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Responsibilities

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INDIGENIZING HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE CALLS TO ACTION

Awakening to personal, political, and academic responsibilities

Shelly Johnson (Mukwa Musayett)

UNDERLYING ALL OTHER TRUTHS spoken during the Year of Reconciliation is the truth that the modern city of Vancouver was founded on the traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations and that these territories were never ceded through treaty, war or surrender (Meiszner, 2014).

Human Rights Injustices and the Musqueam People

One human rights injustice in Canada was acknowledged by Vancouver City Council in 2014, some 128 years after the city was founded on three unceded First Nations territories. What the Vancouver City Council statement does not say is that European settlement was accomplished using the principles of the Doctrine of Discovery, racist political and religious bigotry, which effectively denied the humanity of First Nations peoples, and a drastic Indigenous population decline due to diseases such as small pox and measles. These colonial acts caused the Musqueam population to decline from an estimated 30,000 at European contact to 100 people post contact, to current estimates of over 1,200 (Musqueam, 2011, pp. 39-49). During the same time period, the colonial government removed the Musqueam people from prime west coast real estate totalling 144,888 hectares, and relegated them to three tiny reserve parcels totalling 388 hectares, or 0.2% of their traditional lands (Musqueam, 2011, p. 51). Yet despite deliberate colonial actions to accomplish Musqueam erasure from the planet, the Musqueam people continue to live on their traditional lands where the mouth of the Fraser River meets the Pacific Ocean, as

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they have for the past 3,500 years. Today their recovery from the brink of obliteration is a contemporary survival story that is still not well known in Vancouver, nor at the University of British Columbia – Vancouver (UBC-V), which for the past 100 years has been located on unceded Musqueam territory. One cannot help but wonder what drives this continued lack of knowledge, and if, or how the inequitable institutional occupation of Musqueam lands contributes to the silence.

The UBC-V campus is located just seven kilometers from the Musqueam community, yet, it is far enough away to protect UBC-V from a second injustice affecting the Musqueam people: the overpowering stench of Vancouver's sewage disposal, which is located at the Musqueam community site. A SUV could drive through Vancouver's huge sewer pipe, which runs directly underneath the Musqueam community, and empties into the Fraser River. The sewer pipe was put there years ago, with no consultation to the Musqueam, no compensation, and with no thought to its impact on the well-being of Musqueam people. Numerous community members have said that it was "just done." During one visit to the community, as I ran from a building to my car to avoid the foul odour, I contemplated other things that were "just done" and are still being done to the Musqueam, and other Indigenous communities in Canada. I wondered about the June 26, 2014 Supreme Court of Canada ruling that unanimously recognized land title claimed by the Tsilhqot'in peoples of British Columbia (BC) (Moore, 2014), and the potential implications for other unceded First Nations lands in BC, including the 144,888 hectares of prime Vancouver real estate claimed by the Musqueam. I envisaged "Indigenizing efforts" by various higher education institutions across Canada, and how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) Calls to Action (2015) are being enacted by universities located on unceded territories. It encouraged thinking about what university governors, administrators, faculty, and students could do to address the foul odour arising from centuries of inequitable colonial relationships, and to meaningfully improve Indigenous community well-being.

UBC-V School of Social Work

One recent example of reconciliation action was taken by the Indigenous Student Caucus and Equity Committee in the School of Social Work at UBC-V. They collaboratively developed a project to breathe life into the TRC Calls to Action (2015) prior to Social Work Week in March 2016. The social work students approached their colleagues and faculty members to ask two questions: "What does reconciliation mean to you?" and "What have you done to further reconciliation?" Participants were asked to write their responses on a white board. Then a picture of the person, and their response, was mounted on poster boards, and displayed at the school. This project was the first student-led initiative to encourage social work

students and faculty to describe the ways in which they have, or have not, furthered the work of the TRC, or responded to the 94 Calls to Action (TRC, 2015). Multiple emails to approximately 200 students and faculty members, and personal invitations to participate, resulted in the participation of four faculty members and 25 students. The vast majority of faculty and students did not participate in the project. Some students explained they had too many final papers and exams to complete, while most faculty members declined in silence. The UBC-V was the first social work program in Canada to implement mandatory First Nations social work courses. This result signals that more needs to be done to translate education into action, for UBC-V and other institutions. To ask unsettling questions, such as, “What have I, or what has my educational institution done, or not done, to further the work of the TRC?” Alternately they may ask, “How have I, or how has my institution responded, or not responded to the Calls to Action?”

Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement

The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (2006) and the TRC process led to the establishment of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) at the University of Manitoba. The NCTR mandate is to preserve the Indian Residential School history and legacy in Canada, and to be a permanent home for all the materials gathered by the TRC. In the years to come, the NCTR aims to educate Canadians about Indian Residential School history, and Canada’s deliberate attack on Indigenous families under the guise of “education.” The hope is that access to its archives will assist in fostering reconciliation and healing of the Indian Residential School legacy in Canada (NCTR, 2015). Affiliated with the NCTR is UBC-V’s proposed Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre. The proposed Centre aims to “support community access, public programming, curriculum development, advanced research, and intensive and regular discussion on issues of common concern” (UBC, 2014a). It is not due to open for another year. However, perhaps it could lead UBC-V to address work of the TRC’s (TRC, 2015) Calls to Action. One of these calls asks the federal government to “provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education” (p. 2), and is an action that many post-secondary institutions can address in a timely way.

Indigenous Post-Secondary Backlog

The post-secondary backlog is a significant contributor to the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Canada. In 1996, the federal Liberal government mandated a 2% funding cap on First Nations community budgets for all programs and services, including

education. The despised cap, kept in policy by the Harper government, meant that inflation and a fast-growing Indigenous population were negatively affected by educational budgets that could not keep pace with the numbers of First Nations students who wanted to enter post-secondary programs. It will not be easy in the short term to fully address the education gap, despite the Trudeau government promise to lift the 2% funding cap. However there are many options available to post-secondary institutions to begin the work.

For the Musqueam Indian Band (MIB), collaborative work with UBC-V could mean many new opportunities for their current membership. In 2014, according to information provided by the Musqueam Social Development Department, there were 1,167 registered Musqueam; with 650 people living on reserve and 517 living off reserve. Of the total membership, 117 or 10% are Elders aged 60+ years; 630 or 54% account for adults aged 20-59; and 420 or 36% are children and youth aged 0 to 19 years. Of the children and youth, 362 or 31% are school aged. In terms of employment and education, and based on 2014 MIB social assistance rates, there are 150 employable members living on the reserve; a 24% unemployment rate on reserve and an estimated 30% unemployment rate off reserve. As of 2014, there were 43 MIB members receiving full time support for post-secondary education, while 245 Musqueam people remain on the 2015 education waitlist. The revenue generated by the MIB and the federal government funding for MIB post-secondary education serves approximately three or four MIB members each year. At this current rate, it will take 60 years to support the educational plans of all MIB members on the current education waitlist. Comparatively, the 2015 UBC fiscal financial statements identify a budgetary surplus of \$49 million (UBC, 2016) which demonstrates capacity to significantly address the current (and future) MIB education waitlists.

Upon my return to the UBC-V campus from Musqueam, I theorized about an institutional response if a Musqueam delegation were to arrive at the UBC-V President's office with an invoice for 100 years of "back rent?" What might be the rental cost on 993 acres of Canada's most valuable real estate? What might be the cost of addressing the gross inequity that exists? At that time, might institutions begin to understand that more is required to right this inequitable relationship than merely acknowledging traditional territories in opening speeches? What options could UBC-V consider, before that day of reckoning arrives? From my perspective as an Indigenous woman working within a Western academic institution, arguably no other entity has contributed as much to the economic and academic well-being of 100 years of UBC administrators, faculty, staff, and graduates, as have the Musqueam people. Part of being good neighbours is behaving in honourable ways that are based in respect, integrity, truth, and meaningful reciprocity. In these times of fiscal restraint, it also means creatively looking at existing resources, and considering how they may be

reconfigured to benefit the maximum number of people.

Tuition Waivers

There are over 15,000 faculty on both the UBC-V and UBC Kelowna campus locations (UBC, 2015b). Under the Collective Agreement, all UBC-V faculty and staff and their children under the age of 25 years, are eligible to claim a four-year tuition benefit. If the staff or faculty member has no child, the tuition benefit cannot be transferred to another family member, such as a niece or nephew. At a gathering with the UBC-V President in 2015, a female colleague asked if and how the UBC-V Collective Agreement tuition benefit might be amended to support Musqueam students eligible for entry into an academic UBC program. Could unused faculty or staff tuition credits be transferred to a Musqueam student? If it could be transferred, it may have a significant and immediate effect on the Musqueam student waitlist. A male colleague suggested that a targeted tuition benefit to Musqueam people was not enough. He said that the faculty person directing their UBC-V tuition credit to a Musqueam student must uphold a responsibility to meet with the student to determine their career interest. If it is in an area such as Fisheries, then the faculty member has a responsibility to link the student with a Fisheries faculty member, who would act as an educational mentor to the student for their entire four-year program. Other colleagues spoke about the fact that UBC-V, and other educational institutions currently have a tuition waiver in place for youth that were formerly in the care of the provincial government child welfare services (UBC, 2015c), so a tuition waiver precedent already exists. Another colleague spoke of the need for the development of a UBC-Musqueam Employment Strategy; whereby employable Musqueam people could be beneficiaries of employment opportunities on campus.

Conclusion

On May 11, 2016 Canada removed its objector status from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (CBC, 2016), and provided a framework for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. In collaboration with the TRC Calls to Action (2015), and the Tsilhqot'in Supreme Court decision, this new development lays the foundation for every post-secondary institution in Canada to consider what they have, or have not, done to further Indigenizing and reconciliation efforts with Indigenous Peoples. "Indigenizing higher education" means that Indigenous Peoples will evaluate and determine the success of institutional efforts to do so. In the case of UBC-V and the Musqueam people, some ways to begin are the development of meaningful Musqueam employment strategies,

Musqueam student tuition waivers, and other creative reconciliation processes that work toward eliminating the foul odour of inequity. “Indigenizing” efforts must be specific to each institution, and begin based in their relationships with Indigenous Peoples upon whose traditional lands the institution is located. If no relationship exists, the time to develop one is now, and the onus is on the institution to figure out how to take the first respectful steps. This can be achieved by humbly asking Indigenous Peoples to talk with educational institutions about what they need, and by building a joint plan to achieve their educational goals. The TRC (2015) vision reminds all Canadians that, “by establishing a new and respectful relationship, we restore what must be restored, repair what must be repaired and return what must be returned” (TRC, 2015, p. 6). This process of Indigenizing post-secondary institutions will not be easy, but it is a necessary next step in reconciliation for all who live in Canada, and have benefitted from the structures established and maintained by colonial acts.

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