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One of the hardest things I have ever done was sending my children off to a distant country, when they were each just 15, to go on a year long Rotary Student Exchange. My daughter went to Ecuador and two years later my son went to Thailand. It so happens that while they were each in their respective host countries, there was serious political upheaval and I had to trust, as their loving parent and before the internet was widely available, that they would come home to me safely.

It would seem that the parents of Jordan Wabasse of Webequie First Nation, of Reggie Bushie of Poplar Hill First Nation, and Jethro Anderson of the Kasibonika Lake First Nation, all 15 years old as well, should have had less concern than I did when sending their children off to school in Thunder Bay. This is Canada, after all.

There are no high schools in their home communities so their loving parents likely thought that it was in the best interests of their children's future to send them to the city to go to school – NOT that it would be a death sentence. Each of these children, Jordan, Reggie and Jethro turned up dead in one of the rivers in the city in the last year. These children, Jordan, Reggie and Jethro, were among seven Indigenous youth who were the subject of a recent coroner's inquest into their deaths in Thunder Bay. The inquest heard from other Indigenous youth who attend school in Thunder Bay, far from their homes and families and places. They heard how people in passing cars throw food, bottles and hate speech at Indigenous youth on the streets Thunder Bay. They spoke about hate crimes.

Thunder Bay is not unique in this place commonly called Canada. Saskatoon is infamous for its “starlight tours” where the police would pick up Indigenous people and drop them far out of town in the dead of a Saskatchewan winter. Many froze to death on the side of the road. Supposedly this practice has ended.

Here in so-called BC, there is a too long list of women who have been murdered in the Downtown Eastside and along the Highway of Tears. Safe passage along Highway 16 could be addressed by having something as simple as proper and accessible public transit. But the political will to make that happen is somehow missing – not murdered, but missing due to other priorities, whatever they may be that are somehow more important – at least in some peoples’ eyes, than the lives of women and children.

If we are paying attention, daily we can hear a list of terrible things that are happening to Indigenous people across this country and around the world. The news and catastrophic statistics are so frequent that they seem to have become white noise to most Canadians, aided in this by deeply entrenched and brainwashed colonial assumptions and world views.

When I think about all the past and current injustices done to the Indigenous people of Turtle Island, I am frequently overwhelmed and often weep. But my dear friend Dayna Chapman told me that I must not start the Gathering in tears, unless they are tears of anger.

Well, anger I can do.

The violence against the Indigenous youth in Thunder Bay is being labeled hate crimes. On what basis do we, as settlers, hate the first peoples of this place? I can’t help but feel that the proverbial shoe is on the wrong foot. If one just scratches the surface of Canada’s colonial history and present, there is ever so much reason for Indigenous people to hate settlers. And yet my personal experiences with Indigenous people, dating back to my childhood in Syilx Territory, is of generosity and laughter, community and friendship.

When my oldest child was 6 years old, and it was time for her first day of school, we walked together down our road to the highway where she was to catch the bus to school. The large orange bus pulled up, we walked carefully across the highway together and she got on the bus. I remember panicking as the bus drove away and the distance between me and my precious daughter widened. And I wondered, in a moment of sheer anguish and terror and the bus disappeared around a corner, why I was trusting that she would come back to me safely on that same bus. She did, of course, on that day and on every subsequent school day.

But for parents of children who were forcibly taken away and put in residential schools, there was no reliable nor safe return of their children. The death rate for children in residential schools was as high as 60% - and the Canadian government thought that the cost of returning the children's bodies to their families was too expensive. This is a harsh reality known and lived with every day by those who have survived that terrible program – but not one that the vast majority of Canadians can begin to relate to nor understand. Yet it is part of a history we are all implicated in.

I could also talk about the horrible facts that can be found in the book, *Clearing the Plains*. Dawn and I sat and cried together last year at a conference where the author James Taschuk talked about the policies and practice under the first Prime Minister of Canada, John A Macdonald – I refuse to call him “Sir”. That man deliberately and systematically starved the Indians off the plains – in order to make way for settlers and the imposition of agriculture on the prairies. My paternal great grandfather chose land from that cleared plain to start a farm.

And then there is the man who is celebrated for founding Halifax – the same man, whose statue sits atop a pedestal in a high profile central park in that city put a bounty on the scalp of any Mikmaq (migmah). As the first ever Indigenous poet laureate of Halifax, Rebecca Thomas, has stated, he used their scalps as currency and their deaths to found a city. She has written a powerful poem about this horrible piece of our country's history and I encourage everyone to read it.

It has been a long time since I took part in singing Oh Canada. My discomfort with the words, with our history and our current practices of being on this land has deepened over the years. However, we, as Canadians, as people who have, at some point in our family's history, come to this land from elsewhere, are not inherently, inevitably cruel. But many of us are lacking in imagination or the ability to understand what the historical and current practices like Residential Schools, starving Indigenous People to death, and tying Indigenous Nations up in our court systems for years has to do with us as settlers.

It is all about the land.

I recently heard a piece on CBC radio about an initiative called "Landscapes of Injustice". It is about the seizure of land from the Japanese Canadians in the Second World War. The project shines a light on how unjust it is that land and property was taken and never returned to people who meant and did no harm to this country – just happened to have come from a country with which Canada was then at war. This is an entirely legitimate initiative.

However, when I look around, all I see are landscapes of Injustice. Most of us in so called BC are living on land that was taken and never returned to any of the 27 Nations in this region. Those of us who are settlers here are, essentially, squatters on land of other Nations. We are on un-ceded Indigenous land.

I don't know if it is possible for settlers to really understand the nature of the Indigenous relationship with place. It is blatantly obvious that some are incapable of understanding it, as evidenced by the recent comment by our former Prime Minister Jean Chretien that the people in Atawapiskat should "just move".

I trust that most of us are less obtuse than Jean Chretien. But I know that there is a huge difference between those who look to a place across an

ocean as their place of origin, their home, and those that have been here since time immemorial. That longevity, coupled with a commitment to all the generations to come results in a different relationship with the land that few of us from away – if any - can begin to understand.

Around the world, Indigenous peoples are the ones who have and are preserving the remaining pockets of greatest biodiversity. Here in BC and across Canada, it is Indigenous communities and people that lead the fights against so-called development that will be destructive of the land and of our collective future. They put their time, money and bodies on the line to fight against the Site C Dam, the Northern Gateway Project, and the proposed massive increase of tanker traffic on our coastline, to name just a few.

They know that their past and their future is inherently tied to the health of the land and water. Yet most of us eat from an industrialized, globalized food system that is based on a colonial mentality. Our food comes from a system that mines the soil to produce food. And when the soil is depleted, which it inevitably is under even a lot of so-called sustainable agriculture, we either dump massive volumes of pesticides and fertilizers that enable the production of more crops, or we invade other thriving ecosystems to impose agriculture.

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The Truth & Reconciliation Commission wrapped up last year and next year is the 150th Anniversary of Canada's founding.

Frankly, I do not know what to do about either.

I don't know what true reconciliation looks like. And I know that Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred calls for something more than reconciliation: he calls for restitution. What that will look like, it seems to me, needs to be determined by Indigenous people. And whatever it will be, it is highly unlikely that it will be as bad as what colonialism has wrought: the extermination of the Beothuk, the deliberate annihilation of countless other

Indigenous men, women and children, the massive loss of land, bison, fish, and forest, the contamination of huge swaths of so-called Canada and of so many water systems.

If we truly understand and acknowledge the colonial agenda that founded and continues to perpetuate Canada at great historical and current cost to the Indigenous peoples of this land, then we must live with uncertainty and humility.

I have spoken about so many Canadian horrors not to promote guilt – which is a fairly useless emotion, in my opinion - but to try to demonstrate how we are all implicated and must take some responsibility for making change.

I think that our first step, as settlers, is to join the many who are educating ourselves about the colonial legacy and ongoing agenda. We need to understand what it is about Canadian culture where the disappearance and murder of Indigenous women and girls is commonplace. We need to be uncomfortable, angry, and profoundly sad – and we must continue to work at educating ourselves and taking action that genuinely works in solidarity with Indigenous people.

And we need, as Canadians, to call our new Prime Minister on his pledge to enter into a new relationship with the first peoples of this land – and let him know that it must be nation to nation. Nothing else is good enough.

Because this Network is about food sovereignty. And we can never attain food sovereignty that has anything to do with justice if there is no Indigenous sovereignty for the many nations on whose land we dwell.

I have created a Pledge with a list of suggested activities to take to help decolonize ourselves, our thinking and worldview, and ultimately this land.

BCFSN Annual Gathering, July 2016 Decolonizing Pledge

The BC Food Systems Network acknowledges that the place referred to as British Columbia has always been home to 27 Indigenous Nations who have been here since time immemorial.

We believe that BC and Canadian society owes its prosperity to colonization. We understand colonization as a system that is founded on land theft, ecological destruction, racism, apartheid and genocide. We understand colonialism as an ongoing process that continues to benefit settler society; justice demands decolonization. When fully realized, decolonization would liberate the land, its people, and its settlers. We hold to a vision where Indigenous Nations and settlers share the land in a just and peaceful relationship, and where indigenous sovereignty is fully recognized, including political, economic, and territorial self-determination.

I therefore pledge to do my part to advance the process of decolonization for myself as well as for our respective and joint communities. I pledge to take the following actions before the end of 2016.

- I will discover upon whose territory I reside
- I will study and use Dawn Morrison's *Decolonizing Food Systems Discourse: Contentious and Complementary Terms*
- I will attend an event organized by Indigenous people
- I will read the Executive Summary of the Truth & Reconciliation reports
- I will read the Truth & Reconciliation reports
- I will learn about the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples
- I will read the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*
- I will join the call for justice for the Murdered and Missing Aboriginal Women and Children
- I will read Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash*, Arthur Manuel's *Unsettling Canada*, or Lee Maracle's *I Am Woman* (for starters...)
- I will listen to *Unreserved* on CBC radio
- I will watch Aboriginal People's Television Network
- I will learn about the so-called "60's scoop"
- I will educate myself about the Residential School system and its impact
- I will learn the difference between a hereditary and an elected Chief
- I will volunteer at Indigenous events
- I will donate to Indigenous organizations
- I will educate myself on the difference between historical and modern-day treaties and why extinguishment of Aboriginal rights and title is unacceptable
- I will learn what nation-to-nation relationships might look like on the territory I live on
- I will organize a book club that reads Indigenous authors
- I will educate myself on the ways in which colonialism is not a thing of the past but very much present and pervasive today
- I will learn how environmental racism is practiced in Canada against Indigenous communities, for instance in Grassy Narrows First Nation territory
- I am willing to be uncomfortable, since what a truly just and decolonized Canada will look like is not yet known