

Dr. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux Transcripts

Being an Honorary Witness:

>> When people were inducted into being an honorary witness for the TRC, they actually gave us a call a month in advance and said, you know, "We would like to induct you." It was flattering and sort of scary all at the same time. It was like, well, what does that actually mean then? And what will be required of me? But then I realized being inducted as an honorary witness is done because they're recognizing that you're already doing reconciliation work. And so it's just saying yes, we recognize that you've been spending a lot of time doing this reconciliation work, and we'd like to be able to honour that.

The process is more about continuing to do the work that you've been doing on a regular basis. Understanding that when you go out into the public and you're speaking on a variety of different things -- including reconciliation -- that you say, "As an honorary witness for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I'd like to..." And then go into the conversation that you have. So that people recognize that you are associated to that actual process that went across Canada, that has spoken to survivors all across the country, that is still continuing the work.

The truth has been told to a large degree, the reconciliation process is now unfolding across the country, and there are about 90 honorary witnesses across Canada from a variety of organizations, social levels, you know, backgrounds... There's, you know, former politicians, there's artists, there's athletes, there's teachers, and there are, you know, spokespeople from the Aboriginal community, from the non-Aboriginal community. So it's a very broad-reaching understanding with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Recommendation Highlights

There was one recommendation -- I believe there's 64 or 66 that I actually spoke to -- what should happen with youth? You know? What should we do as a government, as a Ministry, as a Canadian population about the young people in our society? Because they're the ones that get to inherit all of what we do today. There's a lot of recommendations about education. Certainly the Ministry of Education has a lot of work to do when it comes to putting those recommendations into action. But I think we should also come back to the idea that that education is

about those youth in this country, including, of course, the Aboriginal youth who need to be inspired, who need to be supported, and who need to be able to get to the places -- move through the gatekeepers and into academic institutions in a positive way with the supports that are cultural, financial, and, you know, societal. And, you know, they need mentorship. They need all those pieces.

So what can the Ministry do? The Ministry can ensure that they put the resources into the right places.

They also suggested that some of the youth organizations that are up and running -- and there are many. I'd say there's probably a good 20 ongoing, strong, you know, grounded youth organizations across Canada -- that those youth organizations be funded to continue to do the work they're doing. Because what they do is peer-to-peer inspiration and acknowledgement and teaching. So I think that that's something that the Ministry should pay attention to.

Delivering Indigenous Education

>> How do you express Indigenous ways of knowing or Indigenous world views in a classroom setting? That -- yeah, that's a big challenge for everybody. Because, you know, the fact of the matter is, you know, whether you respect Indigenous people or not, you're not ever going to be one if you're not one. And -- but then we have to look at it the other way too and say, well, you know, I go into a classroom and I'm taught a Western way of knowing and thinking, and I'm never going to be a Western person in that particular way. I'm never going to be non-Native. I am who I am. You are who you are. And so that's a really -- that's a big challenge.

But I think that we just have to try to think about being flexible with our education. Those tightly narrated definitions of how education should operate and what it should look like, they're changing. We may not be willing to change that, as educators of a certain age. But I can tell you that young people are ready and willing and doing just that. So in fact, they're already implementing Indigenous ways of knowing when they start to build a canoe in a university system that looks at math and science and technology. It's taking a holistic view of who we are as human beings and who we are -- and how we learn. So we don't only learn by sitting, you know, in rows and doing things by rote and by memorization. We actually do things by doing them. By actually going out and viewing, you know, how a tree...you know, how a forest is generated and how it grows up. You know, the acorn into the mighty oak thing. That holistic view of the world...that we're all connected. That everything we do...action creates reaction. So all it -- those are all Indigenous ways of knowing. It's saying...

So when an elder -- you know, and I remember being a young woman and, you know, this conversation with an elder sending you out the field and saying, "Okay, go sit on that rock and tell me what you see." You know, tell me what's happening. And you come back saying "Well, the sun is shining and the trees are there and there's some grass, and, you know, and my bum got sore from sitting on this rock for three hours and, you know... I didn't see anything." Right? "Birds flew by." Well, that's not what they're asking you to see. Right? They're asking you it from a holistic standpoint. They're saying that everything is interconnected. You know? That the trees are dependent upon the grasses that hold the earth, that hold the water, that create the evaporation, that... You know? All of those pieces are a part of it. And that hold the worms that the birds, you know, eat...everything is related. And when you come back and you understand that -- and each of those seasons is relevant, whether it's snowing... You know? What stage is the tree in? You know? Is it in full bloom in spring or is it losing its leaves because it's going to sleep for the winter? That's what they're asking you to look at. That's what they're asking you to see. And is that really such a bad thing? To take that into our educational institutions and say, you know, we don't really care about the dates. Like I've said to my students as a university professor, "I don't care if you remember the date of the Indian Act. I don't even care if you remember the Indian Act. What I really want is at the end of this year, when you walk out of this classroom on Aboriginal Initiatives or, you know, Native Studies...whatever you want to call it... that you have a really good sense of who Indigenous peoples in this country are. That they're here, they've always been here, they're going to be here tomorrow. And that they are as deserving of respect as anybody else in this society. And if you have that, and then when you walk out of here and you become a lawyer or a doctor or a bureaucrat or a prime minister, and you're sitting across the table from an Indigenous community, that you have an understanding that they are as deserving of good water, positive education, and medical services as anybody else in Toronto or anywhere else, then I've done my job. You are now fully educated...whether you can give me back a date or not. So that's really what it's about. It's just saying we are human beings. Being, not necessarily doing. That we don't have to develop everything within site. And put up skyscrapers everywhere. And to ensure -- you know, ensure that everybody has a car. Or, you know, take all of the gas out of the tar sands. We don't have -- or oil out of the tar sands. We don't have to do all of those things. Can we appreciate that the planet is finite? That we are destructive when we take all the protections off all of the waters and, you know, allow them to be turned into tailing ponds for money. Can't eat money. That's an education that -- and that's an Indigenous worldview that we have to be thinking seven generations back and seven generations forward. That's, I think, probably something that anybody should know and learn it, and hold dear to their heart.

What does reconciliation mean?

>> This is a big country, so there are going -- always going to be different perspectives on what reconciliation should look like for this country, who should be involved, the conversations that need to happen, who will actually provide the resourcing for that...whether it's human resources or fiscal resources... And those perspectives engage things like, you know, "Let's just have a conversation and consider it done."

There are conversations that talk about a reconstitution of the original Peace and Friendship understandings -- those treaties that were signed between the newcomers to this continent and those that were already existing here for thousands and thousands of years.

There's a conversation about revisiting those treaties and revisiting those agreements in a very positive way. And taking those agreements into the schools. 00:00:50.79 There are newcomers to this country who want to come to a country that has peaceful coexistence, who are saying, "We need to understand what this is about. Because we've just arrived within the last five years or 10 years..." And the conversation has not been an all-encompassing one.

So when you talk about reconciliation as Canada moves forward, how do we pull those pieces into the conversation? How do we educate newcomers and their children so that it's not 20 years down the line where people are saying, "Oh, maybe we need to do something about this." But they walk right into, "This is what we're doing. And this is what this country is all about." And these are the foundations that you need to understand and move forward with.

Advice for Educators

>> The advice that I would give to educators in schools today at any grade level, whether it's kindergarten all the way to a PhD level in a university, is to have the conversation. To not feel that they're not competent. Because that's been one of the challenges for educators for a very long time, is that they don't feel competent to speak about treaties, Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships, you know, the issues that are happening in communities, whether it's suicide or whether it's a breakdown in educational excellence. Whatever it might be, they don't feel competent. And I think that they need to understand that their competency isn't really the issue. You know? There's a learning curve and we get that. But just start the

conversation and send young people in the direction of doing that work themselves. And studying and bringing back their own questions about what they want to know, and addressing that. So it's a learning opportunity, I think, on both sides. So that's one thing is to not be so lost in all of that.

There are visuals that you can put into a university -- into kindergarten all the way up that actually include Indigenous peoples, include, you know, people from other countries... Like, there's a celebration of culture globally. Why is it so difficult for us to actually embed that in the places where our children spend so many hours in a day? And then you could -- and then they can do culture days. They can say, you know, we've got eight months of the school year and, you know, we're going to divide that up between all the cultures we have in our school -- including the Indigenous ones here in Canada -- and we're going to have a celebration and we're going to try the foods and we're going to try the, you know, the different things that they bring to it. Like, do things that make sense.

The Jewish community went to Baycrest. They took all the grade sixes in the territory around Baycrest and they had them interview the Holocaust survivors of Baycrest. And they came up with an incredible project. Well, why couldn't we do that with the Aboriginal community around any school? And that they would do an interview process? I did that at UFT. We brought in elders, paired the students with the elders, and they did a story and then they gave it back to the elders so that they would have it for their grandchildren. There's so many things that you can do that are easy to do; they're educational. Take your kids out on an outing to the Friendship Centre. Take them on an outing to a pow-wow [phonetic]. You know? Just get outside and talk about place and sacredness and why the environment is so important. You know? Bring into a conversation with young people in your classroom the idea of stewardship. And understanding that the lands and waters that we live on and exist with are actually critical to not only the Indigenous world, but everybody. And understand things like, "Idle no more." And just, you know, critique those things in your classroom. Or, you know, the Columbus story. Fourteen-ninety-one he sailed the ocean blue and, you know, he discovered America. Well, that's one story. But there are other stories. There are creation stories all across this entire continent that actually talk about how Indigenous peoples had, you know, viewed their world. Their world view is equally important to the rest of society to remember. So rather than tell one story, you want to tell four stories. And, you know, they weren't there when Columbus arrived, so it's just as much a story whether it's a creation story about a woman falling from the sky or a man crawling out of an oyster shell or coming up from under -- you know, they're all interesting and engaging, so do it. And then get some books in your school that actually highlight the history of Aboriginal Canada at the level in which your students may be at.

There are teachers even in university -- and certainly in the primary grades -- that feel that if they don't have any visible Indigenous students in their class, that they don't have to address it. I think that's a misnomer. I think that they do. I think that like any part of history in Canada, you know what I mean -- you may not have a military officer sitting in your classroom either, but you still talk about the military history of Canada. You still talk -- you don't have politicians sitting in your classroom, but you still talk about the politics and the prime -- you know, the former prime ministers and all those people. You still talk about that. And I think it's important that you also talk about the founding of this country and the people that were living here then. And the fact that there was, you know -- anthropologists have had conversations about this for a long time and they figure there was 112 million people continentally here. A hundred and twelve million people. You know? And as many as 80% dead within the first 150 years because of epidemics, because of murder, because of fighting and displacement... So I think that's pretty significant that we actually have that conversation. I think that we need to understand when people have -- because people have said to me over the course of time, "Well, you know, native people didn't fight back." Oh, yeah, I think they did. But, you know, you have to understand that if you're sick -- and entire communities were wiped out by epidemics -- that that's going to have a tremendous impact on the ability of people to stand their ground. You know, my Master's work was on the comparative analysis of the aftermath of the Bubonic Plagues in Europe, which lost 50% of its population. And the epidemics on this continent who lost, you know, as many as 80 -- sometimes people say 90% of the population. The impacts were tremendous in both places. The idea of reconstitution of societies, of reconstitution of financial elements, of spiritual practices, of, you know, stories...of all of those pieces was as challenging there as it was here. The difference being in Europe, the Bubonic Plagues hit on average every 40 years. So there was time to reconstitute their societies in a very, you know, strategic way. In this continent it hit every seven to 14 years. So there was no time to do the reconstitution, nor really the grieving that was necessary to reconstitute and make healthy a community. So people have carried that impact into the present. So those damages -- that historic trauma -- resonates into the present. And I think people need to understand that. So when they look at a Native community and they say, "Well, look at these people. I mean, they're addicts and they're this and that..." They are because they're still not being adequately helped with the trauma that occurred previously. And if you look at what's happening with the holocaust survivors in Jewish community -- in science, we're understanding now that those pieces that happened a long time ago, it's almost -- they're saying it's almost like it's genetically embedded until it actually gets resolved in some particular way and it gets addressed. It gets carried forward. So we're in a process of sort of reminding our own communities about what they've come through so that they can be better into the present. And we have to make choices through that. So my research gave me the ability to look at the history of this continent in a very particular way. And then

say, okay, so I can get that. So I can put down those pieces that I'm carrying forward and not hand them to my daughters. Will they be unscathed entirely? No, not at all. But it's better.

So lots of intergenerational survivors in Canada have raised tremendous children because they've had the capacity to understand -- to learn and understand -- and deal with that more effectively. And we're working on the rest of it. Some of the addictions that you see in those communities and some of those impacts are related to things like fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, where you have a generational impact there. And they are not going to learn until you can stop that impact, which is 100% preventable. But whose job is that? Right? So we argue it's the provinces job, it's the people's job. I would say we're all responsible as a society to do whatever we can. Because it's not only an Indigenous problem, it's a Canadian problem. All right? So we need to all get behind that and say, "What can we do to ensure that more children are safe and not damaged by these impacts?" so that we can stop the constant stream of addictions.

Building Societal Understanding

>> I think what people need to understand about Indigenous people in Canada today is that we're still here. And the population is growing. And it's growing in a very positive way. The other morning I was on a flight to or from Winnipeg -- I can't remember; I go there so often -- with an 84-year-old lady who said to me -- she lives in the North -- she lives in Regina -- and she said, you know, "It's really sad how bad it is for the Aboriginal people in Canada...that they're suffering so much." And I said, "Well, first of all there is some suffering, you're right. You know, on the north end of Regina, north end of Winnipeg, and in some places and other cities there is certainly suffering. But you also need to be appreciative of the fact that there are a lot of people in this country who are doing exceptionally well. That they are -- you know, that we have probably 15 hundred -- maybe 2,000 PhDs today. That we have maybe 8,000 Masters Degrees graduated. And 40,000 undergraduates graduated. And more in school." And she said, "Really? I had no idea. I thought that they were all in that same --" Because that's all they hear. She said, you know, "All I hear on the news is about the bad stuff." We don't hear about the good stuff.

And so I think the Canadian population at large needs to appreciate that our population is small, so there's maybe two million Indigenous peoples in Canada. And there's 32 million other people. So if we only focus on those problems in those neighbourhoods and don't understand that probably the people, you know, walking

down the street next to you with the business suit and briefcase, that many of those people are in fact Indigenous. That they're behind cameras making films. That they're, you know, in bands in, you know, places that you go to across the city when you go out for entertainment. You know? That they're writing books, that they're teaching in your universities, that they're electricians that are coming to the house... They're just not -- they just don't have written across their back, you know, "Hi, I'm Indigenous." They don't have that. But she said, you know, "I would never have known that you were Indigenous if I hadn't actually sat beside you and actually opened up a conversation, and you responded to me. And so we know -- now I understand where you're coming from, and I've learned something new today." So that's what Canada needs to understand -- that they need to change their attitude. The stereotypes are old and outdated and antiquated. Yes, there are still problems. Yes, we have remote communities that are struggling with boil water advisories, very little access to health care and education...but whose fault is that? You know? This is part of our country and yet we treat it like a third world that we can't -- you know, that we have no access to. And that's pretty much nonsense. I have heard in my career and in my lifetime the statement that they should just get over it. And one of the things that I'm doing to help address that and help people understand better what that actually means, is by bringing in survivors of other traumas. So when we showed the film -- we screened the film "Survivor's Row" in Thunder Bay. And we had 250 Aboriginal people come out to view that. Because that was about an Anglican -- a white Anglican priest who flew around the North because he had his own -- the church had given him a plane -- and molested, you know, four, 500 boys. Little boys who are now men who have families...who walk through a lifetime of addictions. Many didn't make it. They committed suicide in their youth and in their teens and as men. And have gone through domestic violence and sexual assault and done a lot of different kinds of things. And have come through it. So we filmed four men who came through it.

Now, to help people understand "Why don't they just get over it?" -- you understand that in a lifetime trauma, how difficult that is. And then we had a non-Native man who had been sexually assaulted by, you know, an uncle or a family friend. Who had walked exactly the same path, who fell into addictions, who became alcoholics, who, you know -- who perpetrated violence...who came through it. So that -- you know, because we want people to see it is not that simple to do that. That there's always an ongoing legacy here. So Ralph Rowe, you know, damaged these boys who have probably damaged other boys or young women, who are now trying to straighten up their lives so that they don't pass that on. But some of the damage is already done. So those children who are damaged are out there possibly perpetrating again. And it goes back.

So what happened to Ralph Rowe -- you know, what happened to him? Where did it come from? And so there's -- you know, you have to look behind the immediate and say, "What happened to these people prior to this individual standing before me that caused them to go down that particular pathway?" And that's where we walk back to look at the question of historic trauma. And when we can help them resolve the impact from their lifetime or the lifetime before -- it was their father who got assaulted who acted out in a cruel way...you know? Right? So then we can put it down. But it isn't that simple.

So you need to understand -- and people across Canada need to understand -- that the last residential school officially closed in 1996. There are still, you know, thousands of survivors still alive. And if they understood what they had gone through, they would not be so quick to judge. And if they looked -- and all they need to do is look around the world -- really, all they need to do is go to Winnipeg to the Museum of Human Rights and look at the atrocities that human beings commit against each other to understand that this is not just, "Why don't you get over it?" This is, you know, the entire globe that is affected by the atrocities these human beings commit against each other. And I don't think anybody with any kind of compassion or empathy can walk through the fourth and fifth floors of that museum and not come out of there in tears.

So it's like, no, it's not that simple. And that's a very callous way -- and very uncompassionate way -- to deal with the realities of this particular globe. This atrocity happens to be happening here. And when you go outside -- if I leave this building and I walk downtown, the grass is growing, you know, the people are going up and down the elevators, people are walking to their jobs with their coffee in their hand..."So what's the big deal?" You know? But there are pockets of pain -- huge -- you know, that are happening across the city that are not just happening to these people. And it would be awful of me to say to somebody that, you know, whose parents or grandparents survived the Holocaust -- in fact, I talked to a girl about that last night -- "Well, just get over it. It's not important." Because it is very important to her. And she said, "I wondered why I was so angry as a four-year-old..." -- this girl is Jewish -- "...as a four-year-old I was out of control anger. They had to take me to counselling because nobody could understand what it was all about. But then when we traced back our family tree to my great-grandfather and what happened to him, and then my grandfather surviving the Holocaust, all that frustration, anger, pain...I'm born; it comes out in me."

So, you know, I didn't say to her, "Well, just get over it. It happened to your grandfather, not you." But that's the reality I think that we all need to face. And most people have trauma in their lives; they just don't recognize it or they choose to deny

it. Somebody once said to me, you know, "Ninety-seven percent of the population has suffered in some very profound way, and the other three percent is lying."

Indigenization of Cities

>> The whole city of Thunder Bay has indigenized. You know, their understanding is changing. It doesn't mean that everybody's onside; that everybody is celebratory about the idea that we're all in this together. It's not like that.

Even go to Ottawa and go into the, you know, the Parliament buildings. You know, I've been there, and I said to them, you know, "It's fabulous that you have all this Indigenous art in every room, in every hallway. Everywhere you go. Maybe you could use a few Indigenous people too." So, you know, we're not there yet. So there is some celebration of the fact that there's this artistic piece that people, you know, honour and respect.

Same thing happened in Australia. You know, the Indigenous art. You know? Or in the Arctic. The Indigenous art is -- people want that. They covet it. But, you know, but then that doesn't mean we want them living next door to us. Well, you know, that's different, right?

So that's what we have to change. Because there's a lot of really incredible Aboriginal people across this country who are doing amazing things. And who are indigenizing Canada from the ground up, you know, in as positive a way as they possibly can. But there's still a lot of people that are reluctant to identify themselves because they do get treated differently. They do find that their work relationships, their social relationships change. Because of those things back here -- those stereotypes and those biases and beliefs that sort of, "Oh, well maybe this person -- if I take them home, they'll rob me." Or, you know...that's all kind of still there. So that's a shame. But you know what? I think we're making some positive headway. And then really it's up to education I think, in many ways, to make that change happen.

Encouragement for Educators

>> When it comes to what could we say to people that are living in this country today that are in industry, that are in Ministries, that are teaching in schools from K to, you know, to PhD -- what could we say? I think we can say that we've done a

tremendous job so far. That we've actually up-taken this challenge in a very positive way. That we've done a lot of work together. That we still have lots to do; we shouldn't feel, you know, too celebratory yet, but that we've actually been moving in the right direction. That we've actually managed to change the -- our own opinions enough to change the viewpoint of our children. And I think that the fact that we've been able to do that is tremendous. And we need to continue to do more of that. And we need to be able to reach out our hands and shake hands. Because lots of people say to me, "Well, I can't afford to do this" and "I can't afford to that," and I reach out and I shake their hand and I say, "How much did that cost you?" And they say, "Well, nothing." And I said, "That's all you really need to do is to reach out your hand and be grateful that we're all still here. And that we can walk forward into the future together."