

Reflection on the Walk for Reconciliation

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There was a lot of excitement in our household last Sunday morning – much of it stemming from the challenge of getting everyone out of bed and onto the 7 a.m. bus to Vancouver. Once we successfully arrived at the Cathedral, however, there was the excitement of watching it fill, pew by pew. By the time the organ struck up the processional, the church was filled to bursting and there were people standing in the back. There's nothing more soul-stirring than being overcrowded in a church full of people, all raising lusty voices to sing one of the old favourites.

The processional was the first in the Blue Book, and as we sang Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, the familiar melody filled me with a sense of gladness, history, and belonging. That feeling, however, didn't last long. Tears came to my eyes as it hit me that this hymn, along with various other Anglican songs and traditions, would likely elicit a very different reaction from most residential school survivors. The memories evoked would not be of pride, but of fear. Not of happiness, but of deep sorrow. Not of belonging, but of isolation and loneliness.

All those feelings, in fact, that a church is supposed to help counter, we created. The hymns and prayers that you and I love so much formed the soundtrack to these children's own personal nightmares.

Our family struck up a conversation with a First Nations rancher down from Williams Lake. She spoke of leaving home when she was seven. Of being separated from her brothers, who were sent to another school. Of the beatings. Of whispering into her pillow at night, the only time she could speak her native tongue without punishment. And how, when the junior girls would cry at night because they were so hungry, all of them would start to cry. The senior girls tried to sneak hard crusts of bread into the dorms to give to the little ones. The rancher cried again as she showed us how they would tuck the scraps under their jackets, and later soak them in water to make them more edible for the little girls.

Anything that could have given these children comfort or helped them make any sense of their experience was taken away from them. Their parents, their spiritual beliefs, and their language were stripped away, to a point where they could never be fully returned. These children were created whole, and our church left them fractured.

So how do all of us respond to that truth? We want to right past wrongs, but how? How can we ask the survivors and their children to trust the church again? Sometimes we get overwhelmed and frustrated by this question and lash out, saying "we've said sorry, why can't we just move on?"

I think some people stayed away from the Walk because they were asking themselves that very question. And that's too bad. Because, after thinking all these

despairing thoughts during the processional hymn, the excitement mounted again as we walked down Georgia to join the massive crowd. Bernice King's speech was immensely powerful. It talked about everyone, of every colour and creed, reaching across our pain and feeding each other. Her speech was not about finger pointing, but about finding and celebrating our common humanity. Chief Bobby Joe and the other native speakers I heard did not once talk about politics or blame. But what they did say, over and over again, was 'thank you.' Thank you for listening. Thank you for caring. Thank you.

There are moments in life during which you feel your heart grow many sizes. I think most people at the Walk went home with a big happy, achy feeling in their chest. I was reminded of Laurel's sermon on the Prodigal Son, and how the pride and righteousness of the eldest son kept him away from the party celebrating his brother's homecoming. I think many of us can relate to that eldest son. Often we use our feelings of 'rightness' to build fences, not bridges. But we sure run the risk of missing a lot of parties. I'm so glad I didn't miss the one last Sunday.