

# CHRISTIAN COURIER



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## SEVEN GENERATIONS

Taking personal responsibility for broken relationships of the past.

**Dorothy Vaandering**

“REMOVED FROM THEIR FAMILIES and home communities,” said Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, “seven generations of Aboriginal children were denied their identity.”

My deepened understanding of this atrocity came from an unlikely source: my 91-year-old dad, a Dutch-Canadian dairy farmer committed to a reformed faith, with no conscious connection to Indigenous peoples of this land. Shortly before he died, Dad shared an insight with me about the concept of seven generations. Now I experience a strange juxtaposition of events at this time of the year: the recent passing of my

mother May 5, 2018; the death of my father in May two years ago; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada’s 94 Calls to Action in June of 2015, which included Sinclair’s statement above, and National Indigenous People’s Day every June 21.

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## IN A RESERVATION CEMETERY

What we found on Four Bear’s grave. | **James C. Schaap**

TO READ WHAT WAS THERE on the grave stone was not a great surprise. I had known for some time that Joseph Four Bear was a believer in Jesus Christ. His granddaughter, Marcella, who is 98 years old, had told me as much. I’d asked her about Christianity, if any; and she’d told me how Mom, Dad, two brothers and two sisters would step up into the wagon and go to church, twice a week, in Promise, South Dakota, a village on the Cheyenne River Reservation so small you can find it only on specialty maps, if it can claim to exist at all.

Her grandparents were Christian believers “in that time,” she’d explained, as if Christianity were a short story in the epic of both her life and the history of her Lakota people. When Joseph Four Bear put his thumbprint on the Ft. Laramie Treaty in 1868,

she said, he promised peace and tolerance for the white man, and was thereby given title to the land where he and his family had been living for years. The Great Father graciously advised him that, now that he’d signed the treaty, he could live where he had before.

“Isn’t that crazy?” she said, shaking her head in disbelief.

We were on our way to her grandparents’ graves just outside of La Plant, South Dakota, a town where once there were eight or nine churches. On a good day, La Plant’s population is 250 or so, but only if you count volunteer workers who come from white churches somewhere vaguely back east. “They build houses for the people,” she told me, pointing at one painted in a peculiar style. “There’s one right there.”

I was a bit surprised she com-

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A meadowlark perches on a set of deer antlers tied to a grave.

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## SEVEN GENERATIONS CONTINUED

### NEW IDENTITIES

My parents arrived in Canada as a young married couple in 1948. They disembarked from the passenger ship *Tabinta* in the middle of summer, fully expecting to give up their Dutch citizenship and become contributing Canadian citizens. They made Canada home, always acknowledging the reality of God's blessing in their lives. In conjunction with a community committed to a reformed Christian faith, and with the arrival of seven children, Canada became the place where they developed roots – where they had the freedom to establish churches, schools and organizations committed to the faith.

In 1948, while welcoming large numbers of newcomers to Canada, the nation was also playing host to large numbers of Indigenous children in its 72 residential schools. A few years earlier, in 1931, the number of residential schools had peaked at 80. A CBC broadcast during Education Week in 1955 celebrated the accomplishment of these church and government-run schools, which provided “for the oldest Canadians, a new future.” One of the longest running schools, Mohawk Institute Residential School (1828-1970) in Brantford, Ont., was located in the heart of the region my parents and many of their peers called home. Sadly dubbed Mush Hole Indian Residential School because of the quality of food provided, young Indigenous children and youth were deprived of everything they needed to thrive. The intent of these schools was to wipe Indigenous presence from the Canadian identity.

I turned five in 1963, the year “Mush Hole” stopped expecting its students to perform manual labour and began to provide a full day of education. Abuses of many other kinds continued, however, as documented in the TRC's Mohawk narratives. I was just about to start Grade 1 at John Knox Christian School, where I was taught that my name was known by a loving Creator.

### THE LONG VIEW

Today I am very conscious of my personal responsibility for addressing the broken relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of this land. As a result, I no longer identify as *Canadian* (the citizenship my parents proudly claimed), but as *settler-Canadian*. Although I may be tempted to deny complicity in the decision of the “founding fathers of Canada” and subsequent governments and citizens, the reality is that I come from a Eurocentric heritage that thrives on colonization. Holland bears the collective guilt for the deaths of millions of people as a result of colonizing efforts here in North America, South America and beyond.

My father and mother never spoke of this aspect of their heritage, nor would they engage in discussions regarding Indigenous harms in our part of Ontario or across Canada. This saddens me. I try to accept this, given the reality of their immigration and their commitment

to a young country they believed to be noble. Yet I cannot ignore the irony that Canada, while establishing its own identity, was liberating Holland at the same time it was consciously wiping out Indigenous peoples at home. I am thankful that in spite of these grim realities, it was Dad who deepened my understanding of the Indigenous concept of seven generations.

“You know, Dorothy, at this time in my life I have known seven generations,” he said in his heavy accent. “I lived with my grandparents at a time when their parents were still alive; then my parents; then there is me and mom; then you seven kids; your children; and now they are having children. At 91, I am now old enough to have known seven generations.”

Having studied Indigenous worldviews in my work with restorative justice, patterns began to take shape in my mind when my father spoke. Stories of Dad's childhood, photos of my Oma and Opa visiting Canada – it all began to fit together and give meaning to my own life story, where I touch the lives of my children, nieces, nephews and great nieces and nephews. Threads woven through generations reveal we are inherently relational – not just interdependent. We understand each other through each other.

### RESPONSIBILITY

The most prevalent understanding of the seven generations concept is a recognition that the actions of those who lived in the seven generations before us touch and shape us today, and

that our own actions will also touch and shape those who come after us in the next seven generations. Author David Wilkins of the Lumbee nation challenges this as an individualistic, almost mythical and romanticized view, by observing that this length of time is beyond our experience, which too often leads people to easily dismiss their personal responsibility.

“We actively tended our families and our clan-ties by holding the lives, memories, and hopes of all Seven Generations close,” Wilkins explains. “Each generation was responsible to teach, learn and protect the three generations that had come before it, its own, and the next three. In this way, we maintained our communities for millennia.”

The realities of *generation* and *responsibility* became even more pronounced for me when my mother passed away in May. Suddenly I felt unanchored. The generations before me were gone. I began to realize that as a first-generation immigrant daughter with few ties to relatives across an ocean, I have perhaps denied or ignored the significance of the past in my life. Where Indigenous peoples are grieving their denied identity, have I actually been choosing to ignore my identity? This leads me to wonder: am I considering my full responsibility to the future deeply enough?

### PRACTICE RECONCILIATION

Thankfully, “Mush Hole” Indian Residential School no longer exists. Its horrific legacy, however, remains. It is hard to know how to address the harms my parents' generation (unwittingly?) caused our Indigenous neighbours, who also acknowledge they are made in the image of the Creator and who clearly live in a world infused with the Creator's presence. But now we are aware, and are thus both implicated and responsible. Graciously, the Indigenous peoples of this land are showing the way. They have us told their heart-wrenching stories and have provided Canadians with a clear list of what they require in order to heal: the Principles of Truth and Reconciliation and the 94 Calls to Action (trc.ca).

Reading Scripture and praying faithfully after meals is one



### COVER ART

This series of cedar panels represents stages in the history of First Nations people since contact with Europeans, from vibrant to faded to whited out back to vibrancy, as depicted by B.C. artist Luke Parnell and displayed in the National Gallery of Canada.

gift my parents, their parents and their grandparents have passed down to us. Though our lives have changed dramatically, this practice continues to give strength and hope to us as a family. This past year, our family also began to read at least one of the TRC principles or calls to action alongside our daily Bible reading. It is *not* enough, but it has led us to reflect, consider and change our thoughts and actions more fully. It has challenged us to consider our identity. Combined with our prayers to a loving, passionate Creator, might this be a gift we can leave our children, grand-children and great-grand-children? Might this be a weekly act of worship in our churches? Might this spur us on to engage fully in national truth telling and reconciliation?

“Together, Canadians must do more than just talk about reconciliation; we must learn how to practice reconciliation in our everyday lives – within ourselves and our families, and in our communities, governments, places of worship, schools and workplaces” (TRC).

Seven generations is not just an Indigenous insight. It is God-breathed wisdom – if we would but listen. ✨



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Sewing class at Fort Resolution Indian Residential School, N.W.T. (undated image, Library and Archives Canada).