The Reconciliation Tapestry

Within the Context of our Work

Following up on the Church windows project (2012), we were part of the two-year project by York University, *Our Dreams Matter Too*, teaching elementary classes by utilizing methodology that based in Indigenous culture (like storytelling, which led to the production of the dance theatre play *The Guardians of the Attawapiskat River*). We continued working with the youth outside the school environment with voluntary work, doing hands-on activities with them to strengthen or re-establish the connection to the land in praxis (outdoor activities like cooking out on the land, canoeing, berry picking, snowshoeing and skiing) and in theory (indoor activities including experiencing cultural history by music, discussions, craft making and just having fun together).

Just before Christmas 2017 we were approached by Mark Cooney of the *Gord Downy Foundation* to cooperate in producing a little video, connecting people of Attawapiskat with people of a southern community (mostly Oakville, ON), wishing each other a Merry Christmas.

In 2018 we received a grant by the Laidlaw Foundation for producing a Music video with the goal of instilling youth with pride in their culture and the strength for dealing with historical trauma. This time we again worked inside the school by doing a song writing workshop in High School music classes, led by two Toronto musicians we had invited. At the same time, we continued our outside school activities, recording music of Attawapiskat youths and children in a little studio we had set up in our living room. The equipment for the studio came to us by coincidence(?). We had just met Aaron McGill who had come up to Attawapiskat with his family for the summer and, as he happened to also be a musician, he always travelled with his little computer/studio equipment. The whole McGill family thus joined the project. The end product was the music video *Kistendamon (Respecting the Land),* containing the impact of residential school with a positive outlook to the future, emphasizing self-esteem and reconciliation. The tapestry developed as a teaching tool for younger children, dealing with the trauma of residential school during the time the McGills were part of the project, with the children being active in putting the story together, gluing felt figures and images they cut out on the textile banner.

Though the tapestry was somewhat a by-product of the music video project, it became the main tool for the outreach that followed the production of the video. Mark Cooney invited us to display the tapestry and explain the story at Reconciliation Activities that the Downy Foundation had put up in Southern Ontario (like *The Brick Works* in Toronto). And ever since, the tapestry was displayed and discussed by us whenever there was an opportunity. Mark Cooney always introduced the tapestry as *Reconciliation Mural* and the name eventually stuck, slightly changed to *Reconciliation Tapestry*.

The Purpose of the Tapestry

To motivate the youth to participate in the music video project, we started to teach Indigenous people's contribution to popular (rock) music over the last 50 years (e.g. Buffy Ste. Marie, Link Wray) and gave them some lessons on instruments like ukelele, guitar, percussion etc. Asked for contributing their thoughts/feelings for song lyrics, the students wrote little poems. We soon realized that they all expressed frustration and depression about their lives, not knowing where these frustrations came from and how they could deal with the problems. When coaxed to think about what they would enjoy, most came up with activities like drumming, dancing (traditional) and other traditional activities in the community and within their family. So, we talked about identity and culture and why there is a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, and what they would like to share within the context of reconciliation. That is how eventually the direction of the lyrics they worked out followed Gord Downies

Secret Path ("I am a stranger" – in my on land) to share their experience/feelings, and at the end with the line *"I am Cree"* to suggest the future they envision, expressing that identity is important for their healing. The music video, based on the two issues of historical trauma and a possible healing, was then not one coherent song, but a compilation of images of the community that showed a little bit of fun but also the negative impact of the historical trauma, underlined with music of different songs (both borrowed and original), peaking in the outlook to the future (I am Cree).

We were also working with younger children outside school in the evening. What eventually came out of this was the tapestry. Of course, the themes of the tapestry were similar to those of the music workshop, as the children's frustrations are the same as those of the youths; they are just expressed less verbally in the art the children shared with us, which we used as basis for the tapestry. The idea of felt art for a cooperative project with the children originated from the necessity of using a teaching method that promotes understanding in little children, yet the outcome was the same, as the tapestry tells the same story as the music video, just with an easier detected chronology of the events. For the children, the tapestry showed a history of their community, symbolically told by the flow of the Attawapiskat River. There are three time periods:

Before contact

This part of the tapestry shows how, in the Cree sense, the world was in order. People lived in harmony with creation, knowing that they were only one part of nature, not her rulers. Like in every human community, people loved their children, and they treated their environment in a way that the land can still provide for future generations. That meant that they showed respect to all life (animal, plants, human beings, even insects) as they knew that all life depended on each other. Looking to the sky, one realizes however, that this time is coming to an end, symbolized by the sunset. At the border to the next time period one can see already what changes had come to the lives of the Mushkegowuk (people of the swamp) at the Attawapiskat River – there is a trapper from the Hudson's Bay company offering a blanket as exchange for furs, and a Cree couple (referring to Jackie's parents on the way to see their children) is paddling down the rapids. Their canoe has an inscription in syllabics "where are our children?"

Stolen children

The dark sky shows that night has fallen. This represents the *Dark Times* for the Mushkegowuk, where children were separated from their parents and people, and were brought to Residential School by a Hudson's Bay Company ship. They were not allowed to speak their own language any more, brothers and sisters were separated, and parents could not visit their children. Jackie's mother, Mary Louise Hookimaw, sneaks up to the school after her long canoe travel just to see her children. Her oldest daughter, Elizabeth, runs into her mother's arms. They both cry, but they have to be careful not to be detected, as parents were forbidden to come to the school during the school year. Other children are looking out of the building, sad. There is a ghostly cemetery by the school with the children who never returned home. Three boys are running away from the school towards oblivion, symbolized by the dark forest. Though the RCMP was looking for them they were never seen again. Their families were not notified until the end of the school year.

A New Beginning(?)

The third part of the tapestry represents present and future, the process of reconciliation. Reconciliation is understood as an initiative by the victims, sharing their sorrows with those who oppressed them in the hope of starting a conversation, promoting compassion and understanding. It is important to understand the symbolism in

the image that the parents are paddling into the sunrise with their children. Rather than seeing this as a *new beginning*, they experience this as a continuation of their lives as it is supposed to be, coming out of the *Dark Times* by their own strength and resilience. The syllabics on the canoe read "the children are happy". They are happy because they are reunited with their parents, community and nation, meaning that they can again rely on their parents to teach them who they are. Of course, they are not entirely alone in this as meanwhile they get support by people who understand and respect them as who they are. Despite the attempt by their oppressors to destroy their culture, the people of the muskeg kept their spirituality and do not see a problem to interpret their spirituality through their Catholic Faith, emphasizing, as they have always had, that all people, are *Children of God (Kitche Manito = The Great Mystery).* As our elders emphasized, the people have always known God, which our priest (Fr. Rodrigue Vezina) saw as the reason why *The Mission* was so readily accepted, yet their own spirituality was still practiced within their religious beliefs. Also, people are still holding on to their land, and they have a deep connection to the land, respecting it and life on it as God's Creation. This part of the tapestry shows the beauty of Creation again, as it is shown in the first part, hence the flowers shown in both parts.

Where do we go from here?

The symbolism in this last part of the tapestry can be the answer to this question. There is a sunrise, and the sun climbs to its zenith. So, there seems to be a brighter future. The people are still *holding on* to the Cross and the Love it teaches, but they have not lost their spiritual traditions, and the symbols used (e.g. feather and drum) are similarly teaching the Love of God. So, although there is a great amount of anger, the goal is not to turn away from spirituality and the religion many people meanwhile claim as their own. The goal is living together and respecting each other. And that means that we (still outsiders) have to understand the people's traditional spirituality as something that does not oppose our worldview or religion, but is rather just a different expression of the same values we hold up. Of course, at the beginning of healing there has to be an acknowledgement of the wounds that were inflicted on the people. Our compassion means to internalize, to feel the pain the people are feeling, and there might be a feeling of guilt among us, even though we were not directly involved. I, Norbert, growing up and being educated in Germany after the war, experienced a similar reconciliation process. We were thoroughly taught in school about the Holocaust, and thus, most of the people acknowledged that the horrors did happen, and that they were inflicted on Jews (our citizens and neighbours and those living in other nations) by those Germans with a different religion. Growing up as a Catholic, I was, of course, part of the latter group, despite our family's personal connection to Jews, as my father's mother was a converted Jew and his grandmother was still practicing her religion. Both women had passed away before the Holocaust had started in earnest, which might have saved my father's family from more drastic repercussions, but the *flaw* in my father's blood was still registered. Beside all this, I could still accept responsibility for what *my people had done*, and I could contribute to a better future just by my attitude of accepting any person, *foreign* as he might be to my own beliefs.

In this way we have to see that any denial of the horror is based on a belief that *those people somewhat deserved what came to them*, and that originates in a sometimes well hidden but nonetheless pure racism. And that is a problem of the society and of those individuals who use this racism as a justification for their deeds. To look away is not an option. So, what we can do is to accept that residential school with the deaths and breaking the spirits of the surviving victims have happened. We have to distance ourselves from the way this was hidden and we have to take initiative within our church, understand the pain, feel the pain, and reach out to those people who got hurt, by listening, by compassion and by helping in healing.