From Reconciliation to ReconciliAction

By Nancy Dyson and Dan Rubenstein

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created in 2010 through a legal settlement between Residential Schools Survivors, the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit representatives and the parties responsible for the creation and operation of the schools, the federal government, and the churches. The TRC's mandate was to inform all Canadians about what had happened within residential schools. The Commission documented the accounts given by Survivors, their families, communities, and anyone else personal affected by the residential schools, including First Nations, Inuit and Metis former students, the churches, former school employees, government officials and other Canadians.[1]

Then the TRC tabled its reports in June of 2015, I rode my bike to a hotel in downtown Ottawa where the Survivors, Indigenous leaders, the federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) had gathered. When I walked into the lobby of the hotel and looked around me, I was overcome by the gravitas of the assembly and the Survivors' raw grief. My wife, Nancy Dyson, and I had been hired as childcare workers at St. Michael's Indian Residential School in Alert Bay, British Columbia in 1970. We were newly married and newly arrived in Canada. What we witnessed shocked us.

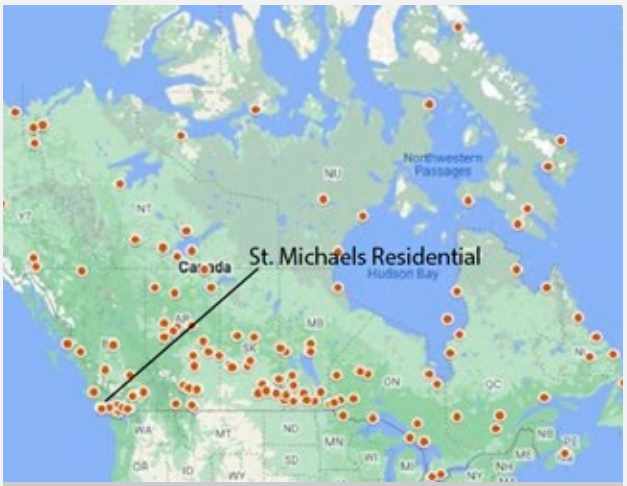

Figure 1. *Canada's Residential Schools - St. Michaels*

Among the Survivors that summer day in Ottawa, memories, and images from the four months I spent at St. Michael's washed over me. The sad and sullen faces of the children. Their wariness as I tried to get to talk to them. Children viciously strapped for minor misdeeds. The almost-lifeless body of a ten-year-old Norman on a beach, the boy who had slipped down to the ocean one night and walked into the sea, his pockets full of rocks. I heard the words the older staff used to describe the children. 'Heathen' who needed to be Christianized and civilized. 'Wild' children who needed discipline, discipline, and more discipline.

[1] Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada - NCTR.

By chance, I shared an elevator with Ry Moran, who was then the Director of NCTR. I blurted out. “I was there. I saw what happened in a residential school. My wife and I tried to protest. I was fired when a delegation from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs visited St. Michael’s and I told them the school was an instrument of cultural genocide.” Ry asked me to tell my story and to ask my wife to tell hers, too. He said it was important to share our account, to add credence to the Truth told by Survivors.

I was deeply moved and promised I would tell my story. I cycled home and shared with my wife my vow to write an account of what I had witnessed. She vowed to write her account, too. For fifty years, we had been silent but now we felt compelled to offer an apology, not for anything we had done but for what we had not done, no longer advocating for the children after we left Alert Bay.

The St. Michael’s (Duck Lake) Indian Residential School opened in 1894 and closed in 1996. It was operated by the Roman Catholic Church (Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus, Sisters of the Presentation of Mary, and Oblate Indian-Eskimo Council) until 1982 when the Duck Lake residence came under the control of the Saskatoon District Chiefs. The school was located a half a mile (.8 kms) from the Town of Duck Lake, facing the lake (Treaty 6).

We wanted to find the children we remembered from St. Michael’s. I called Reconciliation Canada in Vancouver and described what we had seen. I started to cry as I recounted how the children were subjected to humiliation, abuse and neglect. The receptionist was kind and empathetic. She told me that Chief Doctor Robert Joseph, the founder and Ambassador of Reconciliation Canada, would want to speak with me. “He’ll call you later tonight,” she promised.

A few hours later, the phone rang. The caller ID showed a phone number in Vancouver. Chief Joseph listened to my story without interruption. Then he comforted me by saying that any small acts of kindness I gave to the boys may have sustained them during their darkest moments.

I asked about children I remembered, saying their names one by one. There was a pause before he told me the stark truth. Most of the children I had known had died early deaths from alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, violence and suicide. This was the tragic legacy of the residential schools.

He said that he himself had been sent to St. Michael’s at the age of five. That was in the 1950’s. When he left the school at the age of sixteen, he said he was a broken human being. He was full of anger and lashed out at others. He fell into addictions. The white world had no place for him. He had lost the connection to his family and village, to Indigenous language, culture and spirituality. Remarkably, he found the strength to heal himself. He gathered his family around him and became a wise elder, full of grace and

kindness. His journey is recorded in Namwayut which concludes with a call to Reconciliation: [2]

> "Reconciliation can be a spiritual covenant. Reconciliation has to have an element of spiritual co-operation and commitment so that it's binding, and so that it invokes the best in all of us. We all belong here. And so let this be our covenant. Let us call in our highest selves, our human consciousness, in wanting something bigger, better for all of us. Let us remember that in spite of what we have done to ourselves, we belong and we are loved…
>
> Let us align people together, even if it's for a second, or a moment, or an hour, or a day, and connect out energies, our hearts and our minds, our souls.
>
> Let us – every faith, every colour, every creed- recognize our common humanity. Let us accept the truth that we are all one."

Chief Joseph encouraged us to tell our story. We promised that we would. Little did we know how long and difficult that journey would be. Nor how important and meaningful that journey would become.

We read the TRC reports in their entirety. We were shocked and saddened to learn that the abuses we had witnessed at St. Michael's were pervasive in residential schools across the country, from schools in the east to the west and to the north. One hundred and thirty-two residential schools had existed in Canada over a span of 150 years. The last so-called 'school' had only closed in 1996. 150,000 Indigenous children had been forced into residential schools. Some children never left. Mortality rates were high among the Indigenous children in the care of the church-run residential schools. Others children survived but were broken by the abuses of the schools. Like Chief Joseph, they were unable to take a place in the white world and they were cut off from Indigenous culture, tradition and language.

In order to put our story into context, I interviewed leaders among the churches committed to Reconciliation. I also contacted groups dedicated to supporting Survivors. Chief Joseph encouraged us along the way, with frequent phone calls and words of support.

Our book, *St Michael's Residential School: Lament & Legacy*,[3] was published in 2021 by Ronsdale Press, six years after I promised Ry Moran that I would tell my story. There were many reasons for the delay, some personal and some less so, like the pandemic. In Part 1 of the book, Nancy describes what happened during our four months at the residential school and our failed attempts to change the way they children were treated. Interspersed among the pages of her narrative are excerpts from the TRC reports which demonstrate that our experience was not unique, that what we saw was pervasive in residential schools. In Part 2, I probe the intentions of the churches and the Federal Government in establishing residential schools.

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[2] Namwayut.

[3] Dan Rubenstein & Nancy Dyson – Published Authors (rubenstein-dyson.com).

I also explore what ordinary Canadians knew about residential schools. And lastly, I talk about voices of protest that arose from time to time.

St Michael's Residential School: Lament & Legacy was released just as news was breaking about the discovery of 215 unmarked graves outside the former Kamloops Residential School in British Columbia. Canadians were shocked. How could this have happened in a Canada, a county known for its beneficence? A country whose citizens are renowned for their excessive courtesy? Nancy and I were saddened by the news but we were not shocked. We knew only too well the vulnerability of children within the walls of a residential school.

While many people realized that they needed to reassess their understanding of Canada's history, others stubbornly held on to their colonialist views.

While we had delved into the history of Canada's treatment of Indigenous people, some people criticized our interpretation. Over and over again, we heard comments defending what the governments and churches had done.

"The Indians need to get over it."

We answered, "I think they'd like to get over it. How do you get over trauma, intergenerational trauma?"

"The Indians need to accept the fact that they were conquered. We won, they lost."

We answered, the Indigenous people of Canada weren't conquered. They were generally willing to share their land and other resources. That's why there were treaties, agreements that were generally broken.

"The residential schools weren't all that bad. Look at the British boarding schools. Children weren't pampered there either."

We shared what we had heard from a Survivor, "I would have been happy to be transferred to a British boarding school." British children were not forcibly removed from their families. They were not subjected to forced assimilation.

"The Indians wanted their children to go to residential schools. The kids got a free education. They were fed and clothes. No cost to the parents."

In fact, for many decades, Indigenous families faced penalties and even incarceration if they failed to send their children to residential schools.

"I've heard of people who went through residential schools and. They turned out just fine. They're grateful for the education they received. They're leaders now"

We countered, "Resilient people have the ability to remain strong in the face of adversity. That doesn't excuse what happened to them. The residential schools were malevolent institutions. Victor Frankl wrote *The Search Meaning* in a concentration camp but that doesn't mean the camp should have existed.

People inevitably concluded by saying, "You can't judge people today for the mistakes of the past. You have to consider historical context. Residential schools were designed with good intentions."

Good intentions? We replied. Over 150,000 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families, for no other reason other than the fact that they were Indigenous. In the history of Canada, no other people were treated that way, forcibly separated from their children for seven generations.

Frequently we heard people say, "I had no idea what was happening to Indigenous children. I didn't even know that residential schools existed." We believed them but we were troubled by the fact that must have been thousands of people who did know about the residential schools and that Indigenous children were forcibly separated from their families, and communities.

What about the thousands of Canadians who worked in Residential Schools? What about employees in the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs? Religious leaders and congregations in the Catholic, United and Anglican Churches, all of whom ran residential schools? What about the RCMP who rounded up Indigenous children, forcibly removing them from their families? What about the pilots and flight attendants who flew the frightened children to distant residential schools? And what about the Canadians living in proximity to any of the 132 schools? All these thousands of Canadians saw, or knew about, the forced separation. And it was this forced separation that enabled the subsequent abuse.

We classified all of the arguments listed above as Residential School Denial. We continued to staunchly defend our view that the schools were never about education. They were an instrument of forced assimilation, part of a pervasive, malevolent Residential School System whose only goal was to separate Indigenous children from their families, identity, culture and roots. If the intent had ever been education, not cultural genocide, the Churches and the Federal Government could have sent teachers to teach in remote communities. The argument that Indigenous children needed to attend a residential school to be educated also ignored the fact that they were being educated by Indigenous elder, learning their culture, traditions, language and spirituality. To us, it is apparent that the welfare of Indigenous children was never an overarching priority of the Churches or the Federal Government.

In June of 2021, with the news of unmarked graves outside schools appeared in newspapers, we sensed the concern of the country. Many Canadians struggled to align their concept of Canada's beneficence with the facts as they learned that thousands of children died in residential schools, alone, dying without dignity, without ceremony or spiritual observances. Their families were often not told of their children's deaths and lived out their lives waiting for them to return.

Many friends, neighbors and former colleagues contacted us. They read our story. Shaken and troubled, they said they were re-examining their understanding of Canada's history. Others held firmly to their denial of the tragic legacy of residential schools.

Nancy wrote an opinion piece that was published by the Globe and Mail on June 4, 2021.

We witnessed the cruelty of residential schools, as child-care workers. We will not remain silent about what we saw.

Fifty years ago, my husband, Dan Rubenstein, and I were newcomers to Canada. We had visited Expo 67 and were impressed by the images of Canada as a multicultural and welcoming society. In 1970, we decided to live in Canada until the polarization rampant in the U.S. subsided. We found jobs as childcare workers at St. Michael's Indian Residential School in Alert Bay, B.C.

Our belief that Canada was a just and compassionate country was up-ended by what we witnessed inside the walls of the residence. On our first day, the Matron led us to a subbasement where four children were delivered to her care by an Indian agent. The little children stood mute and trembling while the Matron cut away their clothes and their hair and threw them into the blazing orange firebox in the boiler. Dan protested, "Is this necessary?" And the matron answered unflinchingly, "Lice."

Every morning Dan went to awake the twenty-five little boys in his care, children as young as 5 years of age. The dorm room, filled with rows of impersonal metal beds, reeked of urine as most, if not all of the boys, wet their beds. The little children's unhappiness was palpable. The children were treated harshly. Older staff told us discipline and consistency were essential; there was no discussion about love or respect. We saw students who were cruel to other students. Two boys tried to hang our puppy. Our belief that cruelty begets cruelty was confirmed. We tried to protest within the school but were told we were naïve. We joined a community effort to send a petition to Indian and Northern Affairs asking for a delegation to visit Alert Bay. (The federal government had assumed control of residential schools across Canada in 1969, just one year before.) We felt the Department should see first-hand what was happening. A delegation arrived in December. When Dan told them that the school was an instrument of cultural genocide, he was fired.

Dan and I left the school and moved to a neighboring island. From time to time, we saw the children from St. Michael's at the public school. The administrator agreed to our having two of the little boys visit us in our cabin in Sointula. But we stopped advocating for the children. When the school was closed a few years later, we thought the trauma was ending. I lament my silence. Dan laments his silence, too.

It was until 2015, when the TRC tabled its reports, that memories of St. Michael's resurfaced and I was overcome with emotion and guilt for not telling my story. Dan shared an elevator with Ry Moran and promised to tell the story of what we had witnessed. Friends and acquaintances challenged our views. "People did what they thought was right, in their day," they said. "It wasn't all that bad. Look at British boarding schools." And many insisted that

the government and the churches had acted out of kindness and good intentions.

I was there. I know better. The Survivors' stories speak the Truth. We read the TRC reports in their entirety and learned that what we witnessed at St. Michael's occurred across the country. Residential schools were an intentional assault on Indigenous people and their families. Separating children from families led to the loss of identity, language, spirituality and culture. The residential schools were never about education. They were always about something more – the eradication of Indigenous people as a distinct, separate group of people.

The tragic discovery of the unmarked graves at the Kamloops Residential School happened to coincide with the publication of our story, St. Michael's Residential School: Lament and Legacy. For any Canadian who denies that residential schools had a tragic impact on Indigenous children and their families and that the impact continues to this day, I urge them to read the accounts by Survivors and those of us who found ourselves in a malevolent institution where love and kindness rarely survived.

I join people across Canada, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who grieve for the 215 children buried in unmarked graves at the Kamloops Residential School. And I stand in awe of survivors and intergenerational survivors who promote hope and love as they lead our country towards justice and Reconciliation.

Nancy Dyson and Dan Rubenstein are the authors of St. Michael's Residential School: Lament & Legacy (Ronsdale Press, June 2021. Royalties will be donated to the Indian Residential School Survivors Society and other support groups."[4]

In the aftermath of this article and the release of our book, we were interviewed by national television and radio stations, including a Mohawk station and an Anishinaabe program. We were asked to address civic groups and diverse faith groups--Christian, Unitarian, Jewish…

With the shift in public perception of Canada's colonial role and the actions of the governments and churches, we felt hopeful. Many people were actively committing themselves to Reconciliation, a shared journey to develop mutually respectful and equitable relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. It was notable that land acknowledgements were made at the beginning of public gatherings.

But we fear that indifference is eroding that commitment to Reconciliation. We are all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, bombarded by threats from climate change to war to the rise of authoritarian leaders, environmental disaster, the pandemic, financial crises…In the midst of all that, we fear a backlash, as governments recognize the rightful claims of First Nations to land and resources.

[4] Opinion: We witnessed the cruelty of residential schools as child-care workers. We will not remain silent about what we saw - The Globe and Mail

When we feel discouraged, we reach out to Chief Joseph who reminds we need to be patient, that Reconciliation will not occur in our generation. Perhaps, he tells us, it will not even in our children's generation. Perhaps our grandchildren will witness it during their lifetimes. But perhaps it will occur during our great-grandchildren's generation. Meanwhile, Reconciliation moves forward through thousands of conversations among ordinary Canadians in gatherings across the country, not solely by the apologies of government or grand gestures. Reconciliation, he tells us, will be sustained when it becomes a core value within our national consciousness.

Nancy and I continue to talk with people, in person and on zoom, always responding to requests for interviews. We have talked to students and in seniors in a retirement residence.

I have enrolled in an Ojibway language class in the Wabano Centre, a local Indigenous health and wellness centre, where I am welcomed by the teacher and Indigenous class-mates. In most Indigenous languages, 70% of the lexicon consists of verbs, 30% of nouns. In contrast, in English and other Indo-European languages, 70% of the words are nouns, 30% verbs. I have learned that verbs in Ojibway can become nouns.

Maybe the reserve is true in English. Maybe Reconciliation can become "ReconciliAction," a noun becoming a verb, a hope becoming a reality.

Nancy Dyson and Dan Rubenstein
Authors of St. Michael's Residential School: Lament & Legacy (Ronsdale Press, 2021).

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nancy Dyson and Dan Rubenstein

In retirement, Dan Rubenstein and Nancy Dyson achieved their shared dream of becoming published writers. Previously, Dan was an auditor with the Office of the Auditor General of Canada and Nancy was an Early Childhood Educator.

In *St. Michael's Residential School: Lament & Legacy* (Ronsdale, 2021), Dan and Nancy recall four months they spent as childcare workers at an Indian residential school and they explore the historical arc of residential schools, contrasting Canada's history with its current commitment to Reconciliation.

Their first book, *Railroad of Courage*, published in 2017 by Ronsdale Press, is the story of twelve-year-old Rebecca, a runaway slave who makes her way north to Canada. The story has proven to be an evocative tool for parents and teachers to talk with young readers about the legacy of slavery. The authors have also completed a third novel, a story about two Canadian volunteers who become involved with the Lenca resistance movement in Honduras.

Dan and Nancy live in Ottawa, Canada's capital, but they enjoy international travel and frequent trips to spend time with their three adult children and eight grandchildren. Dan also volunteers on international projects with Catalyste. a Canadian non-profit organization which works with global partners to promote locally-driven, inclusive and sustainable development. On his assignments in Central and South America, Dan enjoys the opportunity to exercise and improve his Spanish language skills.