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Virginia "Ginny" Doctor

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## Truth and Reconciliation, and the Anglican Church of Canada

**The Rev. Canon Virginia “Ginny” Doctor\***

**I**n 2010, I wrote an article on reconciliation for the *First Peoples Theology Journal*.<sup>1</sup> In this article I proposed four steps to reconciliation: recognition, validation, healing and a forgiveness ceremony.

Since then, I have undertaken a new position with the Anglican Church of Canada as the Coordinator for Indigenous Ministry. When I entered this position the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was in the midst of conducting hearings around the country for the survivors of residential schools. The survivors were given the opportunity to speak the truth about their experience in residential schools. I attended several hearings and found them very challenging as the survivors spoke about the abuse they endured. It was a very emotional time for me and for everyone who experienced the hearings. There were so many stories of people who wanted to testify that the Commission had to extend the time for the truth telling. The reconciliation part is in the 94 Calls to Action in the final report of the Commission.

Reconciliation is about giving something back that was taken away; it is a large part of the healing that needs to occur before we can move to forgiveness. There are some who say that while Indigenous people can forgive, they never forget. The legacy of the residential schools cannot be forgotten at this point because it lives and breathes in the form of historical trauma. Historical trauma is prevalent in our Indigenous communities. This trauma is a result of those things taken away through the residential schools and other institutions. It all began with the Doctrine of Discovery that gave explorers sanction to claim indigenous land for the country they represented. This sanction was derived from the Doctrine of *Terra nullius*, a papal bull of Pope Urban II issued in 1095, which allowed Christian European states to claim land inhabited by non-Christians.<sup>2</sup>

Settlers came, took land and water rights. Indigenous people lost many things that are the essence of their being. Indigenous people are in great pain and grief; a pain and grief we didn't realize until we began to look at the many socio-economic problems rampant in our communities. These problems, called “crises” in the 1994 *A Covenant and our Journey of Spiritual Renewal* offered to the Anglican Church of Canada, were (and still are) broken homes and lives, sexual and family violence, high recidivism and incarceration rates, high chemical abuse, loss of spiritual fulfillment, loss of cultures, languages and traditions, and poor stewardship of Mother Earth.<sup>3</sup> Our recent work recognizes that these may lead to suicide, low self-esteem, loss of innocence, diabetes, and drug and alcohol addiction. As a church, we need to look at ways to restore the spirituality of our people.

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\* Coordinator for Indigenous Ministries, Indigenous Ministries, Anglican Church of Canada, Toronto, ON.

Our history is difficult but we must know it so we can identify those incidences that helped keep us strong and faithful to God, our Creator. It is these that will help us reconcile the past. While we need to know the hurtful history, we also need to know the good. The “good” is passed on in our storytelling, our ancient way of recording our history. It has been said that Indigenous people are more right brained than left brained. One of the characteristics of being right brained is visualization. When we are told a story, we can easily see it. Another aspect is creativity and artistry. In Indigenous ways, artistry and function are combined in ways that are beautiful and meaningful. While living on the Yukon River I learned how to carve cottonwood bark. The old Athabascans used this art to carve combs, spoons and other utensils. They were always made with some kind of meaningful design. I made mine with turtles, my clan. I also made crosses and each one made was done with prayer. I watched many women do bead work, sewing intricate patterns for gloves, slippers, and other accessories. The women would talk about how things were, how things are and how things are supposed to be. I remember my Grandmother and other women working on quilts at the Church women’s sewing circle. They would make one, and then sell it to help keep the church going. Again, they would sit around the quilt and tell stories, they would laugh, cry or sometimes just be silent.

A Cayuga man is currently promoting a project to restore the ancient raised beading technique that was prevalent among Six Nation people. He is combining it with healing and has obtained several doors from residential schools. People are being taught this technique and they will be placed upon the panels of the doors. The first door, from the Mohawk Institute, will have 130 raised strawberries on it, one for each of the residential schools in Canada. He is giving back something that was taken away from those attending the Mohawk Institute. Once children were removed from the home, it was practically impossible to carry forth the traditions and artistry found in the homes and community. It is significant that the strawberry used in its design is one of the first fruits of the summer season and it also has medicinal/healing value.

Another important facet of reconciliation is remembering and living our traditional teachings. Since I have been working in Canada, I have become very familiar with the Seven Grandfather Teachings of the Cree (and other First Nations) of humility, love, wisdom, truth, generosity, courage and respect, and will use these to illustrate remembering and living. It is important to recognize that these teachings are not contrary to Christian teachings and that they should be incorporated into our ministry as Indigenous Christians. In doing so, we honor our ancestors and begin to know that what we had was not evil as some early missionaries or settlers might believe.

As I said before, when we tell stories, we make the listener see what we are telling; we are painting a picture. However, it is very important to be a good listener, to hear with the heart and not try to analyze. One story I like to use for the teaching humility is the story of why the corn husk doll doesn’t have a face. A long time ago, there were three sisters; corn, squash and beans. The Creator placed the sisters on Mother Earth to sustain the people to

come. Corn decided to make things for people to use – mats to sit on and also little dolls to play with. One day Corn made a really beautiful doll. This Corn husk doll would go the water and look at her reflection. She would say, “I am so pretty, with my flowing silk hair and husks of gold. The Creator would speak to her and say, “You are pretty but so are your sisters.” Corn doll would laugh and say, “No, I am the prettiest.” These went on several times and finally the Creator said, “If you continue to say these things, something will be taken away from you.” Again, Corn doll laughed and didn’t believe what she was told. The next day she went to look at herself and when she peered into the water she did not see herself. The Creator had taken away her face. It’s not that she wasn’t pretty, but that she bragged about it. As children we are told, “Don’t ever say you are better than anyone else and don’t brag about what you have, just be thankful for what you have.”

An important teaching is Love and there are so many stories of love in our communities that it’s difficult to pick one to share. The strong faith of our elders is certainly one of love. They have experienced difficult times and challenges, been ridiculed but yet have remained strong in their faith. It’s about loving God. I had a mentor in Alaska, and elder who spent much time with me as we ministered together to restore the presence of the Church in the village. He was called to ordained ministry and I was called upon to help him get through the daunting process. We talked by my woodstove glowing with heat – drinking coffee – about what we needed to do and how we would do it. He would usually come in the morning; at first I thought he was checking on me to see if I was still alive and not frozen to death! But, he wanted to share things with me that he had not shared with others, mainly about his worthiness and call to ordained ministry. One day I asked him point blank, “Why do you want to be ordained?” He looked out the window at the bird feeder where some grosbeaks were feeding. He said, “See those birds out there? They get to eat because you feed them. I want to feed my people because I love them. It hurts me when they have to go without communion, without that spiritual food. Seems like the only time we get to have communion is when there is a funeral.” I looked at him and said, “You know, this isn’t going to be easy but we will find a way to make it easier.” He said, “I know that but I love my people and love my God.” After all he had been through, he still had faith because he had love. It took us six years but he was ordained and what a difference it made in the community. If we can love through our pain, reconciliation is possible. John, my mentor was able to reconcile his past and with those he may have hurt in that past. God is good, God is love!

Generosity is a quality that I see in all of our communities. When Jesus fed the five-thousand he was giving us instructions for living a generous life. We have to look around to see what we have and then give thanks for what we have. It then becomes enough or sometimes even more. I was teaching a Sunday school class on the feeding of the five-thousand. After I told the story, I put out five round crackers and two strips of dried fish. I told the class, “This is all I have for your snack.” They looked at me like I was crazy. One boy pulled out his pocket knife and began to cut the strips so everyone could have a piece. Several girls broke the crackers apart. Then one said, “We have to pray now.” They did and each had a cracker

with fish. The real miracle occurred when the children started to dig in their pockets. All of a sudden we had an abundance of candy that was shared with all. We also witness generosity at times of celebration and tragedy. These are times for feasting and people contribute whatever they have to feed the community and visitors. I have seen hunters go out in -30 degree weather to “get a moose” to feed everyone. They are generous with their time and talent but they are also giving thanksgiving and respect to the moose by the way they butcher it. Nothing is wasted. I have watched elders cut fish, lips moving in prayer as they reverently cut these gifts from the river, from God. What can’t be used is returned to the river and a prayer is said for what is being returned and what has been given. If we are generous with what we have been given, God will continue to be generous to us.

You may be wondering why I am telling these stories and there are more I could tell. It is my way of explaining what is needed for reconciliation. If we honor the Traditional Teachings of Indigenous people the path will become clear. If we recognize the gifts of Indigenous people, the path will become clear. If we give back and then reclaim the things we have lost, the path will become clear. All of this takes courage. We cannot be afraid of what others will say, or perhaps not say. We have to think more about “right brained reconciliation” and how it intertwines with the left brain. Both are needed, both need to be honored. For Indigenous people, what is created with one’s hands comes from the heart. We are in this together, the left brain cannot operate without the right brain; and we need each other to be complete beings for our Creator.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>“Moving Around the Circle: Four Steps to Reconciliation, *First Peoples Theology Journal/Special edition for the Oklahoma IV Consultation on Remembrance, Recognition, Reconciliation and Reclamation at the University of the South School of Theology* Vol. 10 No. 1 (May 2010): 94-100.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <http://archive.anglican.ca/gs2001/rr/presentations/terranullius.html> accessed 27.05.16.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <http://www.anglican.ca/im/foundational-documents/covenant/> accessed 27.05.16.