

RECONCILIATION AND OUR INSTITUTIONS

Opportunities for Learning and Justice

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As I approach twenty-five years with my museum, I have been reflecting upon the work that we do and the privileged role that we hold in our communities. While we are accustomed to sometimes feeling like an “also ran” when it comes to funding and philanthropic support, we have the opportunity every day to craft our communities, inform discussion and to shape our future together; that is a privilege to recognize, to celebrate and to take seriously.

We talk a lot in Canada about reconciliation, truth and trust; in today’s world the fact that we are having this national discussion is not something to be taken for granted. So much anger, so little compassion and too much rhetoric is scarring civil society and public discourse, getting in the way of understanding each other and embracing this rapidly changing world we all share. The work is nowhere near done, but we are on a path, one that will get us to where we want to be, out the other side of these uncharted times we find ourselves in today.

Museum professionals occupy a unique vantage in this unsettling time of public discord by enjoying the confidence of our communities, deep intergenerational involvement, partnering in educational

research, and sitting at decision-making tables at all levels. Our expertise has far-reaching and long-lasting impacts through shaping knowledge, preserving history, and creating understanding. We have the rare opportunity to take a leadership role in the social environment, to help shape the discussions which will be judged by future curators as they try to tell the story of our era. Holding the public trust comes with a great responsibility, as our GLAM institutions hold important cultural significance - forums for civil debate, hubs for the exchange of ideas, and centres for the vital development of historical perspective. Our institutions can be a space for people to feel welcome and inspired. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that as we offer up our perspectives that we are entirely aware of our own biases and unintended knowledge gaps, that we make certain there is room for all people within our framework. This is where reconciliation takes on a far more complex and vital role than we generally consider, for it is not simply about acknowledging wrongdoing and developing equality, but also it is about learning from each other and applying that knowledge to these conversations in real time. It is about playing to each other’s strengths and compensating for each other’s shortcomings.



Through opportunities both planned and by chance, I was afforded the opportunity to learn over two decades from the Elders of the Lheidli T'enneh Nation while simultaneously learning from experienced professionals in the museum and science centre world at a moment when Canadian Society was having an extended epiphany. Neither I, nor my institution came to the table with a preconceived notion of what our “job” was in the community. The Exploration Place had suffered a total loss in a devastating fire some twenty years earlier, and had been struggling to find relevance and trust in the community since. Because of this, the museum was open to unusual approaches, a little risk-taking and broad input. I was a transplant from Ontario, holding a fine art background with no

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formal museum training or personal investment in the accepted history of the area, leaving me receptive to new ways to tell a story, to engage a public and to exploring the truths behind the settlement of our Region and its impacts on the Lheidli T'enneh Nation. It was a perfect opportunity

Opening of the permanent gallery Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning on June 21st 2017. From left to right, CEO Tracy Calogheros, Chief Dominic Frederick, and board member David Bird.
Photo credit: The Exploration Place

Elder Mary Gouchie of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation in Hodul'eh-a: A Place of Learning. Photo credit: Rob van Adrichem, courtesy of The Exploration Place.



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to follow a path that no one was sure of, exploring what could work for everyone involved. There is nothing like a joint adventure with no clear destination to forge deep and lasting relationships.

From the Elders, I have learned that I move too quickly sometimes, that my ideas of science and history are incomplete, that interrupting someone as they search for the right words will limit what I learn, that no matter what I thought of who I was at 24, I am better today for the journey I am on. From all of you I have learned that business principles matter, that bills must be paid in order for the art to continue, that our galleries and collections hold the heart of our communities and that they are constantly evolving, that our museums afford society the chance to pause and consider, to reflect and reassess. I have learned that without this opportunity to learn and reflect, we are all at risk. From my team at The Exploration Place I have learned compassion, to move quickly but to be willing to course correct or shift gears, to ask questions and really listen to the answers, that my decisions have profound effects on peoples' lives and work and that everyone is looking for meaning in their work and ways to contribute to their communities. I am circling back to the idea that the museum's perspective is both privileged and essential to the work that needs to be done in Canadian society.

Reconciliation is not about any single act or acknowledgement, it is not only about engaging with troubling and uncomfortable history in an effort to heal. It is about making our society whole again. It is about creating trust and friendship so as to craft our collective future and to sustain us through the stumbles and gaffes that are yet to come. It is about realizing that we all have important knowledge to contribute, that without our collaborative best efforts we are not going to tackle climate change, stop racism, end poverty, or prevent violence. Reconciliation is what will move us forward

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as an industry and as a society, and it is not a fast or straightforward process because it has never been done before. There is no better place to work through such a process than in our museums and galleries, home to our collective stories and traditions, troves of material culture, past mistakes, successes, tragedies and triumphs.

In working towards an understanding of the role a museum can and should have in its community I have shaped my career and my institution, celebrating the friendships I have been honoured with along the way and culminating in the signing of the MOU between the Lheidli T'enneh Nation and the Fraser Fort George Museum Society and the opening of Hodul'eh-a : A Place of Learning. In the eighteen months since that signing I have come to realize that rather than crossing a finish line, we have just left the starting gates. Every single thing I learned, studied, saw and heard in the 20 years prior was training. Shaking hands, cutting that ribbon, that right there was the true start of Reconciliation, of building that future together. I am coming to believe that the trick is to not to let go after the hand shake. The truth about reconciliation is that it is more like a marriage than a friendship. Both parties must be willing to be vulnerable, to open themselves up to possible pain, to find compassion when you do not understand each other, to be inspired by each other's strengths and to howl with laughter at our foibles, all while engaging in building a life together, inextricably intertwined, from which comes our legacy for future generations.



I have argued in many venues over the years that our voices are strongest when lifted in concert. Together we can overcome that which we could not tackle alone. Advocacy today, in all places, on all forums, at every table, is so much more important than I can express here. We have a responsibility as keepers of the past, explorers of the present and inventors of the future to step up collectively and bring people together. We are always learning, society is ever evolving and the only consistent thing since time immemorial is human triumph through change and personal growth. We are the story tellers, the knowledge keepers. In the Lheidli T'enneh tradition, you become an Elder in Training at 50, the BCMA turned 50 a decade ago and we have been on a steep learning curve since then. We don't have all the answers either individually or collectively, but we are engaged in the process, committed to the truth, and we have something important to bring to this national discussion on Reconciliation; even if it's only the offer of a hand to hold along the journey.

Two Elders visit the Cultural Expressions of the Lheidli T'enneh exhibit done in partnership with the Lheidli T'enneh for the 2013 Elders Gathering. Photo credit: David Milne, courtesy of The Exploration Place