in all those schools. I asked them, "How many First Nation reservations are there in Alberta?" They were excited. Some of them said, "300." The other one wanted do out the other one, so the other one said, "1,000." I said, "Oh, my God, I wish." I said, "There's 48 First Nations in the province of Alberta."

I also wanted to know, because language is so important. I said to me, "How many indigenous language are still alive in Alberta?" I just finished telling them there was 48 reservations, and they said, "1,200 languages." I said, "Really?" Then one kid said, "48." I wish. Then I said, "There's five. We have the Blackfoot language, the Cree language, the Dene, Michif, Nakota. Those are the languages that are spoken." Another question I asked them was, "Why were reservations created?" Their response was, "You didn't have any land to go to, so we give you land."

I said, "Oh." I said, "What year were they created? What year were they established?" They didn't know. Another question I asked was, "What is the size of the land base that reservations are situated on?" No one had the answer. It came to my understanding that we have lived in Canada for many years now. We have lived in Alberta for many years now. Indigenous people were taught religion. Indigenous were taught the English language. Indigenous people were taught who the first prime minister of this country was. Indigenous people were taught that Alberta was established in 1905.

Indigenous people were taught that the oil and gas production started in 1910, and yet there was nothing being taught about indigenous people. Although we were living in the same community. Although we're living in the same area. Why is that? Why is that that the first people of this country were never spoken of? Nobody asks who was the first chief? Nobody ask what were the environmental laws of First Nations people? What were the traditional practices of adoption? What were the seven rights that were given to indigenous people? What were the seven teachings that were taught to the indigenous children prior to the coming of the Europeans?

Once I asked all those questions, I felt comfortable in, "And now what am I going to do?" Some of the schools said, "Wilson, you come in, and we got a whole bunch of books in the library. Pick one, and go to every classroom, and read about it." I said, "That's not

going to happen, because we, the indigenous people, we have our own stories. We have our own relationship. The stories that were told to us when we were just walking, just beginning to walk were the stories that motivated us to understand."

Because we were considered non-Christian, we were considered savages and heathens, but yet we looked after Canada, or Turtle Island, for over 30,000 years. We had no pollution. We had no courtrooms. We didn't need any police because the old ones, the grandmothers, they taught us the seven teachings of love, kindness, respect, courage, and bravery, honesty, and truth. Through that relationship, and the respect given to the words and the wisdom of the old people, that is all we needed, because those words were the ones that were given to us by Wakan Tanka, or God. For that reason, we truly believed the teachings that we were receiving in our early years.

Also when I sat at that gathering on the third day, because my parents had gone to a residential school, I started having tears coming to my eyes. That day, all the pieces came together, like that. On that day, the pieces that came together formed a ball for me, because now I can see what had happened to the indigenous people. I can honestly see it, like a crystal ball. It had brought tears to my eyes, because for many years... Because my parents didn't love me, because my parents didn't provide me with kindness and respect.

For those reasons, I had no use for them. Right there on that day I thought to myself, "If they had only taken the time to teach us," because they brought nine of us to this world, and every one of us were abused physically by our parents. Every one of us were abused mentally by our parents. Every one us were abused emotionally by our parents. Every one of us were abused spirituality by our parents. Now with all that abuse, how do you expect to function holistically? How can you see the world? How can you see the importance of education if you are broken?

I tell you, it's very, very difficult to be able to envision in your mind and in your heart what is your future. I thought about that. I also thought about my grandmother. Annie Bearhead was her name. My grandmother was very strong and very wise, but she used to talk about... Some nights I would hear her cry. She would break down and cry, because she, too, was one of those mothers that wait for her children to get off the train from the residential school. When the train stopped, they never got off. She, too, didn't have the answer of what happened? Where were they buried?

She didn't get those answers. Of course, her heart was broken. Her spirit was broken, and she would cry. Sometimes she would cry in Nakota. She would say this. [foreign 00:25:27]. She'd say angry words like, "The white people stole our land." [foreign 00:25:35]. "They stole our children." [foreign 00:25:43]. "How come they don't want to listen to our words and our stories? Because God told us to be kind and respectful and friendly." We did not receive that. They treat us like children. [foreign 00:26:15]. "Yes, they treat us like children, but children were meant to be respected. Children were meant to be cared for, and they don't treat us like that. No matter how old we are, no matter how much wisdom we have, we are still treated like children."

I remember that quite clear. Also on that day, I heard other people talk about reconciliation. Where does it begin? How does it begin? The old people remind us, if you want to find answers, if you're looking for guidance, God gave us a heart, God gave us a mind, and when our heart and mind connects, our spirit lights up within us. We're given a voice. A voice that can communicate with those that are willing to listen. That voice is very powerful, because kind words that come out of that voice, come out of that mouth, the old people tell us that the words of kindness are good medicine for the ears and the heart.

It will take us on a journey, a journey that will begin by talking to one another. I just briefly, I only got a few minutes. I just briefly want to talk about when I went to those schools. One of the things I talk to kids was that your ancestors didn't want to learn how to sing like indigenous people. I remember when I came into Edmonton in 1973. As I walked down the street, people would make that sound. I don't know if any of you heard it, but it goes like this. Or they put two feathers up like this, and they'd dance around.

I thought, "I wonder what tribe they're from." I would see that, and then I thought to myself, "Maybe they need to learn," because the story of the drum, the story of song and dance is a spiritual relationship that God gave us in this world that we came to visit. You use the song and dance for healing. Because of that spiritual connection, men and women learn the traditions of song. They learned the importance of drum. The children were taught. When I went to these schools, I taught them how to sing.

I said, "I'm going to use your English words against you. I'm going to let you say, 'Hey. Ho. Ha.'" They look at me, "Hey, ho, ha?" I said, "Yeah. Then drag it." They go, "Hey, hey, hey, hey, ho, ho, ha, ha. Hey, hey, hey, hey, ho, ho, ha." These kids learned how to sing. 200 years, nobody wanted to learn, and these kids learned in less than one minute how to sing an indigenous song. One of the things that I did was teach them about dance and teach them about song, because that was the intention of the drum that God give us, creator gave us, was to bring spirits together, the spirit that is within us. All of us.

The sound of the drum is mutual, but it's kind to all of us. I do know that other people across the world have that drum. I've gone and sang and drummed with my brothers from Africa. I've gone and sang and drummed with my brothers from Japan, and from China. I have drummed with them, and I've heard the story of their drum, where it came from. Education and reconciliation go hand-in-hand. Indigenous people long ago, before the Europeans came, [foreign 00:31:33] is education. [foreign 00:31:38], we speak of learning of education. [foreign 00:31:46] is to believe in education.

Education is healing. The more we learn, we more we will heal. Stories that are told are meant to guide us, to give us a direction, because the creator gave us many things to point us in a right direction. None of us should be lost, because we already know which direction to go. Listening opens our heart. The old people tell us the ears are the ones that feed your heart, so you could understand love and compassion. Our eyes are meant to educate our mind. In order to understand balance of the spirit, you got to be able to use a mind and the heart as one. Then you will find balance.

In closing, I want to read a poem. The children in Elk Island have come a long ways in the last three years. This one young boy, he's grade three. He shared a poem with me, and it goes like this. "To those who did right, we did wrong. To those who helped, we disrespected. The wounds of others have not yet healed. We still not have chosen a better path. They taught us most of what we know now, and instead of thanking them, we overpowered them. Apologies are not enough for the horrible, the terrible things that we did, but friendship is still possible."

"We must trust each other to come together. Then there will be growth, kindness, a most importantly, peace for all people everywhere." The young man that wrote this poem, his name is Finn Smith. Two years ago, these children knew nothing of the things I just spoke of. Nothing. It is very irresponsible for governments or others to say to them, to describe reconciliation. It's only when you feed their minds, it's only when you fill their hearts that they will understand what that means.

Lucky for me, I've been fortunate to witness all that in the children that I work with. We need allies to help us on our journey to healing. We need support. We need someone to stand with us. The days when our parents and their parents and their parents, when a child came into this world, he was never alone. His parents stood in front of him to show him a way. They stood beside him to make him understand love, and they stood behind him to encourage, and I guess to build a community. Those are the things and those are the practices that we must continue.

I can open for question. Carlo's got a question.

Carlo: Okay, I'm just going to bring the microphone to you so everyone else can hear.

Georgina: Hi, my name is Georgina Maxwell. I just came to Canada two years ago, and I start learning about indigenous people, and about the residential schools five months ago. When I start reading about what happened in the residential schools, really broke my heart. Really, I think your community is very strong, and have a really big heart, good heart, really strong. After all those damage, is no easy decide close the cycle and start over again. I want congratulate you or your community for that big heart, for that very strong spirit. I wish I had the same spirit you guys have.

I have a question. How the indigenous people preserve the culture to the new generations? Because the new generations now, they had to be more in the Canadian society. They come to school, and they have... A lot of kids have a life outside the communities. What actions are you taking to preserve your roots, your culture? The second question, what thing we can do as a society to support you, to support your actions, and your culture through reconciliation? Thank you.

Wilson: Thank you. Those are good questions. I think when the ban that was lifted in the '60s, early '60s where indigenous people weren't allowed to leave the reservation, the past system. When that was lifted, and then also in 1965, the government of Canada looked at lifting the ban on cultural practices is when our elders immediately went to work. They started telling the stories again. You can abuse a mind, you can abuse a heart, but

it's very difficult to break the spirit, because creator has given us many tools. God has given us many tools to rebuild the mind and the heart and the body.

Stories were retold. The fire was relit, and children started to come to the fire to learn. I find that a lot of children are coming to that fire. As far as the second question, the history talks about a lot of injustice. One of the things that I would encourage is learn about a social injustice in your area, and be a part of it. Thank you.

Elizabeth: Hi. My name is Elizabeth. I work with indigenous youth as a psychotherapist. I find that some of the youth are quite resistant to looking to their heritage and looking to their spiritual practices as healing. My position is that I don't want to impose a Eurocentric view or practice of spirituality on me, because that was the history. What would you say to encourage these youth toward indigenous healing and indigenous knowledge?

Wilson: I find that one of the things that works is acknowledging and looking at the child's spirit that's within. Over the years, I have worked with kids in foster care. Over the years, I have worked in federal penitentiaries with young men who are in prison, and working with kids in foster care. Many of them, I'm invited to come and sit with a children that wouldn't listen to a psychologist, or a teacher, or a doctor, or a social worker, whatever it is. They would invite me to come and be with them. Sometimes I'd spend an hour, sometimes I'd spend two hours with them, and sometimes they wouldn't even look at me or talk to me.

I'd sit and talk, tell stories. I remember this one kid, I spent an hour with this one boy. This boy was broken. He had attempted suicide three times. He didn't want any help from anybody, so I spent an hour with him. After I was done, the social worker, the psychologist asked me if I wanted to make another appointment with him. I said, "That's not up to me. That is his responsibility. It is up to him." They asked him, and he nodded his head, and he said, "Yes." Immediately I said, "I'm going to see you two days from now." I went to the place to pick him up, because I said, "I want you to be able to come to my ethical space."

I picked him up in my vehicle. He got into the car. He had a big smile on his face. He said this. "I apologize for my behavior." He said, "But psychologists, social workers, counselor, I do not trust." Soon as I start talking, they write stuff down on paper, and they use that to judge me." He said, "I notice that you didn't write anything down on paper." We build that trust that day, and he became a good friend of mine. He's doing well. I think that's all the time we have.

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