

The Honourable Mary Jane McCallum
Senator – Manitoba



L'honorable Mary Jane McCallum
Sénatrice – Manitoba

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Open Letter in Response to Senator Beyak:

The Canada I have known is not the Canada you know. The Canada that many people speak about and look up to is a country of freedom, of inclusiveness, of justice, and of equality. These are core democratic values that have not always been fully representative of my Canada. I have worked for decades – and continue to do so today – to challenge this reality that has been carefully fashioned over time by many institutions and by many people. The Canada I grew up with was one of marginalization, injustice, inequality, vulnerability, and without Voice.

I have decided to share parts of my story as a residential school inmate of eleven years to raise awareness to Canadian citizens about my experiences - experiences that were beyond my influence and out of my control. This is not about blaming or shaming. Rather, I simply ask for compassion and for restraint from the judgment that has typically come swiftly and harshly. My colleague and fellow Senator, Senator Lynn Beyak, recently took it upon herself to make controversial statements, on multiple occasions, which have resulted in inflamed attitudes against Indigenous citizens. As I had stated in a letter to Senator Beyak, “We are not public property (to be put) on public display.” There are those that give themselves the liberty and privilege to act as our Voice, opening our wounds at will. Possibly they see us as less-than; unable to be our own representatives. These very people then deny or discount our own deep, personal stories. I am disappointed that the catalyst of this recent incident is an ambassador of the Red Chamber, an institution that has its foundation in the ideal of sober second thought. It is my plea that, as Canadians, we stimulate meaningful and fruitful conversation about the consequences of residential school in our journey towards reconciliation and unity.

I am often described as a success story of the residential school system because of my dental degree. However, I argue that when I entered residential school at the age of five, I was already a success story. Why? I was connected to the land and understood its’ concepts through my Cree language. The spirituality I understood and practiced originated from these connections as well as from teachings from my community - whether these came from my parents, relatives, Elders or others. I was a happy, carefree, curious, and imaginative child whose playground was the outdoors. I was safe, well-fed, warm, and nurtured. My parents were not abusive, nor did they drink. These freedoms that I took everywhere with me and that I took for granted ended when I walked through the doors of that immense, cold and sterile residential school building, where I was met by strangers in black dresses who spoke a foreign language. My story changed on that day. My mentor described it to me as such: Imagine if a stranger told you, “I’m going to take your child for the next 11 years and decide what language she’s going to speak, what religion she’s going to practice, what she’s going to eat, what she’s going to say and think, when and if you can see her again, and then you may or may not get her back after these 11 years.”

Would you allow your child to lose the power of choice and the basic freedoms Canadians take for granted? Would you allow your child to grow up in an institution that practiced human rights abuses, where child abusers and sexual predators were free to do as they pleased?

The work ethic and values that I practice today, such as sharing, compassion, loyalty, generosity, gratitude, etc., were modeled after the work ethic of my parents and other community citizens who constantly demonstrated these values. My people were nomadic and practiced the concepts of recycling and sustainability. I was later to realize that my community had given me the foundation of spirituality that allowed me the ability to deal with the effects of genocide.

It has been a lifetime commitment to undo the years of violence and trauma that stemmed from the spiritual genocide that I endured in my youth. All forms of child abuse are forms of abandonment, for when children are abused there is no one acting as their protector and caregiver. What many do not realize is that with each act of abuse, the child is shamed. Young children often believe they are responsible for the abuses they suffer. At times I, myself, still wonder what I did to be treated and judged so harshly at such a young age. I had not asked to be placed there. I, nor anybody, belonged in residential school.

In effect, it has taken me sixty years to get back to that little girl of five and restart my journey towards healing. In many of those years I sought ways to stop remembering, which were self-destructive. I was taught to practice obedience; not to question but to do as I was told. Critical thinking skills were not encouraged. I passed my childhood and more importantly my adolescent years without reference to spiritual growth. The one-dimensional self I had come to accept made me ill-equipped to enter Canadian society. However, in adulthood I finally learned that I had choice – choice to decide how to think and how to act. It is never too late to improve ourselves.

In one of her statements, Senator Beyak said that residential school had done some good. As a former student, I am aware that I had my good times in the school. However, this did not negate the abuse. It is a characteristic of children to have reservoirs of hope, of creativity, and of imagination that can sustain them through times of trauma. Students developed a family system in the institution to keep a semblance of safety and of family connections. Today we still remain a family. As a child I did not have the sounding board of experience to think that I would be free from this captivity in five or ten years. I stopped thinking of tomorrow; I stopped thinking of a future. No amount of good times can ever override the bad times in the institution, especially if it involves sexual abuse. No amount of good memories can override the negative experiences I have gone through in the past sixty years due to the “teachings” of residential school.

As a former student, I have continued to keep good relationships with some of the people who worked at these schools. In 2013, I visited the retired nuns and personally thanked approximately 50 of them for their years of service. Stories like this do not make headlines because they rightly belong in survivors’ private lives. Yet I feel compelled to make this statement in response to some of the letters on Senator Beyak’s website, which claim there must have been some good teachers. The claim was never made that everyone related to the institution was bad, but the question sparks important dialogue.

I believe that many Canadians have questions similar to this regarding the Indigenous experience, yet they may not know Indigenous people to ask in search of these answers. While I am concerned that there exists a segment of the population who ask these questions in a malicious way, there are others – the majority – who are genuinely interested in gaining knowledge about an often-misunderstood segment of Canada’s population. It is important that we facilitate this type of constructive dialogue so that we can achieve a greater understanding of the different perspectives, experiences, and histories that come together and intertwine to form Canada’s past, which in turn shapes its future.

The sharing of very personal stories by former students, relating to their experiences of vulnerability, would normally evoke empathy. Telling our stories is one way of taking back our power and spirit. Through voicing our stories we are telling Canada our hearts had been broken. We are telling Canada that this act of sharing is the starting point of our healing journey.

I, and other First Nations, have always been valuable to Canada. Canada just does not know it yet.

The Canada you know is not the Canada I have known. Although there exists a fundamental difference in experience, it is important that we come together to uphold and fight for the principles of unity and reconciliation. With the goal of a strengthened Canada, it is integral that we work together to reframe the Canada-First Nations narrative from one steeped in negativity and division to one based on healing and togetherness.

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