

"Bury the Hatchet" Brad Jersak

"BURY THE HATCHET"

The practice of burying hatchets by First Nations (i.e. Indigenous) chiefs to seal a peace agreement was noted by settlers in the 17th century. In Thwaite's *Jesuit Relations* (1644) we read of chiefs who "Proclaim that they wish to unite all the nations of the earth and to hurl the hatchet so far into the depths of the earth that it shall never again be seen in the future." The exact phrase, *bury the hatchet*, occurs for the first time in *The History of the Five Indian Nations of Canada* (1747).

Burying the hatchet makes for an excellent working definition of reconciliation (making peace) and forgiveness (burying the weapons of violence and vengeance) and echoes the words of Christ, who said,

Blessed are the meek; they shall inherit the land. Blessed are the merciful; they shall receive mercy. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice; they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called children of God. —Matthew 5:6,9 my translation.

"BRIGHT NEW DAY"

I met Chief Robert Joseph on the volatile grounds of St. George's Residential School, one of many notorious religious boarding schools where countless Canadian Indigenous children had been taken (from their families), stripped of their culture and language, malnourished,

beaten and molested as part of my country's greatest human rights crime.

Now, the Lytton First Nation was hosting 60 representatives for a "Bright New Day" workshop on the traditional territories of the N'Laka'Pamux Peoples. Half the group were from Aboriginal communities. The rest of us represented governments and businesses with a stake in building relationships with First Nations communities. I was there with my friend, Charles Littledale, a Hydro consultant.

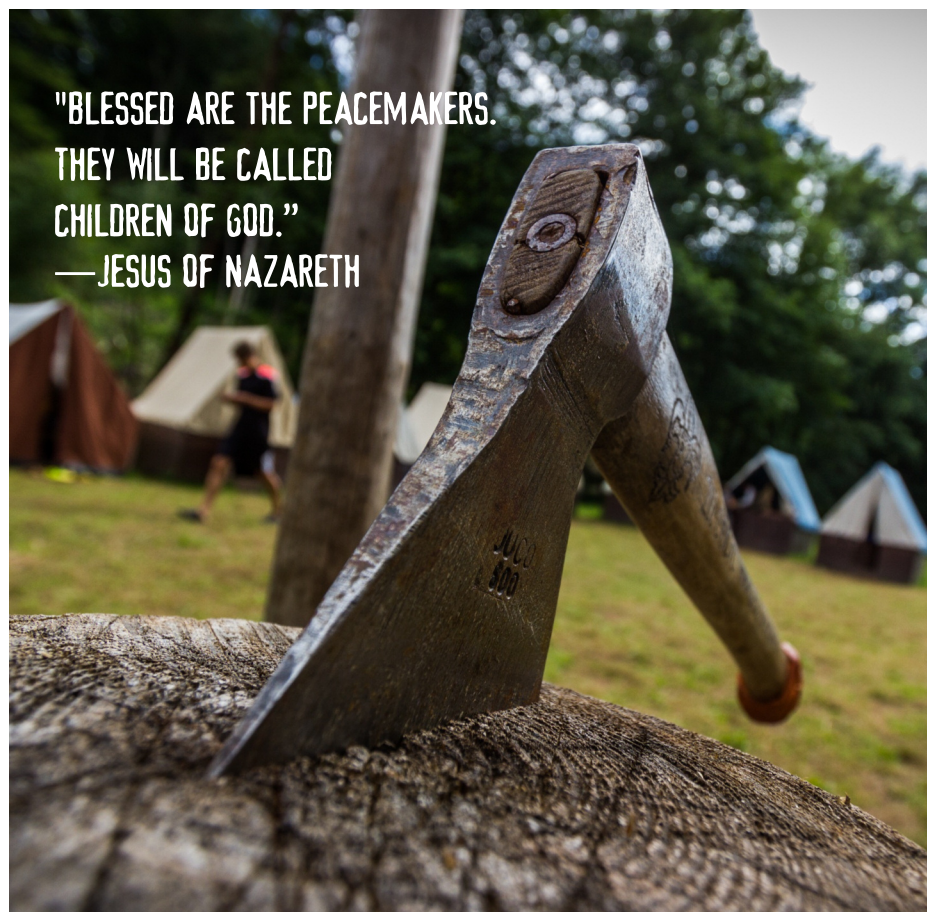
Our major task was to discuss what "reconciliation" means in the aftermath of that cruel and too-recent past. Although I am a

trained theologian, I had no idea how intensely I was about to be "schooled." I hope that sharing my "Bright New Day" experience (with Chief Joseph's blessing) will highlight implications of the Cross for reconciliation and the true nature of forgiveness.

"RECONCILIATION" DEFINED

"Reconciliation comes from addressing a point of pain or silence or frustration between communities, and addressing it together. Bringing people face-to-face to work through these issues is the best way to create lasting change and a future that will be better for all."

—Chief Robert Joseph



During our “Bright New Day” workshop, many non-Indigenous reps typically proposed definitions of reconciliation but the First Nations members started with personal stories of heartache. To them, reconciliation involves real-life struggles, dealing with a host of painful personal and public issues that take great courage to recount. Many had been residents of St. George’s, where they endured isolation from family and culture, all manner of discrimination and abuse, hunger and illness.

Others spoke of tragedies involving domestic violence, substance abuse and broken families. On the public level, they reminisced about the days of roadblocks, tensions around forestry and fishing, and the unresolved matter of rights and land titles.

When emotions showed and tears flowed, these were always acknowledged and honored with a hug from one of the elders.

Personalizing our understanding of and commitment to reconciliation was instructive,

cathartic and yes, included “cringe-moments.” Facilitators created a healthy place for authentic vulnerability. People expressed their hurts and anger without being shut down or tuned out. Some, unable to say the words “reconciliation” or “forgiveness” at first, were finally able to voice their story.

We weren’t merely rehashing old wounds—genuine healing was happening. Nevertheless, I confess to some despair (was it theirs or my own?) when I realized how deep and old and raw the grievances were.

On one hand, several First Nations people described how they were only able to find healing and reconciliation after choosing to forgive and “leave that old sh*t behind.” But one precious elderly woman, whose entire life had been reduced to ruins from a young age, defined reconciliation as litigation, the vow never to forgive and a wish that her offender be “mangled.” For her, it was offensive and ludicrous for someone to say, “Just forgive and move on.”

An iconic Canadian politician, Iona Campagnola, responded by validating her pain: “Some things are unforgivable.”

I wondered to myself, *Can reconciliation really span the polarities of vengeance and forgiveness, or retribution and restoration? Can there be reconciliation without forgiveness? Or does the word reconciliation become so broad as to be meaningless?*

Then Chief Ruby Dunstan challenged me directly. For her, the pressing question was, *“Reconciliation to what?”*

RECONCILIATION THROUGH INDIGENOUS EYES

I would summarize our shared vision of reconciliation after two days as follows. In First Nations context, reconciliation includes:

- **Making peace with the Creator:** It starts with God. Every meeting was blessed in prayer by one of the elders and prayerful songs were offered at the beginning and end of the conference.

- **Making peace with oneself and one’s past:** One’s history cannot merely be erased from memory; nor should it be. But can we relate to the past as the story which brought us to today—or will we continue to be tormented by the past as if it were today? Ideally, reconciling with the





CHIEF ROBERT JOSEPH

past, whatever healing journey that requires, will set us free from being stuck in past pain so we function as whole people.

- **Making peace with each other:** I am most familiar with peacemaking at the individual and family level. But how do we make peace or restore trust with institutions, churches, corporations and governments? This is not a given. Often, the healthiest route is building firm boundaries (with the help of courts and communities) and having sought restitution, agree to part company.

- **Making peace with the land:** For First Nations people, reconciliation includes the role and importance of the land to their history and identity. Historically, unresolved land claims and modern infringement cases put First Nations groups across the table from government and business as enemies—if parties even agree to meet.

But today, there's a growing desire to move beyond adversarial encounters and litigation towards reconciliation and partnership.

- **Making peace with creation:** Related to the land is a renewed and unified commitment to ecological responsibility. God has called us to steward creation and its resources, sustainably and responsibly, rather than exploiting it beyond repair. This isn't a political partisan issue—the Native peoples know it is a Genesis 2 creation mandate.

WHAT FORGIVENESS IS NOT

How does forgiveness relate to reconciliation? I recall what one bright First Nations leader called her “f-word”—*forgiveness*. By describing what she could and could not offer at her stage in the journey, I saw more clearly *what forgiveness IS and what it is NOT*:

Forgiveness is NOT saying "It's okay." What happened is NOT okay. Abuse and oppression are never acceptable. Forgiveness must not minimize injustice or the damage it does.

Forgiveness is NOT saying "I'm okay." Healing can take years. Genuine forgiveness does not ask anyone to skip any stage of the grieving and healing process.

Forgiveness is NOT saying "You're okay." The offender is not simply off the hook. Repentance includes facing consequences, which may include incarceration, rehabilitation, restitution and restoration.

Forgiveness is NOT saying "We're okay." Forgiveness may include but does not require the victim of injustice to re-enter a relationship with the offender. That may not even be safe. One can forgive and be healed without ever being reconciled.

FORGIVENESS MEANS "LETTING GO"

Forgiveness happens when we *release our offenders to God's judgment*, rather than chaining our hearts to them with resentment. We become like those we resent but become free from those we forgive. So, we allow the Creator to unbind us from them and trust God to heal one and all by his love and mercy. This doesn't mean we bypass human justice systems when necessary. But it means our healing doesn't depend on courts.

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Forgiveness happens when we *release our burdens* of hurt, grief, anger, loss and sorrow to God's care, rather than stuffing them or fashioning them into weapons. We exchange them for the Creator's love, joy, peace and healing mercy. We look to God, rather than our own outrage and indignation, for strength and

wisdom to fight ongoing battles, lest we perpetuate injustice in our own families and communities.

Forgiveness happens when we *release the debt of the other's offense into God's hands.* Even if they repent sincerely and make restitution, our offenders can never cover the debt of harms done. We must let God bear that burden—ours and theirs. For Christians, the Cross is our most powerful image of this divine "sin-bearing."

Forgiveness happens when we *release our healing into God's hands.* No one's punishment or repentance is sufficient to heal us. Only God can truly do that. Our healing is NOT in the hands of the ones who hurt us. Surrendering to God's care within a community of reconciliation makes healing possible.

Forgiveness happens when we *release our guilt into God's hands.* Many former residents of St. George's saw how their experience there shaped them into abusers, addicts and criminals. When they finally owned and gave their own guilt to God, healing became possible.

Forgiveness happens when, *having let go, we surrender our lives to Christ's love and care.* One man shared the story of how his pain had led him into years of addiction, homelessness and alienation from family and community. In his pain, he had damaged everyone in his life and was ready to take his own life. But God and his community walked him beyond shame and humiliation to receive forgiveness and belonging. His community became the welcoming arms of the Creator, agents of God's restoration and reconciliation.



I am grateful to our Indigenous neighbors for bringing God's light to reconciliation and forgiveness, so central to the Christian gospel. My prayer is that we would receive these gifts—reconciliation and forgiveness—from our Creator and Savior, Jesus Christ, embodied in communities of God's healing love. □

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