# THE SPIRITUAL VIOLENCE DONE IN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

A member of the Kahnesatake Mohawk Nation, **Kimberly Murray** is Ontario's first-ever Assistant Deputy Attorney General for Indigenous Justice. She was the executive director of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

**As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission said, there was "spiritual violence" in Residential Schools. Its impact continues to haunt survivors. Churches bear a responsibility to formally recognize Indigenous spirituality as a valid form of worship equal to their own. They should go further: Tell the survivors, "It's o.k. *not* to be Christian."**

***Tel que la Commission de vérité et de réconciliation l'a affirmé, il y a eu une forme de « violence spirituelle » dans les pensionnats. Son impact continue de hanter les survivants. Les Églises ont la responsabilité de reconnaître formellement la spiritualité autochtone comme une forme valide de culte égale à la leur. Ils devraient aller plus loin et dire aux survivants, « On peut très bien ne pas être Chrétien. »***

> *Sago, kwe kwe, Kimberly Murray, une-juts, Haudesauneee, Mohawk Kanesatake* – Wolf Clan.

Thank you Ryerson for inviting me to participate in this very important conversation. When I was first asked to speak on this panel, my first reaction was to decline. I am not the right person to speak about Indigenous spirituality, and what we can learn from it. It is not my role to — I leave that to our Elders, and Knowledge Keepers. But what I can offer to the conversation is to share with everyone what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had to say about spirituality and religion.

First, just a quick reminder: over 130 years, more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Metis children were apprehended from their homes and communities, taken from their loving parents, and placed in residential schools. The schools were funded, or rather- under funded, by the federal government, and operated by church entities. The stated purpose of the schools was to civilize and Christianize the children. Children were not permitted to speak their Indigenous languages, and were forced to learn English or French. Their Indigenous identities were literally beaten out of them. It has been noted, that the goal of the schools was to "Kill the Indian in the Child."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission stated this:

> "Aboriginal children were taught to reject the spiritual ways of their parents and ancestors in favour of the religions that predominated among settler societies. As their traditional ways of worshipping the Creator were disparaged and rejected, so too were the children devalued. They were not respected as human beings who were loved by the Creator just as they were – as First Nations, Inuit or Metis peoples. Rather, their Christian teachers saw them as inferior humans in need of being 'raised up' through Christianity, and therefore tried to mould them into models of Christianity according to the racist ideals that prevailed at the time."

> "The impact of such treatment was amplified by federal laws and policies that banned traditional Indigenous spiritual practices in the children's home communities for much of the residential school era."

The Commission concluded that "spiritual violence" occurred in the residential schools. The commission said that "spiritual violence" occurs when a person is not permitted to follow her or his preferred spiritual or religious traditions; when a different spiritual or religious path or practice is forced on them; when a person's spiritual or religious tradition, beliefs or practices are demeaned or belittled; and when a person is made to feel shame for practicing his or her traditional or family beliefs. All these things happened in Residential schools.

The impact of this "spiritual violence" has lived on past the closure of the last school in 1996 – and the impact continues today.

The Commission heard from 7,000 survivors and intergenerational survivors. Many spoke of the "deep fear" of the church that was instilled in them as children in the schools, and that "deep fear" remains with many of them.

One Survivor who spoke to the commission shared this about her experience in one of the schools:

> "At the front they had a poster. It was really long and there was a black ugly road going down and there were people in the fire at the bottom and their hands were raised and they were suffering and they were stuck there and the priest... he taught religion. He said if you want to go down this road, you are going to be in there. You are going to go to hell and then the other road was so beautiful they had a picture, it was going to heaven. There were angels and the lord and talk and it was so beautiful and you didn't want to go with that other one. I was so terrified of hell."

How does one heal from (such) spiritual violence? Many Survivors told the Commission that reconnecting with their Indigenous spiritual teachings and practices has been essential to their healing – with some saying that Indigenous spirituality "saved their life".

Indigenous spirituality is connected to the land, to language, to our songs, to culture, to our identity as human beings.

Survivor and Elder Fred Kelly said that to take the territorial lands away from the people whose very spirit is so intrinsically connected to Mother Earth was to actually dispossess them of their very soul and being. "They were mortally wounded in mind, heart and spirit and that turned them into walking dead."

But not all Survivors reject the religion that was forced on them as children. Many still embrace what they learned. But what the Commission heard was that for many communities, (especially) the young people, want to return to Indigenous spirituality, they want to learn the ways of their ancestors – but the fear of the past continues and in some communities the survivors themselves want to stop Indigenous spirituality.

The spiritual violence perpetrated in the schools has now led to spiritual conflict within some communities and some families.

So, what is the answer? The Commission said that churches bear a responsibility to formally recognize Indigenous spirituality as a valid form of worship that's equal to their own. Many religious entities are incorporating Indigenous spirituality into their churches, and mixing religious teachings with Indigenous spiritual practices. But the Commission challenged the church entities to go a step further: Come out and tell the survivors, "It's o.k. *not* to be Christian." By doing so, the churches would help lift the fear of hell, and perhaps help resolve the spiritual conflict that exists in some families and communities, and help the young people learn the way of their peoples before the children were taken away to residential schools. But this challenge has not been fully taken up by the church entities.

I want to speak about the Two Row Wampum. It's one of the first Treaties that Settlers entered into with Indigenous peoples of these lands. The Wampum Belt that depicts the Treaty is that of two purple rows of wampum. One row depicts the Settlers on their side of the waterway in their vessel. The other row, which runs parallel to the first, represents the Indigenous peoples in their canoe. Both are travelling along side by side in friendship, peace and respect, and neither will interfere with the other. Residential schools, along with many other government policies, directly breached this Treaty.

So, as institutions, governments, churches, NGO's, individual citizens, how to we breath life back into our original agreement, our treaties? We all have a role to play. Indigenous communities must be supported in revitalizing and reclaiming their languages, their laws, their governance systems, and their spirituality (whatever form that may be today). I urge policy makers to think about that. And as John (Ralston Saul) stated last night, Canada will be a better place for everyone.