

*I offered this reflection at the Service of Praise at the Saskatchewan Conference (United Church) Annual Meeting held in Estevan on June 1, 2013. The theme of this annual meeting was "Gathering Spirits, Building Relationships". There are references throughout this reflection to our shared time at the Annual Meeting. For example, Ovide Mercredi was the theme speaker. The readings for this service were Matthew 11:28-30 and Corinthians 12:14-16.*

*After I spoke, I was approached by Yvonne Terry. When I read the canoe trip story Yvonne cried because as a black woman she and others have experienced that sense of invisibility that I wrote about many times, and her pain was not recognized in my telling. She wished that I had said that this experience is not limited to Indigenous-settler relations. The worship at the Annual Meeting provided by Tricia Gerhardt and Christa Eidness took a global view of building relationships. From the wisdom offered we could look at our own particular situations. In my reflection, I took a very particular view of building relationships (Indigenous - settler) and hoped that it might speak to other situations as well. Thank you, Yvonne, for bringing to my attention that our cultural blindspots affect **all** minority groups (not just Indigenous peoples).*

Good Morning. I know that there are people with us who have not been here the last 3 days, so I would like to introduce myself. My name is Sue Bland. I was born in Algonquin Territory and grew up near Ottawa. My ancestors came to North America in the 1700s and 1800s. I come from a long line of mothers, printers, mothers, sea captains, mothers, ministers, mothers, carpenters and florists. (I didn't want all those mothers to be forgotten!) In the 1980s, I came west to Treaty Four Territory and eventually married Shane whose people came from Germany, Ireland and Norway. They arrived to farm in the Abernethy district near the Qu'Appelle Valley 8 years after the signing of Treaty 4 in 1874. Here, Shane and I have raised 4 daughters....Here my own life has been enriched by both prairie small town culture and by my friends and neighbours who live in the File Hills area, who are Cree, Nakota, Saulteaux and Métis.

These last 3 years I have had the privilege of supporting the work of the Justice and Right Relations Network<sup>1</sup> - a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people walking together, dreaming of a world where all of our children and grandchildren can be friends, dreaming of justice, and trying to walk our talk. I should tell you that I am not a minister, I am not a preacher, so it is a little daunting to speak to a group so full of them. But I was asked to share some personal reflections about building bridges, and about truth and about reconciliation stemming from my work, and from my life, and I am happy to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> The Saskatchewan Justice and Right Relations Network originates from the Saskatchewan Conference of the United Church and is open to anyone who wants to work towards better relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. For more information, please see <http://justicerightrelations.wordpress.com>

My heart was filled with joy yesterday when Janet and David<sup>2</sup> brought their drums to prayer time and asked us all to join in a round dance. They offered us teachings about the round dance - a dance of peace and friendship, a dance to invite in and honour the spirits of the ancestors, a dance that is both a prayer and an action of love.

Janet also shared some teachings about the drum. For those of you who were not present, I would like to offer these thoughts from a fellow named Keeper, an Elder in Richard Wagamese's novel Keeper'N' Me.....

*The drum is the heartbeat of Mother Earth. In the Mornings ... we use the drum to join us up to that heartbeat. That heartbeat is always there, but we humans get too busy sometimes to listen. Wanna jump out of bed, dress like the fireman, and run out into our life. The only heartbeat we hear when we do that is the one that is going like crazy in our chest all day. So, us, we start our days joining up to the universal heartbeat. Making ourselves part of it.*

*The reason is easy to understand. When we're little babies rolling around inside our mothers all we can hear is her heartbeat. Ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom all around us when we're in there....*

*We're floating around and we feel all warm and safe with that heartbeat drumming away . We cry when we get sent out in the world because that sound gets cut off and we get scared. All we hear is the world then, noisy and loud. The more we hang around in the world, the more we forget the sound of that heartbeat and how we feel when we can hear it all around us. Sometimes we hear the birds or water or something nice around us, and it makes us feel good. Peaceful. Quiet inside because we all move through our lives with the echo of that heartbeat inside us and them nice things remind us of it. Our ears may forget what that heartbeat sounds like, but our insides never forget.*

*That's why we use the drum in the morning...Takes us back to our beginning. Reminds us that we gotta stay joined up with Mother Earth an that we can feel safe and protected that way. Reminds us to stop and listen for that heartbeat going around us all around us, even now. That's why we use it. Not for our ears, for our insides. Us, we have to learn to live from THE INSIDE OUT (my emphasis). The drum teaches us that when we know what it's for....<sup>3</sup>*

Each worship time this past week began with the sound of a beating heart, followed by a drum beat...What I love about Keeper's teaching is that when we are considering reconciliation, when we are thinking about building relationships, it brings our beautiful earth into the picture. Stan McKay, well known to many of us, suggests that

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<sup>2</sup> Janet Sigurdson and David Kim-Cragg led us in a Round Dance.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Wagamese. Keeper'N' Me, Doubleday Canada, excerpts from pp 113-116

reconciliation is more than about people getting along<sup>4</sup>, that in fact reconciliation is initiated by the Creator and it is about **all of creation** - care and reverence for all the plants and creatures, rocks, earth, lakes and air and the diverse peoples.

The other thing I love about this teaching is its focus on the **heart**. As we all know, the heart is absolutely central to any exploring of building bridges, of healing, of reconciliation.

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On Friday, Ovide (Mercredi) was asked what an ordinary person could do to build relationships with Indigenous people. Ovide told us about Bob, a journalist who used his gift to write in a way that encouraged people to explore further, to get them thinking about Indigenous issues. He also said “Bob travelled to our communities, Are you willing to do that? He slept in our homes. He was non-judgemental. He came to our meetings and events. He listened....and he asked questions.”

Yesterday during the Justice and Right Relations video, we listened to Lillian, an Indigenous Elder who said “We have these nuns from the Phillipines and they come to our round dances, and they are interested in our ways and I like that. When white people invite us into their homes and we eat with them and we visit, I really like that.”

And so, relationships.... friendships are vital to building bridges. We know that when we come to know someone, when we hear their story, we can entirely change our view of them.... our hearts can be shifted, and our own story about ourselves can change.

We also know that such friendships are rare in our province.

Dawn Rolke, one of our leaders and visionaries, shared this at a Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing last year<sup>5</sup>. She quoted David MacDonald who describes the “two solitudes” of Canada like this: “First Nations people, he said, had experienced so much racism, discrimination and prejudice that they didn't reach across the divide anymore. It was just too risky; it was too painful. Whites, he noted, particularly those who know something of residential schools or colonization, experience so much guilt, confusion or shame, that they don't reach across the divide either. They don't want to offend again. So, here we are, caught in our own worlds, both groups unable to reach across, to move past our own solitude.”

Dawn went on to say, “I realized that he spoke to my condition. What he said was true for me. I felt caught; I felt unable to reach across the divide of the past, and connect.

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<sup>4</sup> Stan McKay, “Expanding the Dialogue on Truth and Reconciliation- In a Good Way” in From Truth to Reconciliation: Transforming the Legacy of Indian Residential Schools, Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2006, p.106

<sup>5</sup> paraphrased by Dawn Rolke based on what she said at the Prince Albert TRC Hearings, Feb. 2012

I decided that day that I was going to find a way out of my solitude. I didn't know how, but I was going to do it.”

I think Dawn is right about this paralysis, this fear of doing wrong. Last year part of our role was to encourage United Church people and others to attend TRC hearings - to listen and to witness. Many many of you came and listened - not without trepidation for some....when should we arrive, what we should wear, how we should behave, should we speak or not? and of course, the bigger fear if we could handle what we heard, if the survivors even wanted us there, would people point the finger at us?... We were coming into a space which was unfamiliar to us, we were a bit on edge. The rules here were not our own.

I think that that is exactly what we are being called to do - to leave our own places of comfort, to notice our own fear, to do as Ovide and Lillian suggested and to travel to communities, to round dances, to powwows, to Idle No More rallies, to find ways to sit in other kitchens and invite people to sit in ours. There are many many invitations out there - our biggest task, I believe, is to begin to notice them.

(I meet many people who live in a part of the province where there are few or no Indigenous people, but I believe that if you form an intention to make these friendships, you will. Our own church offers these opportunities - in a great treaty program at Calling Lakes Centre<sup>6</sup> and through friendships in the Justice and Right Relations Network.)

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I want to share a story from my own journey, from my own adventures and misadventures in building relationships.

Last year, with 14 other women, I took part in Nimis Kahpomotate - Cree for Sister Journey, an intercultural women's canoe trip. This trip was planned with the goals of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in mind - an opportunity for 15 women, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to share our truths, our stories... a chance for healing and for reconciliation on the waters and rocky shores of Lac La Ronge.

The most experienced paddlers on our trip had had life changing experiences on previous summer canoe trips - they had often developed a wonderful program which supported their desire for spiritual growth. So, it was assumed that this would work well for our trip, too. I became part of a program planning team. Our group had a few conference calls, many ideas were circulating, a draft schedule was drawn up. On the third conference call, however, one of the Indigenous women said, “You know, I don't think I even want a program. My day to day life is so busy and so programmed. We will

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<sup>6</sup> Please see <http://www.callinglakes.ca> and ask about “Building Bridges: Treaty Days” held annually during September.

already have the daily routines of preparing meals, setting up camp. What I really need is just to be.”

A collective breath of profound relief passed through the wires that were connecting us. We agreed not to have a program. If someone wanted to offer yoga, or share how to bead or initiate a sharing circle they could do so... and if others wished to participate they could choose to...or not. We would support each woman to do the healing she needed to do in the way that best suited her.

When we got out on the water, however, that decision caused tension, stress, and discomfort for some. On our second night, for example, we gathered in small groups of 2 and 3 on the rocks near the water. Lots of conversation. One woman was beading. There was lots of laughter. Occasionally there were tears.

At the end of the evening, the group of women who had thrived in the past with more structure were upset - how could we achieve the goals of our canoe trip if we didn't have a sharing circle, for example? One said, “Nothing happened tonight. We are not accomplishing what we came here to do.” One of the Indigenous woman said, “All kinds of things were happening - the kind of sharing that happens between 2 or 3 people was happening, we are just getting to know each other - that kind of sharing might never take place in a sharing circle.” Another woman felt that the program planning team had shirked its duties. I would say that for a few, there was a real sense of panic that we did not have a program.

To be sure, all over the world there are some of us who prefer to let things unfold, and those of us who feel better with a plan, even a loose plan, in place. It isn't about which way is right or which which is better. It's about how all of us fall into the trap of not being able to see another way, another possibility when we are firmly attached to our own wonderful idea, agenda, way of doing things....I lay awake for a long time in my tent pondering all this. What disturbed me most deeply, of course, was what I learned about myself. I observed how we non-indigenous women could not even hear the other point of view, or at least not hear it in a way that we truly understood it in our hearts. I observed how strong the force in us was to prevail and do it our way, and how we felt entitled to do this. I observed how we weren't even aware of what we were doing.

As I said, in all this I saw myself. I have worked for many years building bridges, and I saw all too vividly how many times I had come into a setting with Indigenous people and very quickly assumed nothing was happening, nobody was going to take charge, so I did.

I did because somewhere deep in me, I believed I knew best. I may have observed that “nothing” was going on - but more correctly **nothing that I understood** was going on. Outside of my own way of seeing things, my own quite limited lenses, something was definitely happening.

One of the Indigenous women said to us, “Reconciliation isn’t all about talking. We want to have fun, let loose, play like tomboys, hang out. Many of us have not had a lot of chances to do that.”

We were bound to our idea of what we thought reconciliation was - thanks to some wonderful teachers, our idea grew. I could see all too clearly how often I had missed the gift, sitting right in front of me, because my heart did not yet understand what a gift it was.

This epiphany, while very difficult, had many ripples and continues to have ripples for me.

I could see that this is a very old story...we heard many versions of this story from Ovide.

This epiphany gave me a deeper understanding of and sympathy with our ancestors, some of who supported or taught at residential schools with the best of intentions, just like mine.

I could see that this story is still happening today, not only in my life, but in many ways on every level in our society. Idle No More is trying to address this old story, as just one example.

It allowed me to understand how deep this legacy is - it goes so deep that we are often blind to its power.

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Consider, for example, this way of looking at the word “colonization” which I have borrowed from Steven T. Newcomb.<sup>7</sup>

Colonization comes from the root word *colere* which means to “till, to cultivate farm (land)”. Colonization is

- taking control of indigenous soil
- uprooting indigenous plants (peoples)
- overturning soil (indigenous way of life)
- planting new colonial seeds (people)
- transplanting colonial plants (people from another place)
- harvesting the results(taking resources)

As Newcomb points out, our settler ancestors, and we ourselves fail to see the gifts that were and are already here, right in front of us.

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<sup>7</sup> Steven T. Newcomb, [Pagans in the Promised land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery](#), Fulcrum Publishing, 2008, p. 14

Last year an Elder told me “I have read your bible many times. I believe that if your people had come here as Jesus did, and walked among us, and been with the people in the way that Jesus did, there would have been no problem. But that is not what happened.”

I believe that Jesus was able to see the “essential nature” in the people he met and interacted with. (I borrow this term “essential nature” from Parker Palmer who wrote “we must know and revere the [essential] nature of the other...”) Imagine if our ancestors had come with a curiosity about the “essential nature” of the people who welcomed them. Imagine if they had paid attention to the “essential nature” of this rolling land, the many grasses and wildflowers, the creatures who call this place home. And like Ovide said yesterday, it isn’t that Indigenous are against agriculture or against resource development....it isn’t that these practices are inherently bad. What we are opposed to, he said, is how it has taken place, how it is continuing to taking place.

However, they and we, hang on to what Parker Palmer calls the “cherished and destructive myth of our culture” - the myth that all things, land....people are capable of being molded into any shape we desire.”<sup>8</sup>

This myth, Parker writes, results in violence to ourselves and to who or what we try to mold, whether we are speaking of people, other creatures or land. When we violate the essential nature of the other, we violate ourselves as well.<sup>9</sup>

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In one of our United Church apologies, we said, and I paraphrase - in our enthusiasm and zeal to share with you the wonderful message of Jesus Christ, we did not hear your story, we did not learn about your spiritual beliefs. You and we are poorer.<sup>10</sup>

Like my canoe trip story, if we are full to the brim with our own ideas, our expectations, our agendas or the great news that Jesus brings, we do not have room, we do not have the space within to truly listen, to discern the true nature of the other. We do not have room to receive the many gifts they offer. We cannot hear the universal heartbeat.

In my work with Justice and Right Relations, I have learned a lot about our United Church culture from the Indigenous folks who are a part of our network. This is something we really need to think about in our desire to become a truly affirming

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<sup>8</sup> Parker Palmer, [The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring](#), p. 69

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, page 70

<sup>10</sup> 1986 United Church Apology to First Nations People, Rt. Rev. Bob Smith. See <http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/policies/1986/a651>. A subsequent apology was made in 1998.

conference.<sup>11</sup> We have loads of jargon, we have a bureaucracy which is not only complex but which changes form frequently, some of the hymns we love may sound dreary or even oppressive to those who haven't grown up with them. Having accompanied Indigenous people to this very annual meeting, it is...well, a total mystery and incomprehensible!!

If we become truly affirming, it will change and transform us to the core.

Many of us were brought up on the Golden Rule, and Trisha and Chrysta <sup>12</sup>used it well as they shared many facets of the word *compassion*... Listening on Friday, I was reminded of my friend Jayne Whyte's proviso when it comes to the Golden Rule. Jayne is a mental health advocate, and I quote, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Jayne says, Even better, do **with** others as **they** would have you do **with** them. You might have to ask and listen because what is best for you is not necessarily what others want or need. And none of us like having things **done to us!**" <sup>13</sup>

One of our own wise women, Janet Clarke walks her talk. Her mantra "nothing about without me" has been a powerful teaching for me. That means if we are working on a project that might be about Indigenous people or people with mental health issues, that those walk with us from the get go, guiding us and teaching us. They are the experts. Jan's teaching can be applied to so many areas. When we do this, it will entirely change the way we work....often it slows down our work, we may be less efficient, we don't do things in the way we are accustomed to...but we are paying attention to what is really important... **relationships**....., we are treating those we work with with reverence and while we definitely go slower, we also go deeper and truer...we are working in a more organic way, with the "essential nature of things". We are more in tune with the universal heartbeat of the world.

As I listened to the devastating and often heartbreaking stories of those who attended residential school and their children and grandchildren, I was also struck by courage like I had never seen before, amazing resilience, great love, wicked and wonderful senses of humour... I heard so many teachings and wisdom - I remember thinking if all of Canada could just listen, we would have all the wisdom we need to go on.

Our ancestors may have missed the many gifts of Indigenous culture because of their zeal, but all of us right now have the opportunity to receive this gift, to learn other ways if we wish, to accept the invitations and openings in our own lives. This may be exactly

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<sup>11</sup> Sask Conference of the United Church became an "affirming conference" at this Annual Meeting. As an affirming conference, Sask Conference "embraces diversity and strives to include all, regardless of age, gender, race, culture, education, ability, economic status, marital status, sexual orientation or gender identity to participate in the structures of [Sask] conference."

<sup>12</sup> Worship throughout the annual meeting was offered by Tricia Erhardt and Christa Eidness, and drew (in part) on the Charter for Compassion, [charterforcompassion.org](http://charterforcompassion.org)

<sup>13</sup> This is also known as the "Platinum Rule." With thanks to Jayne Whyte.

the new wind, the fresh prairie breeze that we need to stir us. It may be exactly what we need for our own healing. (I didn't say this, but it may be exactly the fresh wind that our United Church so desperately needs.)

David Spangler writes "Healing is an act of creating wholeness. Usually this means restoring broken connections but sometimes its a matter of breaking old connections which no longer serves or that have become corrupted and then weaving new ones." <sup>14</sup>

What are the connections, the patterns which no longer serve us? I think we must each begin by reexamining our own personal stories. What is your relationship to this beautiful land? What is your story in relation to the First Peoples you share this land with? Which treaty territory do you live in? How have you benefited from this treaty? Has this treaty been honoured? What are you noticing and not noticing in the world around you? When it comes to your relationship with Indigenous people, what do you fear?

We also have to begin with how we see ourselves as United Church people - reexamining our own story, our own identities, keeping true things, letting go of other parts.

We are used to seeing ourselves as activists, as "doers" willing to roll up our shirtsleeves and take a stand, as leaders and helpers.

Can we be listeners? Can we be learners - can we unlearn old stories and learn new and difficult stories? We are even more aware of the terrible injustices in our country after listening to Ovide....Idle No More has asked us to be allies, to follow their lead, to join in the global round dance. Can we be followers?

Can we sit for a while and be present to our discomfort and our unknowing so that we can more accurately discern the simple quiet opportunities for shifting the pattern?<sup>15</sup> Can we learn to step back and observe before rushing in? Can we take the time to learn where our cultural blindspots might be?

Do we have space in ourselves for a new story? Can we step out of our own comfort zones? Can we enter the world in a new way...Can we approach this work with courage because these truths are not easy truths? Can we approach this work with joy and vitality, because as Marie Wilson told us last year, we have a "marvelous opportunity to be part of a new a new Canada..., a new dream" <sup>16</sup> and I would add , "a new creation".

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<sup>14</sup> David Spangler, blog in healing, date unknown

<sup>15</sup> Wayne Muller, Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in Our Busy lives, 2000, p.

<sup>16</sup> TRC Commissioner Marie Wilson addressed the Sask Conference of the United Church at our Annual meeting in Saskatoon in May 2012

We have a chance to be a part of the “turning of the world”, as Michelle’s chosen hymn puts it.<sup>17</sup>

A world where we take time and listen to the heartbeat of the earth, a world where we hear the gentle whisper of the prairie breeze, a world where we hear our own heartbeats and the heartbeats of those we share the earth with.

As Keeper says, the universal heartbeat is always there - we just need stillness and space to truly hear it. To be reminded to live from the inside out. To be reminded to know and revere the “essential nature” in the other. To live in a new creation where our children and grandchildren can - all of them- hold their heads up proud.

I am not a candidate for ordination but I want to share with you why I chose our next hymn which I always think of as “How Can I Keep from Singing?” (wrong title). The hymn acknowledges the truth, the dark places, the discomfort, the terrible injustices that are a part of our journey. As people of faith, as hopeful partners in a new creation, “we cannot keep from singing.” There is no other way to approach this most difficult and necessary work - this work of truth, of building relationships, of healing. As Alex Wilson asks “Where was the joy at residential school?” Part of reconciliation is to bring the joy back into our lives...enjoying, laughter, dancing, singing having fun - all of this is reconciliation.”

Please lift your hearts and join me in “My life flows on”.

*I would like to acknowledge and thank the following people for their contributions to this reflection: Dawn Rolke, Janet Clarke, LeeAnn Bird, Debra Brown, Jayne Whyte, Elsie Livingston, Elder Danny Musqua, Laura Stewart, Yvonne Terry and the wonderful members of J and RR, Nimis Kahpomotate 2012, and the Fort Qu’Appelle Idle No More Community Circle. Also, heartfelt gratitude to the late Cameron Akapew, the Starr family, Maggie King and spasaqsit possessum/ron tremblay, all dear friends and gifted teachers.*

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<sup>17</sup> Michelle Rowe was ordained during this service. The hymn is “The Canticle of the Turning”.