

Imagine Canada – a national art and essay competition, through the lens of Reconciliation

Imagine Canada was a national art and essay competition that asked young people to share their thoughts on what the future of Canada would look like through the lens of reconciliation. The competition was open to Grades 1-12 and undergraduate students at the post-secondary level.

Christopher Sanford Beck, Grade 10 student from the Living Sky School Division, was the only Saskatchewan recipient. Christopher shared an excerpt of his submission at the Saskatchewan School Boards Association 2016 Spring Assembly. His entire submission can be read on the following pages.

Treaty Six Territory, June 21st, 2036

Looking back on the past twenty years, I am ever-surprised at how far Canada has come. When I was a boy, growing up in a farming community in rural Saskatchewan, what I am doing now would have never happened. I am taking my two daughters to the local First Nations reserve – for the third day in a row – to attend the culture festival. Quickly becoming an annual tradition for everyone in the area, the culture festival is a week long event celebrating indigenous history and tradition in Canada. As a country-wide event, each reserve customizes it to reflect its own history and traditions. This has emerged as an extremely effective way to encourage us white folks – and other newcomers to Canada – to learn and grow not only in our own cultures and traditions, but to share in the rich traditions of Canada's First Peoples. The fact that it builds and strengthens intercultural communities is a side benefit. Yesterday there was a powwow, the day before that we partook in a feast and smudge, and today we are gathered for a re-commitment ceremony of the treaty promises that were made so long ago.

Events such as these are not new to me. Growing up in the Saskatoon inner city and attending an elementary school where my siblings and I were the only white students, I was exposed to many Cree traditions and cultural values as a youngster. For that I am forever grateful. It is now my profound joy that these rich teachings can be shared not only with my own children, but with all of the families who live around us. To see the grown-up children from what had been the most racist families in the area bringing their little ones to an event like this warms my heart in a way words can not adequately describe. That now – instead of something that a select few white people would attend for solidarity's sake – everyone in the community can gather together to smudge, feast, and dance.

I think that this is an almost magical shift from where things were at twenty years ago. When I look even further back into the past my awe only multiplies. For someone fifty years ago to imagine a future where farmers and people from the reserve could hold hands together and share in the beauty Canada has to offer would have been unheard of. There would, of course, have been people dreaming of a time like that, working for it, striving for it. But to imagine that an on-reserve culture festival would have become a mainstream tradition may have surpassed even their hopeful imaginations.

When I delve back even further into the past, into things that were already a subject of near legend during my childhood – despite their only recent eradication – I am blown away. To think that one hundred and fifty, even one hundred years ago, children were being forcibly removed from their families and traditions; thrust into an unfamiliar and hostile environment; stripped of their traditional clothing, teachings, and language; and abused, 'educated', and assimilated is unthinkable. Nowadays the residential schools and their legacy sound like a dystopian novel. This is Canada's history.

If I were to tell you that the legacy of the residential schools has completely faded I would be a liar. And is Truth not the very basis of reconciliation? Without truth there can be no understanding, no reconciliation, no future. So, as I do not want to undermine how far we have come since Gordon Indian

Residential School – a school run by my own church in my own province- closed its doors in 1996, I will not lie to you: the legacy of residential schools is still alive. Poverty, addiction, and a cultural disconnect are still present in Saskatchewan’s cities and reserves. The difference now is how it is dealt with. There are countless functional support systems in place to guide people – young and old – on their journeys through life. Prisons are no longer filled with poor people and disillusioned youth. In fact, today we are as close to a traditional First Nations society as we have been since first contact. The young people are cared for and mentored by the elders, and likewise, the youth provide for elders and people in need. Cultures and traditions are taught in all schools; to white and aboriginal people alike. Day by day racism, poverty, and injustice are being replaced with love, understanding, and reconciliation. Every morning is a fresh page in the tome of Canada’s history, and today’s authors are geniuses.

My wife and I each hold the small, tender hand of one of our daughters. The four of us savour the time together as we walk from our farmstead by the lake towards the reserve. It’s mid-summer now and the sun, still high in the sky, warms us pleasantly as we walk. As we pass tall grasses and poplar groves, a rustle at the side of the road grabs our attention.

“What is it, Daddy?”

I peer into the grass for a minute. “I don’t know... Maybe it’s Wesakechak!”

My daughter laughs, imagining her favourite character from Cree legend hiding out in the grass.

“Maybe...”

It takes us less than two hours to walk to the reserve; a personal record for us. As we make our way to the powwow grounds we see Mr. Wilson chatting with Mr. Lightfoot and wave at them. Their kids are playing together a few feet away. Tommy Wilson just had his birthday and is admiring the gift from Eagle Lightfoot. My own daughter runs over and says hello to them before rejoining us.

“How goes the battle?” someone behind me asks.

I turn around to see Harold Swiftgrass and his wife, Elain. Her pregnant belly is protruding even more than the last time we crossed paths. I think I’m as excited for another kid in the community as they are.

“It’s going really well,” I respond with a smile. “Just finished bringing in the hay last week.”

“I’m a bit behind on mine. Too many trips into town for ultrasounds and the like, you know how it is.”

“Do I ever,” I respond, remembering how far behind my farm work got when our second child was born. “You know what Harold, I’ve got a couple free days next week. How’d it be if I came over and helped out for a while?”

Harold grins. “That would be great. In fact, bring the whole family! It’s been too long since we’ve had your whole clan over for supper.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I say.

When we get to the powwow grounds it is packed with people. It looks to me like the whole district has made its way to the reserve. My family’s light skin isn’t out of place at all here. In fact, there’s an incredible mix of backgrounds and cultures gathered here today. A wide mix of people congregated to pay homage to promises that were made so many years ago, and to learn to better understand each other.

I see the new Nigerian family who just moved onto Henry Smith’s old quarter getting to know the Bears. It has been their goal to get to know as many people in the area as they can, and their quest has been accepted by everyone around. As I turn my head, I’m not surprised to see the Ahmadi family helping to set up another tent. They were refugees who made it to Canada about twenty years ago during the Syrian civil war. Ever since then they’ve been a big part of the community.

As well as these relative newcomers I see many faces that have been on this land for generations. In fact, there are families on this reserve that are direct relatives of influential chiefs like Big Bear and Poundmaker. Though leadership of the band has passed through many different families over the years, they are still a large part of leading the community. Their family background still holds much gravitas. In fact, the great granddaughter of Big Bear is taking on a role as an elder in today’s ceremony. It fills my heart with joy to see the unique, multicultural blend of people coming together for events like these. From people with roots in the land almost as old as the ground itself, to people just arriving in a new country. This is the joy of reconciliation.

We are all standing side by side, hand in hand, in a great Circle. I see people from all reaches of the globe standing intertwined in a beautiful symbol of togetherness. In the centre of the circle stand the two elders selected for this ceremony: one Cree and one European. Everyone in the circle watches as the two of them look into each others eyes for a moment, allowing the gravity of the gathering to grow fuller in everyone’s heart. It is a special moment. A sacred moment. I watch in trepidation as the elders release each others hands and gesture to two small children standing nearby. A boy brings forward a long piece of paper that has been rolled into a tube and tied with ribbon. A girl holds a small wooden box. As the elders take the items from the children, the ceremony commences.

Treaty Six is read out loud for everyone to hear. Unlike the very first time this was declared, there is more to this than the recitation of a legal document. As the vows are read out, each and every person in the circle is asked to reiterate and reconsecrate these promises. And in doing so the very meaning behind the document is shifted. It is no longer a list of give and take, but rather a sacred promise. A promise of interdependence and interconnectedness. Of mutuality.

As the final words of the document are read, all of the people affirm again their commitment to each other. In the pregnant pause that follows, I hear a crash ring out around the powwow grounds. A murmur runs through the crowd.

“What was that?”

The question echoes around the circle.

Just as people are deciding that it was something from the highway, or maybe a thunderclap from above another town, an old man charges into our circle. His hair is long, grey, and wild. He is dressed all in traditional buckskin clothing and wearing moccasins. His brown, weather-beaten face is a testament to being a man of the land. When he makes it to the centre of the circle he throws himself onto the ground before the elders. His whole body is shaking in exertion and his breath comes in short gasps.

“Mooshum, Kookum,” he rasps. “The-the Sacred Stem.”

As he says this, he procures a deerskin pouch from his robes and hands it to the Cree elder. She takes it from him with a gasp.

“It can’t be...”

Something from the back of my mind is suddenly jogged. It pushes its way through the muddled confusion of my thoughts until it finally reaches the forefront. I remember an elder telling me something a long time ago... the Sacred Stem is an item of legend in the First Nations tradition, almost like the Holy Grail or the Ark of the Covenant. It is said to be the stem of the pipe smoked at the original signing of the treaty. Sometime after that event, it was lost. As the years passed steadily by, so did its memory, until only a small number of elders even knew its story.

I watch, as slowly, carefully, the elder unwraps the bag and removes something from it. It is a wooden pipe stem. Its smooth length is devoid of any ornamentation, but its beauty is in its simplicity. Though it is in perfect condition, its age is evident in the maturity of its wood.

The elder kneels down to the old man, who has seated himself in the dirt. She whispers something into his ear and then turns her lips to his forehead. She gently kisses his brow and then takes his hand in her own and helps him to his feet. Harold steps forward from the circle and brings the old man to join the rest of the assembly.

I watch, enthralled by the recent happening, as an oskapew steps out from the circle. The young man picks up a pouch of tobacco and a wooden box of matches from his feet and takes them to the elders. He then takes the wooden box that the little girl had presented and opens it. Inside are two parts of a pipe – the stem and the bowl. He takes out the bowl and hands it to the elder who holds the Sacred Stem. She puts them together and hands the assembled pipe back to the young man. Continuing with the ceremony, he opens up the pouch of tobacco and fills the pipe bowl. When the bowl is full he hands it back to the elders. The two of them hold it between them and bow their heads in a silent prayer. I see them slowly spin the pipe in a circle, pausing as it lands on each of the four directions. I recognize this ritual from my childhood and allow myself an inward smile. When they have completed their prayers, the pipe is proffered to the young man, who lights the tobacco. The elders then smoke the pipe and seal the vows between the people they represent. As the smoky aroma ascends, we all hope that our prayers can be taken with it to the Creator, to seal our covenant.

Once the elders have finished smoking the pipe, they hand it back to the young man. He takes it, and holding it by the bowl, walks clockwise around the interior edge of the circle. When he has completed his round he takes the pipe back to the elders, who smoke it once more. This procedure is repeated three more times until it has made it around the circle four times. Having completed the ceremony, the pipe is emptied, taken apart, and replaced.

“This ends the Treaty Ceremony, but our work for the coming year has just begun,” the elders say together.

At this, everyone in the assembled crowd break into applause and cheering. I release my daughters’ hands and my family joins in the primal cheer. Somewhere behind us a drum begins to beat. As the noise from the circle recedes, the drum music picks up. Its volume heightens until its beat seems to fill my very soul. It merges with my heartbeat and becomes a part of my being, connecting me to the earth and to everyone around me. As a singer’s voice picks up, everyone in the circle begins to dance in a slow, two step rhythm. Around and around we dance. As the music grows louder we begin to spin faster. Our feet pound the ground beneath us and kick up clouds of dust. The music fills our bodies and souls so much that to dance is all we can do. The beat of the drum, the singer’s voice, and our own rhythmic footfall fill the area and connect us to the earth and each other in a way that no words can.

How important it is for us to move together in this sacred rhythm. How important to hear the treaties reiterated, reconstituted, and reconciled. To publicly agree, as a community, on something that has been our way of life for the past decade. To make a public and personal commitment to each other. To affirm our love for one another. To work to reconcile the damages incurred when white people first colonized the Great North. How important it is for my daughters to hear this, to learn about our history, and to look towards the future. A future which, unlike the future from my childhood, is not just filled with hope for love and understanding, but also for the continued growth of these things. During my childhood we were headed in the right direction. Steps were being taken towards the road of growth. But now, as I think of my daughters and the way they see the world around them, I know that we are finally walking the Good Road together. We already have one foot in the hopes of the past and the dreams for the future. We are already experiencing reconciliation each and every day. We are already experiencing acceptance and understanding each and every day. And we are already experiencing Love each and every day.

Cree legend says that the first people to sign the treaties saw them as much more than a legal document. More even than a promise, commitment, or vow. The treaties were entities in and of themselves. Living, breathing, changing beings that were to be respected and honoured. And as our community danced that day to the beat of the drum, on Treaty Six territory, I did not have to see the young man dressed in traditional clothing that had not been with us when the song began to know that the spirit of the treaty was very much alive and with us that day.