

Returning To Spirit: Workshops for First Nations and Religious: process nurtures conditions for healing

"No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."
--Albert Einstein

Einstein's insight took on fresh meaning for me as a participant in "Returning to Spirit," a courageous and life-enhancing approach for facing into the impasse surrounding the troubled legacy of the residential school system. This session took place in March in Winnipeg and was attended by 76 persons from Nunavut, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba.

"Returning to Spirit" was initiated and developed by Marc Pizandawatc, an Algonquin from Kitiganzibi First Nation, and Ann Thompson, a Sister of St. Anne from B.C. The two met during a workshop that Pizandawatc was conducting in Yellow knife, and from that conversation "Returning to Spirit" was born. Five years later, the workshops have enabled hundreds of church and First Nations persons to reclaim and reconstitute their personal and communal lives.

As the name implies, "Returning to Spirit" is not about superficial change or "cheap grace," but is a path of transformation. It is a way for persons to return to deep spirit, the precious being each of us is before pain and trauma sealed off full access to that sacred source. In the case of those participating in "Returning to Spirit," the identified trauma is the residential school experience.

It is indisputable that persons who went to residential schools suffered loss of language and culture. It has become clear that many were also physically and sexually abused. That dark chapter of Canadian ecclesiastical and civil history needs to be acknowledged and repented, not in a way that obfuscates what took place, but in a way that enables persons to move through it and beyond it. At the same time, religious women and men who taught and administered those schools became caught in their own pain, confusion and anger when reports of abuse by some of their members began to surface.

"Returning to Spirit" gives everyone, no matter what their starting point, a way through to reconciliation and healing. In one sense the method of "Returning to Spirit" is deceptively simple and is carried out in two phases.

In Phase One, aboriginal and church persons meet separately to go through the identical week-long process. During this week, participants develop a common language and a common frame of reference for addressing their lives and their different perspectives on the same history. We become aware of how each of us creates stories around painful life events in which I am right and the other is wrong. There is an illusory protection in such a story, and I often hold on to it in the vain hope that the past will change and I will be vindicated.

As Pizandawac explains, "People are stuck in a particular conversation. First Nations have one conversation and the church has a totally different conversation ... each trying to prove to the other who is right and the result is always the same: more anger, more frustration, more pain, and the vicious cycle continues. Reconciliation is about having the same conversation. First Nations need the church for completion and the church needs First Nations for completion." Each person takes the necessary steps to accept and "complete" the past, (accept that it is past, that it can never be different from what it was.) This acceptance is not of what happened, but accepting that it happened in the past, it is over, and the person is not willing to carry it into the future.

In Phase Two, the First Nations and faith community members come together to have new conversations, meeting separately for two days and then together for three days. The work of the days apart is to review the learning of Phase One, and to prepare what we want and need to say to one another clearly, honestly and kindly in the days ahead. People have the opportunity to speak and listen to one another, not as roles or antagonists, but as persons.

The goal of Phase Two is reconciliation. Participants are reminded that forgiveness has nothing to do with the other person and everything to do with me. By not forgiving, I stay stuck and pass on my "stuckness." I am caught in "the story," in a monologue of no possibility, and all I can do is reproduce more of the same. Through the process, workshop participants create the conditions in which they can come together beyond differences and histories to experience communal reconciliation. In the group, a new tangible aliveness rises as people speak and listen to the suffering and joys of the individual in front of them. The experience of being part of such a circle of forgiveness and compassion is for many participants an experience of a viable church, where everyone is valued, new life is an ever-present possibility, and we move forward together into a future that is qualitatively different from the past. We learn in new ways how to live from the depth of spirit.

Through this process of "Returning to Spirit," I was able to observe and experience first-hand the kind of shift Einstein envisaged, as church representatives and First Nations persons met one another on new ground, from a new consciousness, and created the conditions that make possible new conversations and new futures together. This is a profound sign of hope in the present world, and opens wide the door to the possibilities of a different future together.

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