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Reconciliation: *All Our Relations*

Kelly Laurila*

*On November 28, 2015, I arrived at the city square for the **Global Climate March**.¹ I and the women from our Indigenous drum circle² would be singing. I could count, on one hand, the few who were there before me. I had a moment of thought that it would be another small turn out of Indigenous people. As the time drew nearer for proceedings to get underway, an Indigenous woman, offered to smudge³ anyone who wished. I saw people partaking in this ceremony, some observing what was happening and others asking what the smoke was for? Shortly thereafter, a prayer was said by an Indigenous Elder. She acknowledged the land we were standing on and she gave thanks for 'all our relations' in Creation, which allow human beings to survive. As I scanned around, I saw that the area was filling with people. I saw many Indigenous and Settler peoples standing beside and amongst one another. As the crowd clapped and cheered for the words given by the speakers, I could not help but feel Creator's presence and the unity I felt with others. We were there because of a shared concern about the land and what was happening with it. **Reconciliation?***

*It was a sunny, but cold day on November 25, 2015 when I arrived at the University of Waterloo Arts Quad area on Campus. At the invitation by a professor⁴ of Settler heritage, I joined her as she spent the whole day writing with chalk on the cement, the names of Indigenous women and girls who were murdered or missing (Amnesty International – Canada, 2009; Amnesty International- Canada, 2015). She explained that writing the names was a way of humanizing the statistics; that it puts a name to the number. When I arrived, I was overtaken by a welling up of tears as I saw the many names that the professor had already written. She came over to me and offered a hug. She just let me cry. There is something that shifted between us as this moment of pain and grief was shared. We never said anything, but I felt it. I felt for the women who lost their lives and who are still missing. It moved me when I saw this Settler professor's efforts to raise awareness and educate students who stopped to ask what she was doing. I thanked the Creator for this day and that I met this professor. I smudged this space and I sang for the women with my drum. **Reconciliation?***

Three years ago, I had a chance meeting with a member of the Waterloo Regional Police Male Chorus. As I was walking by a display booth at a local college the word 'chorus' caught my eye. Before I knew it, I was engaging in a conversation with 'Bob' about our singing experiences. And then, the most spectacular thing happened! I was sharing with 'Bob' information about my experiences with other Indigenous peoples and the difficulties that some individuals have had with coping because of impacts of the residential schools. Bob, in turn, was sharing his

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experiences of being a previous police officer having occasion to interact with Indigenous people in trouble with the law and the empathy he had for the traumas many have experienced. Our conversation steered towards the possibility of partnering for a singing event. This event happened February 23, 2013 and it was called "Bridging Communities through Song." Through our singing partnership, members of the Police Chorus and the Drum Circle learned more about one another than they previously knew. What makes this connection with 'Bob' particularly significant is knowing the history of Indigenous people and the involvement of the police with regard to accompanying the social worker to take Indigenous children out of their family homes and putting them in residential schools; with high numbers of arrests of Indigenous peoples for crimes; and the overwhelmingly high incarceration rates of Indigenous men and women (Wendy Chan & Dorothy Chunn, 2014; Yale Belanger, 2014; James Frideres, 2011)⁵. Who would have thought it possible that there could be a partnership with a police chorus?

Reconciliation?

For almost three years, I have been facilitating a local sharing circle for anyone wishing to engage with talks about reconciliation. There were stories shared of participants growing up, not knowing of their Indigenous heritage and the sadness they felt from the years lost in not knowing. Some participants of Settler heritage shared how they have always lived in Canada, as have their parents and grandparents, and that they never considered themselves Settlers or having come from another land. Some expressed guilt for not knowing about the residential schools and questioned what they could do to help. Others expressed fear of saying or doing the wrong thing with regard to Indigenous peoples. What struck me most from all these stories is the reverence and humility with which participants spoke. I have often wondered why the circles keep going. How many times can one talk about reconciliation? I have discovered that the answer is: many times. Amongst the participants and even for me, there is a strong desire to learn more; perhaps about reconciliation; perhaps about ourselves.

Reconciliation?

I am a second year doctoral student in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University and I am of Indigenous Sáami⁶ and Settler⁷ Irish heritages. All of my heritages have European roots. To add to this, I know little of my Sáami heritage compared to the Anishinabe (i.e. Ojibwe) ways of knowing that I have been taught to me by Elders living in my region of Canada. Thus, my sense of knowing and being resides within and between Indigenous and Eurowestern knowledges. I am still wrestling with how to connect to my Sáami roots. My European heritage is not something that I have found much comfort in. It represents the colonizers who brought their dominating ideology, called the *Doctrine of Discovery*, (James Frideres, 2011) with them; assuming that any new lands that they perceived to be vacant (i.e. *terra nullius*) were free to be claimed for the European Monarch. As they claimed and settled in the new lands, their ideology continued and they imposed their ways of knowing, being, seeing and doing on Indigenous peoples (Gale Cyr, personal communication, May 17, 2015; Yale Belanger, 2014). It feels quite conflicting to have the heritages of the colonizer at the same time as the colonized. At times, I have hated that

colonizer part of me. I am working on acceptance, but it is still a struggle. It is my own struggle within that motivates me to explore ways that Indigenous and Settler peoples can move towards reconciliation. I seek reconciliation, acceptance and peace with the Indigenous, Settler, Colonizer, Colonized heritages of who I am. The reconciliation I wish for myself; I wish for Indigenous and Settler peoples.

Something else that motivates me to search for reconciliation stems from an event that took place three years ago. Our drum circle had the opportunity to sing at an event⁸ where Aboriginal Justice Murray Sinclair, of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2012), was speaking about the traumatic impact of government policies on forced attendance of Indigenous children at residential schools. Justice Sinclair asked the people present what they could do to contribute to reconciliation between Indigenous and Settler peoples so that these atrocities never happen again. Many of the women in our circle, including me, were moved by his words and his call to contribute to reconciliation. I am picking up Justice Sinclair's call through my doctoral work.

What is reconciliation? How does it look and what does it feel like? Why is it important? How will we know when we are there? And who is the *we*? Is this Indigenous peoples, Settler peoples and/or Indigenous and Settler peoples? I have learned a lot about reconciliation; but I am not sure I know enough. These are my words; but they could easily be anyone's. They speak to what many Canadians are grappling with regarding reconciliation.

I have found in the literature that the perspective of reconciliation will vary depending on who is defining it and what one's experiences have been with Indigenous and Settler peoples. There are **national** discourses about reconciliation taking place from Settler perspectives. Shelagh Rogers (2012) says that reconciliation is about taking apart the whole system of colonialism which includes the personal, political and philosophical relationships that have been built between Indigenous and Settler peoples and re-building them. Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham (2009) see reconciliation as an ongoing process of reckoning with colonial injustices. Similarly, Colleen Sheppard (2013) says that the ongoing structural and systemic legacies of the residential schools and government policies regarding Indigenous peoples need to be addressed. Paulette Regan (2010) focuses the meaning of reconciliation on the collective work that Settlers need to do with reconciling the history of Canada as they came to know it and how they came to know (or not know) Indigenous peoples. The TRC (2015a) describes reconciliation as coming to terms with events of the past in a manner that overcomes conflict and establishes a respectful and healthy relationship among people, going forward. Victoria Freeman (2014) sees reconciliation in the form of an ongoing process of building relationships, alliances and social understandings between Indigenous and Settler peoples.

Indigenous perspectives are also revealed in national discourses of reconciliation. Garnet Angeconeb (2012) says that reconciliation is about relationships and communication. John Amagoalik (2012) sees reconciliation as not being the right word to use. For him,

reconciliation implies that a relationship can be re-stored to its previous harmony. He says that the relationship between Indigenous and Settler peoples has never really been harmonious and thus, conciliation may be a better place to start. For John, conciliation is about overcoming the distrust and hostility that has been built up between Indigenous and Settler peoples and to make things compatible. Taiakake Alfred (2014) states that reconciliation means first transferring the land back to Indigenous peoples, and then working on relationships. He stresses the importance of Canadians understanding the historical and cultural connection Indigenous people have had with the land and how integral the land is to their way of being.

These national discourses are compelling and important. They perhaps provide a general framework of thought for further deliberation and they certainly ignite debate, conversations and further discourses. But, something is missing. It feels daunting and overwhelming to think about what this means for me in my part of Canada. How do I take these national discourses that are found in journals, popular magazines, newspapers and television and contribute to reconciliation? That is, if I even want to. Will people automatically want to contribute to reconciliation? Something is missing with what to do next. Indeed, in the various circles I facilitate I hear participants ask, "What can we (I) do?" I admit that when I first started exploring discourses on reconciliation, I was looking to what people were saying about where Canada needs to move as a whole. It was my own experience of feeling overwhelmed by the dominating discourses that I searched further for something I could relate to. I found discourses making it to journals and the media regarding reconciliation efforts at the community level.

Developing from a growing national awareness of the need for better intercultural relations between Indigenous and Settler Australians, an example of a community effort can be found from a partnership built between music students from Griffith University and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia (Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, 2012). It was found that in order to complete certain tasks such as writing lyrics and recording songs, efforts were needed in building relationships and sharing tasks with one another. It was discovered that when the students became part of the project, rather than just observers of the process, a *space* was created for transformation of a new relationships between the Indigenous peoples and the university students.

In British Columbia, there is a community outreach project called Reconciliation Canada (2015) led by Chief Robert Joseph of Gwawaenuk First Nation. The goal of this project is to bring people together through various activities to engage in dialogue about reconciliation. Thus, by doing with one another, people learn about each other, their histories and their experiences. This model focuses on collective goals, while at the same time, still recognizing the differences among people. I have heard Gale Cyr who is known as "granty⁹" in our community say something similar. She tells me to remember "the differences in the commonalities and the commonalities in the differences" (personal communication, May 17, 2015; June 6, 24, 2015). I pick up from her words that it is okay to maintain one's

own identity and uniqueness but that people can still come together to share what they have in common with one another (e.g. the land where we live; the water we all drink etc.).

Maggie Hodgson (2008) shares the experience of a community 'reconciliation walk' involving local Indigenous and Settler peoples and how they all walked with former residential school survivors and their families and concluded the day with a feast for all. She discusses how at one time there was a boycott of the local town by the Indigenous community because of hurtful remarks made against them by the town councillor. The Indigenous peoples' initiative to invite the Settler people from the town for this walk shifted the boycotting to education and the building of relationships based on mutual respect as ways to resolve differences.

Creating community efforts of building relationships as noted above speak to what Victoria Freeman (2014) calls "place-based" relationship building. Thus, Indigenous and Settler peoples living close to one another can come together for their mutual needs. But, living close to one another does not necessarily mean that Indigenous and Settler peoples *will* relate to one another. Something needs to come before this.

As I delved deeper into the literature, I found meanings of reconciliation at the individual level. Fred Kelly (2012) speaks about reconciliation being personal and making peace with oneself and reclaiming one's identity. He discusses that it is through personal reconciliation that one is then able to reach out to reconcile with others. Similarly, Gregory Younging (2009) speaks about reconciliation being first about undergoing what he calls a "micro reconciliation" (p.6) within oneself. Lee Maracle (cited in Victoria Freeman, 2014) says that the first step in the process of reconciliation is facing oneself. This involves acknowledging one's own relationship to the colonial past, what gets perpetuated as a result, and the decolonization that needs to happen for Indigenous and Settler peoples. These discussions prompt me to reflect back on my own journey of reconciliation.

Maggie Hodgson (2008) describes reconciliation as being a Western concept; but she puts the meaning in her own words: "bringing one's spirit to a place of peace" (p.365). She also talks about "Wind spirit." She says that it is through the "wind spirit," that one is responsible for the breath breathed into the tone and words that one uses to speak. Thus, Indigenous and Settler peoples have affected each other's spirit through giving breath to words that hurt. Maggie says that both have choice and responsibility about whether they will continue to impact each other's spirit in hurtful ways or find ways to come to peace.

The discourses of reconciliation at the individual level that have found their way to documentation in journals and books can prompt one to reflect on their meanings and implications for oneself. But, there is still something missing. Me! No, seriously. My stories presented at the beginning of this article are not in any journal or publication. They are real and one could say that they are efforts contributing to reconciliation. Their absence in publications prompts me to think about what other individual and local stories of reconciliation are happening someplace in Canada that me and others don't know about. This leads me to thinking about social change; the kind of change that happens slowly, in

increments, and over time. Imagine dropping a pebble into a pond. One will see a circle form from where the pebble was first dropped. But, then there is another circle beyond the first one that forms. Then there is another, and another, and so on. There is an energy present that pushes out and creates each of these next circles. Dropping this pebble into a pond can be compared to human growth, development of relationships and yes, reconciliation.

The growth of circles arising from the dropped pebble is symbolic of an Indigenous epistemological concept referred to as *all my relations*¹⁰ (e.g. Elder Jean Becker, personal communications, 2003-present; Gale Cyr, personal communications, 2014-present; Cyndy Baskin, 2011; Kathy Absolon, 2010; Herb Nabigon, 2006; Michael Hart, 2002). I have been taught that my circle of relations is only as good as my relationship with myself. A healthy relationship involves living life wholistically; which means having balance spiritually, emotional, mentally (i.e. cognitively), and physically (e.g. Kathy Absolon, 2011; Julie Bopp, Michael Bopp, Lee Brown & Phil Lane, Jr., 1984). From the Anishinabe teachings that I am most familiar with, living wholistically also involves following the ancient teachings of the Seven Grandfathers (e.g. Elder Jean Becker, personal communications, 2003-present; Gale Cyr, personal communications, 2014-present; Edward Benton-Banai, 1988; Cyndy Baskin, 2011; Herb Nabigon, 2006). These grandfathers refer to: love, respect, truth, honesty, courage, humility and wisdom. Thus, *all my relations* are impacted to the degree to which a person lives their life wholistically and incorporates the Seven Grandfathers. If it is not the Seven Grandfathers, then it could be another teaching that helps a person to live in a balanced and good way.

The circle of relations can be hurt by one's limited efforts to bring the teachings into one's life. However, it can flourish with conscious effort to live these teachings to the best of one's ability. When a person makes effort to live a more balanced way, opportunities for forming positive relationships with other human beings and *all our relations* open up and the circle of relations becomes bigger. When one is living towards balance, there is greater potential to consider one's own implication in the matters at hand (such as reconciliation) and to listen, to have empathy for, and inquire about other peoples' concerns. A journal entry from Mitch (one of the music students from Griffith University) reveals his efforts to live a balanced life through his introspection and inquiry about his lack of knowledge of the Indigenous peoples:

In learning about other people's culture and musical styles, I felt I learnt more about my own [...], I saw great value in the cultural exchange that took place, and realised that as an urban Australian, I really knew nothing about indigenous culture. I am grateful that I was given the opportunity to take part in such an amazing experience. [...] Culturally, I will be able to take a lot of knowledge back home about the indigenous community, that I otherwise wouldn't have learnt had it not been for this trip. (Mitch, field diary, 2010 cited in B. Bartleet, 2012, p. 55)

Continuing with this discussion of *all my relations*, I refer back to the vignette of the sharing circle. Over time, participants were sharing their connections and experiences involving Indigenous and Settler peoples. I, for one, talked about the work our Indigenous women's drum circle was doing, working with the Presbyterian, Lutheran and Mennonite Churches to develop and implement mutually agreeable services of faith. A man, who discovered his Mohawk heritage late in life, discussed how he was working with his community to start a similar sharing circle there. A man of Settler heritage, shared that he has been offering a portion of his farm land to an Elder for sweat lodge ceremonies. A woman of Settler heritage, who is an elementary school teacher, shared her experience of using the Blanket Exercise¹¹ (KAIROS, 2013) with her students. I was astounded to learn of the multitude of connections and relationships being built right here, in our local region. To bring this revelation to light, I drew a large circle on a poster-size paper and I asked everyone to write down their connections. See **Figure 1**.

When I looked closer at the circle, I saw ripples of many interconnections; thus, one connection was connected to another via another. As I ponder the connections being made, I wonder if this was happening because of the readiness of the people involved to engage with one another. Were they at a point in their lives where they could be open to learning about others different from themselves and in forming new relationships.

This ripple effect of interconnections described from an *all my relations* Indigenous perspective is how I view reconciliation moving forward. Thus, I see that it is through the process of building better relationships between Indigenous and Settlers that change will happen and efforts towards reconciliation will grow. Thus, the energies contributed towards Indigenous and Settler peoples talking together, doing together and being together is a force that is happening and already creating change. I see these efforts as being 'bits of reconciliation efforts' at the local and community levels that are contributing to and keeping the momentum of reconciliation moving forward. These 'bits' can add to the collective whole of what is happening individually, locally, nationally and globally. When I think about reconciliation in these terms, I see possibilities and change. I see that there is something anyone can do to contribute to reconciliation.

need for relationships arises again with the recent release of the TRC Final Report (TRC, 2015b). This report talks about the need to establish and maintain a mutually respectful relationship between Indigenous and Settler peoples in Canada. To this goal, the TRC states that reconciliation needs to be practiced in everyday life – within oneself, one’s family, communities, government, places of worship, schools and workplaces. Again, I add that these everyday efforts contributing to respectful relationships can add to the collective energy of peoples’ individual, community, national efforts towards reconciliation.

Concluding Thoughts

A reflection on the various national discourses taking place reveals perspectives for the nation as a whole. Discourses on the community and individual levels reveal efforts of reconciliation that can start with just one person. The global perspective, while seeming to be large in perspective can reveal national and/or personal and local stories of reconciliation from other parts of the world and can contribute to the understanding of reconciliation within Canada. In amongst all of these stories are the complexities of human beings and their degree of readiness to engage in dialogues and action regarding reconciliation. Reconciliation is also complex and evolving. It is not a goal to obtain, but a journey of change to embark on. I feel hope that can come out of the growing energy of all the bits of reconciliation already taking place.

As I close, I am reminded of a teaching an Elder gave to me a long time ago regarding relationships. She said that one cannot just make a relation one time and expect the relationship to take care of itself. It needs to be re-visited and nourished. She was talking about relationships with *all our relations* (i.e. people, animals, trees, plants, land, water, the environment). She said that when we forget that we are connected to everything and we don’t renew our relationships, things fall apart. People get disconnected. The land, water and environment become sick. The animals, plants and trees stop helping us. If Indigenous and Settler peoples do not connect with one another, how will they know each other? How will they care about one another if they don’t know each other? It is in the coming to know each other that one comes to know HOW to relate to the Other. **Reconciliation?**

Endnotes

¹ A local march in Waterloo Region contributing to global mobilization in support of climate justice and clean energy.

² Circle in this context is an Indigenous denotation of a group of gathering

³ A ceremonial process of burning sage in a porcelain bowl or abalone shell. When the fire goes out, the smoke is used to cleanse. One brings the smoke to one’s eyes, ears, mouth and heart to clear away any negative thoughts/energy and to make way for good thoughts and positive energy.

⁴ Professor Sorouja Moll. Information about event can be obtained from: <https://uwaterloo.ca/womens-studies/16-days-of-activism/writing-names>

⁵ I wish to acknowledge the whole of authors' identities by including their first names.

⁶ My roots are connected to the Indigenous peoples of Finland.

⁷ Paulette Regan (2010)⁷ defines Settler peoples as "Euro-Canadians whose ancestors came to Canada during the colonial period and also more recent immigrants who are from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds..." (p. 240).

⁸ Truth & Reconciliation: What's Law Got to Do with It? May 24, 2014 at Centre Wellington District High School, Fergus, Ontario.

⁹ Grandmother and aunty combined together

¹⁰ An Indigenous concept used to describe how human beings are first connected to themselves, then to their families, communities, nations, universe, plants, tress, animals, insects, birds, crawlers, the land, the water and all else that is in Creation.

¹¹ The Blanket Exercise, first developed in 1998, is now at its' third edition. KAIROS is a collective of Canadian churches and religious organizations working towards human rights and ecological justice. The Blanket Exercise is their expression of commitment to public education about Indigenous history and the nation-to-nation relationship that once was between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

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