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## Our Journey

— Otsistohkwí:yo (Melissa Elliott)

It was May 28, 2021, and we were sitting in one of our school's small yurts as the rain poured outside, waiting for families to come for their one-on-one Closing Wampum ceremony, when one of my colleagues reported, "Oh my God, they have found 215 children's bodies at the Kamloops Residential School grounds in British Columbia." At first I didn't seem to hear her words—I was so focused on the task before us: ceremonially celebrating this strange year for our school's youngest children and releasing our responsibilities to their families for the summer months.

I held a basket of wampum strings in my hands, which is a string of ceremony beads that our people have used for centuries to symbolize agreements and record our Haudenosaunee history. At our school, Skaronhyase'kó:wa (The Everlasting Tree School), these wampum strings are made by the families to represent their child and their commitment to our school, ceremonially passed to us, their teachers, and held throughout the year as a reminder of our responsibilities to each child and family. The speech that we say when we hold and ultimately release their families' wampum was going through my head:

*Tyohsera't nikarí:we's wa'ethiya'tanó:ronhste, wa'ethiya'tanenhstate, táhnon wa'ethirihónnyon ne sheyén:a nonkwawenna nok niyonkwarihó:tens tsi niyó:re yonkwatkwénnyon.*

*For one year we have loved, protected, and taught your child our language and ways as best as we were able.*

That thought was broken by the discussion that ensued among the other early years teachers about this discovery and its darkest revelations. This truth that we have known for so long, but held in the shadows:

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GENOCIDE. It is finally coming out and being revealed to the world. A bittersweet, tragic, and gut-wrenching silence comes over the room. However, we could not linger in this. Instead, we pull out the trait we have all learned as we grew up through trauma and ongoing genocide: compartmentalization with a twist of humor.

We must put aside our grief today, don't think about it, put it in a box, don't even glance at our social media, so we can get through the day and fulfill our responsibilities to the children and families. This is how we survive the day, this is how we've survived many days.

Though this proves to be effective, and we have many laughs and smiles celebrating the little spirits we have the honor of knowing in our Kanenhanonnha (Protected Seeds) nursery program, it is broken up with flashes of a growing pain in the stomach: buried grief bubbling up and begging for release. Indigestion is a symptom of genocide and trauma that indigenous peoples experience the world over.

*Ó:nen enyakwátkahwe ne ki onekórha táhnon akwé:kon yonkwaterihonte tsi niwakénhas*

*Now we will release this wampum and all of our responsibilities during the summer time.*

As I return to my home in Brantford, Ontario, I go to my room immediately, shut the door and open my Facebook app, reading the countless posts and commentary on this horrific discovery. It takes me down a rabbit hole that I can't avoid—watching videos of Residential School Survivors' stories, reading articles and reports. Alone in my room, I allow myself to feel some of this grief, though at this point it is coming up more as a mix of anger and numbness.

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How do people not know this?! The Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report was released in December 2015! This is NOT news. A dark realization floods me that most people didn't know or even worse, didn't believe us—not until they found the physical bodies would they believe our stories and history. And even still many don't.

When we speak of Onkwehonwe (Indigenous peoples) and education, we must look at the dark truth that education has been used as a tool of genocide in our communities. Traditionally, we did not have “schools” in our communities. There was no need for schools. Our peoples' lives naturally flowed and allowed for everything children needed. Children were brought up not just with a mom and dad, but with a community of aunties, uncles, and grandparents/elders that all supported their growth. They were involved in all aspects of life and taught through life as well as based on the gifts they were given from Shonkwaya'tihson (the Creator). They were at the center of our life, valued, seen and supported holistically.

However, in the colonial, Eurocentric and Christian viewpoint, this was a backwards way. We needed their schools in order to be properly educated, in order to “kill the Indian in the child.” How did this “proper education” manifest in our communities? Through kidnapping our children, abusing them in every way imaginable, separating them from the land and ceremonies, hurting them if they spoke our language, isolating them from their families, making them ashamed of who they were, working them to the bone, and in many cases, killing them. Let us remember that the last residential school closed in 1996, a mere 25 years ago.

This education has morphed and changed over time (though its foundation has remained the same) to take us to today with the current educational model. We

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are hardly represented in the curriculum; it is for the most part only offered in English (perhaps with a Native Second Language class here or there). The modern day educational curriculum for Onkwehonwe peoples does not connect us to our community or to the land, at best romanticizing our traditions, history, and culture, and at worst completely erasing them.

This was the way our communities were invaded and ripped apart from the inside: through “education.” In fact, you can see this reflected in our language. In Ohswé:ken (Six Nations of the Grand River

Territory), our word for school is yontaweyatáhkwa, or “the place they enter and don't return.” This is the grief and trauma that was passed down through the generations, the trauma that we are collectively carrying in our communities to this day. Therefore, to speak of schools or education in our Onkwehonwe communities, we must acknowledge this collective trauma and consciously work to heal it.

As previously stated, our Onkwehonwe peoples traditionally never knew or needed schooling. However, we have come to a place in modern society where schooling is necessary and in fact needed. With this in mind, how do we provide schooling and education in our communities? Do we simply accept the modern educational model that was forced on us? Do we simply translate public school curriculum into our languages? Or do we transform schooling into something completely different? These were the questions burning in the founders of our school. They were on the hunt for an educational model that more reflected our beliefs and culture.

When the founders of our school were introduced to Waldorf education over 15 years ago, they found a system of education that offered an alternative to the horror we have experienced with modern education and schooling. They found a system of schooling that was healing, based on seeing the child as a gift from the

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spiritual world with their own mind, spirit, journey, and purpose that we are to nurture. This, along with so many other aspects of Waldorf education, was in such alignment with our own traditional view of the child and child rearing that we felt the search for an indigenous pedagogy to education was over. In Waldorf, we found a modern educational model that we could transform and imbue with our language, culture, and ways of being to create something useful and healing to our community.

*“Through Kanyen’kéha we will nourish the spirit of every child to guide and inspire them to realize their true potential as Rotinohsyón:ni”*

*– Skaronhyase’kó:wa Mission Statement*

Our school, Skaronhyase’kó:wa, was founded in 2010 with this intention. Instead of abusing, neglecting, and harming our children, we would love, protect, and honor them. Instead of condemning and punishing the use of our language, we would speak our languages, immersing and nourishing our children with our language. Instead of separating the children from their family and community, we would create partnerships with their families and connect the children to their community. Instead of shaming children for their culture, we would enliven our culture and create a space where our ceremonies and traditions are natural, living, and expressed daily.

Instead of separating children from the land, we would connect children to the land. Instead of forced child labor, we would allow children to play, create and build their imaginations. Instead of starving children, we would provide children with traditional, healthy, nourishing foods. We will consciously transform the toxic system of education into one that is healing and nourishing to our children and community.

This school started as a small initiative of parents who wanted a more holistic education for their children. It has since grown over the past 12 years as teachers have become trained in Waldorf education and begun experimenting with how to implement this model in our own way. A few Skaronhyase’kó:wa teachers with a traditional Haudenosaunee perspective and background, myself included, took Waldorf teacher training. We immersed ourselves through

many outlets into the Waldorf educational movement holding the question: how do we translate and transform Waldorf into our language and culture and bring it to our Onkwehón:we community?

The modern Onkwehón:we Waldorf teacher is an alchemist at heart. We do not simply implement the accepted Waldorf curriculum in our languages. We instead use Waldorf pedagogy to awaken questions within us through which we can examine our culture, language and traditions in a deeper way. For example, how do our people traditionally view child development? What traditional stories are appropriate at each age? How do we prepare our children to participate in ceremony? How do we bring traditional principles of Ka’nikonhrí:yo (a good mind), Ka’satsténshera (the great natural power), and Skén:nen (peace/tranquility) into the classroom? We then start looking for answers to these questions, discussing them with each other, with our elders, and our people—finding connections, differences, and new needs as we look to bring these elements to the classroom. We finally allow ourselves the creative freedom to transform our ceremonies and traditions within an educational setting. Through this process, we are re-ensouling our ceremonies and traditions as we bring them into daily living. Our culture then becomes living and relevant to the children in our program.

We are continuing to develop these methods of marrying Nonkwawén:na nok niyonkwarihó:tens (our traditions and ways) with a Waldorf educational framework, which is unique to our Kanyen’kéha (Mohawk) culture and community. However, this past year we were given the unique opportunity to further document our pedagogy and teach it to others. Through a grant received by the Douglas Cardinal Foundation of Indigenous Waldorf Education from the National Indian Brotherhood Trust Fund, we brought together three Haudenosaunee Mohawk Immersion schools who are inspired by and experimenting with Waldorf education. We took our knowledge and experience and began teaching each other these new methods and pedagogy.

Through this work we formed the Haudenosaunee and Waldorf Inspired Initiative (HAWI), a collective of Haudenosaunee schools, programs and initiatives that are doing this same work.

In June 2021, we held our first three-day Onkwehonwe Early Years Training Intensive. This was immediately following the discovery of the 215 children's bodies at the Kamloops Residential School. Throughout this training we could feel the power of this work and the growing movement that was forming. We received such an incredible response, that we hosted another training this past month. This session was opened to the public and we welcomed over 20 Indigenous early years educators from seven different programs.

There is no doubt that discovery of the over 5744 children at various Residential schools across Turtle Island has reawakened the collective pain and grief within our communities. It has made the hidden history that we have known and carried for generations public for the whole world to see. However, this discovery has also awakened a new impulse within our Onkwehonwe communities: to examine, reimagine, and transform education. As we do this work, we are not only honoring the memory of these children, we are consciously healing these collective ancestral wounds.

If you are an Onkwehonwe educator who is reading this article today, know you are not alone. This work can seem lonely as our peoples and communities are spread out all over Turtle Island. Connect with us through our Facebook page, share your work, and help us lift each other up.

If you are a non-indigenous ally to this cause, you can support this movement through continuing your education on this dark history, start genuine working relationships with Onkwehonwe school initiatives, participate in discussions through the work of the WECAN Inclusion, Diversity, Equity & Access (IDEA) Committee, and donate to HAWI, Skaronhyase'kó:wa, or The Lakota Waldorf School. For more information on these initiatives contact HAWI on Facebook or at hawi.inspired@gmail.com or info@everlastingtree.org or info@lakotawaldorfschool.org.

Written in memory of and honoring the children who didn't make it home. We see you. We love you. Every Child Matters. ♦

- 3,213 documented deaths of children found by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (Canada Wide)
- 215 bodies found at Kamloops, British Columbia
- 104 bodies found at Brandon, Manitoba
- 38 bodies found at Regina, Saskatchewan
- 35 bodies found at Muskowekwan, Saskatchewan
- 751 bodies found at Cowessess First Nation, Saskatchewan
- 182 bodies found at Ktunaxa Nation, British Columbia
- 160 bodies found at Penelakut Island, British Columbia
- 227 bodies found at Mt. Pleasant, Minnesota, USA
- 189 bodies found at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, USA
- 161 bodies found at Fort Providence, Northwest Territories
- 21 bodies found at Grand Junction, Colorado, USA
- 39 bodies found at Dunbow, Alberta
- 74 bodies found at Battleford, Saskatchewan
- 50 bodies found at Rapid City, South Dakota, USA
- 103 bodies found at Haskel, Kansas, USA
- 182 bodies found at Cranbrook, British Columbia

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