A time to listen, learn, and change



By Nate Smelle

Since first putting on my reporter's hat with Bancroft This Week nearly a decade ago, I have had the privilege of engaging in many rewarding conversations with change-makers in our community and around the world. In their own way, each of these discussions have given me insight into several issues I knew very little about beforehand.

Every one of these close encounters, whether friendly or confrontational, has done its part in shaping the way I see the world. Yet, when I look back on my own personal evolution during this time, the most enlightening and transformative exchanges have been gifted to me by the Indigenous elders and Knowledge Keepers who have taken the time to share their worldview with me.

While driving to town last Wednesday, I was again reminded of these teachings when I switched on the radio. The broadcast, aptly named "A DAY TO LISTEN," was part of the Gord Downie and Chanie Wenjack Fund's campaign to raise awareness of Indigenous issues, by giving Indigenous leaders, residential school survivors, elders, musicians, and teachers a chance to share their stories.

Usually, the week leading up to Canada Day the radio is dominated by the music of The Tragically Hip. This year, however, instead of indulging my ears in a plate full of "Little Bones" I decided to fully and completely tune into the wisdom blasting from the speakers in my car. As I listened to the broadcast while making my way through the list of assignments that day, I was reminded of how The Tragically Hip's lead singer-songwriter/poet warrior for peace Gord Downie had chosen to leave behind a legacy urging us as Canadians to listen to the truths being shared by Indigenous people. Thinking about how National Indigenous History Month was just wrapping up, and how we need more than just one day to listen to Indigenous voices, I went home and started going over all the articles I had written regarding Indigenous issues over the past 10 years.

In honour of the1,000+ stolen Indigenous children recently discovered on and near the grounds of three of Canada's former residential schools - and those of the children still missing - rather than offering my reflections on these issues, I will keep with the spirit of "A DAY TO LISTEN" and share with you a few of the precious lessons learned from the Indigenous elders and leaders who passed them onto me.Chi-Miigwech?

?We speak in silence more than we do with words. It's amazing what you can learn from body language, and what you can learn from watching animals. If you are silent you are open to receive the messages you were meant to learn. Those are the messages that tie you to the land, and to the people, and to what's going on around you. If you are the type of person that is talking all of the time, you are not learning anything.?

?Our most sacred value is life itself. We as a people have pride in our hearts that we are an original native tribe from this country and especially from this area. We are proud of our ancestors for sharing their wisdom, knowledge and culture with those who passed it on to us. The values they taught us who we are today? Everyone as the same connection to Mother Earth. Some people choose to ignore it but it is there for everyone. We try and control nature for man and in the end we do more harm than good. All of western science has actually been built up by Mother Earth.?

- Katherine Cannon, Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin elder.

?It is a scary reality that one in five Indigenous women will go missing or be murdered. Well, I have five women in my life, and it's almost like I need to ask which one is going to be directly affected by this issue.?

"It's this uphill battle that we are going through, and I think people need to be aware that it can change. That change comes from knowing more about these issues. It comes from educating yourself because the education isn't going to do it for you, and the media isn't doing it justice. You have to take on that responsibility on your own if you want to live in a better society.?

- Nick Printup, filmmaker and Knowledge Keeper from the Onondaga Beaver Clan from the Sour Springs Longhouse in the Six Nations of the Grand River, and the Kitigan Zibi Anishinaabeg First Nation near Maniwaki, Quebec.

?There are already water shortages. Four barrels of water are needed to extract one barrel of oil, adding up to some 4 million barrels of water a day currently I can't even imagine what 4 million barrels of water looks like. This is only going to increase as they [the tar sands] expand so we are looking at 8 million to 12 million barrels of water a day. Where does the runoff go? They put it into tailing ponds? Tailing ponds leach into the environment.?

- Grand Chief Serge ?Otsi? Simon of the Mohawk Council of Kanesatake

?Though we have endured many, many years of cultural suppression, our community and familial ties are strong. We come together as a large, extended family, whether to celebrate, to grieve, or simply spend time together. There is knowledge that has always been held within this community.?

?Reconciliation is such a complex topic, especially in the most current context. Offering knowledge through sharing of elements of who we are as people ? whether our stories are artwork, etc. ? is so important as it breaks down cultural barriers. It is my hope that together we can rid our communities of the ?us versus them' stereotypes by developing meaningful appreciation of cultures different to our own.?

- Christine Luckasavitch, Madaouskarini Omaamiwininii Anishinaabekwe Algonquin Knowledge Keeper from the traditional territory of the headwaters of the Madawaska River.