INTRODUCTION

BUILDING BONDS IN THE MIDST OF SOLITUDE

MIRIAM TAYLOR

Miriam Taylor is the Director of Publications and Partnerships at the Association for Canadian Studies and Metropolis Institute. She is the Managing Editor of ACS-Metropolis' flagship publications, *Canadian Issues*, *Canadian Diversity* and the recently launched *Metropolis* eBook.

In June 2020, as we entered the third month of lockdown, the world was struggling to come to grips with being plunged into a global pandemic. With regular reports of suffering and death and daily life at a standstill, fear and uncertainty became familiar emotions. Humankind faced a growing sense of social strife it could ill afford as the pandemic revealed the structural fault lines of our societies and tensions emerged over how to navigate the crisis.

To provide some badly needed hope and inspiration, the Association for Canadian Studies partnered with Metropolis Canada, Experiences Canada, Historica and the Social Sciences and Humanities and Research Council (SSHRC) to host a conference coinciding with Canada Day entitled, *Stories of Hope: A Celebration of Canada*. Bringing together voices of Canadians from diverse communities who have overcome adversity and overwhelming challenges to make Canada a better place, the conference linked us to the past to imagine the future. By forging connections between us and reminding us of our common humanity, the stories also aspired to shed light on some of the vital lessons needed to tackle unprecedented global challenge.

Assembled in this special edition of *Canadian Issues* are selected conference presentations with a view to preserving and sharing some of the uplifting stories heard at the moving day-long event. The edition is divided into three sections. Section 1) **Inspiration from Immigration: Stories of Courage and Hope**, tells riveting immigrant stories. Section 2) **Learning from History: Transcending the Past, Transforming the**

Future, highlights historical victories in the struggle to secure the recognition of fundamental rights. The third section 3) Building the Canada of Tomorrow: Youth Making a Difference Today, focusses on youth as the builders of our future.

The issue opens with three texts tying hope to the imperative to recognize and correct the inequalities and injustices that continue to plague our society. In his welcoming remarks, transcribed here, Minister of Canadian Heritage Steven Guilbeault evokes the transformative power of stories: "it's sharing our life experiences that puts us on the road to healing and to more meaningful relationships." He also affirms his government's commitment to build a more inclusive society by combatting racism, discrimination, exclusion and obstacles to self-actualization that leave minority communities at a disadvantage.

In a searing and powerful opening address, the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean makes a poetic uncompromising indictment of injustices past and present, evoking those left behind by the pandemic and condemning the structural blind spots that led to the brutal murder of George Floyd. If we want hope to flourish, insists Madame Jean, we need to have the courage to look reality in the eye, and root out the hatred and indifference that suffocate and poison our world.

Philosopher Charles Taylor also finds hope in the opportunity that global adversity has afforded us. The COVID-19 pandemic and the harrowing murder of George Floyd that transfixed the entire world have laid bare the structural inequalities that impede communal action and highlighted the essential importance of solidarity for our survival. The crisis has provided us with a chance for renewal, an opening to learn from and act on these lessons, an opportunity that Taylor hopes will not be squandered.

The first section 1) Inspiration from Immigration: Stories of Courage and Hope contains four extraordinary immigrant stories exhibiting exemplary courage and triumph over adversity. The stories are those of an Olympian, an innovator, a parliamentarian and a peacekeeper.

Born in Somalia in the grips of civil war, Mohammed Ahmed started competing as a runner as a teenager and overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to become an Olympian and a bronze medallist at the 2019 World Athletic Championships.

One of an estimated two million "boat people", Can Nguyen left his native Vietnam in 1980 and narrowly escaped death to become an award-winning eco-innovator finding creative environmental ways to turn waste into an agent of growth.

Jean Augustine came from Grenada on a program that secured her Canadian permanent residence in exchange for a year working as a domestic servant. She went on to incarnate a series of firsts, becoming the first African Canadian Member of Parliament and Minister in the Canadian government and leaving a lasting legacy as a mentor and advocate.

Major Samson Young fled Laos, lived in a refugee camp in Thailand, and eventually settled in Canada where he distinguished himself as a peacekeeper in the Canadian Armed Forces and continues to inspire through his lifelong desire to learn and share.

Section 2) Learning from History: Transcending

the Past, Transforming the Future highlights hard-won historical battles for the respect and recognition of minority rights. The stories demonstrate that even when the struggles seem initially hopeless, the courage to stand up and persevere have the power to transform our future. Michelle Douglas was a proud member of the Canadian military with a bright future ahead of her, until she was subjected to intense interrogation and eventually dismissed from the service because of her sexual orientation. With a group of fellow activists, she challenged the system, reversed the policy and secured a historic apology for the LGBTQ+ community.

Jean Teillet, the great-grandniece of Louis Riel and the author of a book telling Canada's history from the Métis perspective, illustrates the power of teaching our children to invest in a better future even when immediate results are impossible. Rosemary Sadlier recounts the tenacity required for a stay-at-home mom to fight for and eventually gain official recognition for Black History Month in Canada. Senator Wanda Bernard shares her extraordinary journey as one of thirteen fatherless children living in extreme poverty and attending a segregated school. She went on to become a civil rights advocate with a career in social work and ultimately a Senator in the Canadian parliament.

The final section 3) **Building the Canada of Tomorrow: Youth Making a Difference Today** focusses on youth, their potential and their unique talents as the future builders of our country. Drawing on data from two surveys of 12- to 17-year-olds, Ashley Manuel, Managing Director of ACS, reflects on the optimism and resilience of these rarely heard from young Canadians amid an unprecedented pandemic with all its challenges and difficulties. Ilona Dougherty, a widely consulted expert on the unique abilities of young people, counters negative misconceptions about this group known as generation Z. She points to the way in which their unique abilities will be essential in tackling the problems of the 21st century. She also notes the intergenerational solidarity that has been fostered by the pandemic, a perhaps unanticipated yet positive outcome of being thrown together in isolation, that will no doubt help us to face the challenges that lie ahead.

Deborah Morrison, the president and chief executive officer (CEO) of Experiences Canada, the largest and oldest youth travel and exchange program in Canada, characterizes Canada's youth as actively involved in social justice and seized with the desire to effect change. She remarks on their remarkable resilience and leadership and introduces us to five exceptional young leaders who will be shaping the Canada of tomorrow. Tessa Erikson, a member of the Nak'azdli Whut'en First Nation, created an application to revitalize Dakehl, the native language of her people. Emma Lim created and galvanized an impressive network of student climate change activists. Stella Bowles used social media to alert her neighbourhood to the dangerous pollution in the local river and succeeded in pushing three levels of government to address and correct the problem. Abhayjeet and Sukhmeet Singh Sachal are a brother duo who became cultural connectors. In the final article of the publication, the brothers tell the story of how a tragedy sparked a movement and led to the creation of a foundation bringing youth together to break down barriers.