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RECONCILIATION
Truth about What? Reconcile How?

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It was a Friday night in October of 2015. I was in pain, an 8 out of 10. I had spent much of the day in the walk-in Emergency Department at our local hospital. After six weeks of low back pain, I had a prescription for Gabapentin, an anticonvulsant also used for nerve pain. I hoped it would bring relief by morning. (It didn't)

I was hungry, didn't feel like cooking. Wanted to eat, go home, take the meds, wake up *sans* pain.

There's a diner on the way home. The parking lot was crowded. I entered, walked past a table of four customers with menus, sat next to them, a divider between us.

The server was busy, but she had served me a week earlier and before too long I had a menu. The menu is not very complicated. I started reading my *Maclean's* magazine to pass the time. It took my mind off the pain. I didn't pay much attention to those around me.

You are wondering where this is going…

Eventually, the server came by to take my order. I had not heard her at the next table. Had their order been taken? Oh, yes, I forgot to mention that my neighbours were visibly aboriginal.

I thought, "I should rise, look over the divider, and see whether they have been served." I was in pain, eager to eat, get home and take the new meds. I should have asked, "Has that table been served."

"Is it my turn?" I asked.

"I can squeeze you in."

What to do?

Hot chicken sandwich.

I don't recall whether my neighbours placed their orders before or after my plate arrived. I remember eating less than half of my meal and then going to the cash register before my bill arrived. I paid for my meal.

Truth. Four people who had arrived before me were served after me. I had taken the easy way out. Chickened out. Was it my problem? Judgment call.

Reconciliation. I told the server-cashier that I wanted to pay my neighbours' bill. I calmly explained why. After paying, I went to my neighbours' table and quietly told them that I had paid their bill because they were here before me. "Really?" the man replied.

"Taapwe (*truly, really*)," I answered, hoping he understood the Cree word. It seemed he did. I went home.

As an educator I though the foregoing was a good "hook." You be the judge.

A good hook has to connect with what follows. For weeks I wondered where I was going with this opening story. (*See, you are not alone*.) Then a gift arrived.

Lawyer Julian Falconer's words at the inquest into seven First Nation student deaths in Thunder Bay, Ontario:

Police considered these students "less than worthy victims."[1]

My neighbours in the diner had somehow been considered less-than-worthy customers.

Just a few generations ago, their ancestors were considered less-than-worthy parents, their children consigned to residential schools.

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[1] Jody Porter (2015), "Indigenous cases treated by police as 'less than worthy victims,' lawyer says". http://www.cbc.ca/news/Canada/thunder-bay/indigenous-cases-treated-by-police-as-less-than-worthy-victims-lawyer-says-1.3307961

We are all still shielding our eyes from the after-glow of that shameful era, long after the sun seems to have set on it. Its multifaceted impacts reach into almost every crevice in newcomer-indigenous relationships.

How could such a situation have possibly arisen in this country of ours? I can think of no better starting point than by examining that question. Asking it … listening to what indigenous people say … and then asking "what do we need to do about it?" What can I do?

That, for me, is the essence of truth and reconciliation.

It's not what I did in the restaurant. That was a small act of injustice that I couldn't ignore.

But it's what we need to do about the big issues, the fundamental issues of what it means to be treaty people, to live in a country that is founded on a nation-to-nation relationship with aboriginal peoples.

In our workplaces, in our classrooms, in our neighbourhoods, everywhere. What will you do?

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Dr. John S. Long was an Emeritus Professor at Nipissing University. He was a teacher, administrator, principal and consultant in Moose Factory, Moosonee, Timmins and Kashechewan for almost thirty years before coming to Nipissing. He was Canada's most outstanding student of the history of the western James Bay Cree and possessed a deep appreciation for Cree culture and oral tradition. Publishing numerous works on the subject, his most recent book *Treaty No. 9* (2010), published by McGill-Queen's Press dissects the "agreement to share the land in far Northern Ontario in 1905." It has since gone into reprint. Sadly, John passed away this March after a six-month battle with cancer.
