

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHIEF ROBERT JOSEPH O.B.C.

By Debbie Douez, Reconciliation Art Project Coordinator
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Chief Joseph is currently the Ambassador for Reconciliation Canada and a member of the National Assembly of First Nations Elders Council. He was formerly the Executive Director of the Indian Residential School Survivors Society and is an honorary witness to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). As Chairman of the Native American Leadership Alliance for Peace and Reconciliation and Ambassador for Peace and Reconciliation with the Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace (IFWP), Chief Joseph has sat with the leaders of South Africa, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Mongolia and Washington, DC to learn from and share his understanding of faith, hope, healing and reconciliation. Chief Joseph is the Hereditary Chief of the Gwawaenuk First Nation. He was interviewed at the Reconciliation Canada office in North Vancouver and was asked to explain what reconciliation means and why participating in the upcoming Walk for Reconciliation is so important for Indigenous People in Canada today. This is what he had to say.

Chief Joseph, what does reconciliation mean to you?

I've always thought that the most important definition of reconciliation was the one that applies to an individual's own life experience. What is it in your life that needs to be reconciled? For many First Nations people it means, resolving problems that created trauma and that mitigate ongoing trauma. As long as we are imprisoned by trauma, the hurt continues and we are likely to live out our lives chaotically.

For me personally reconciliation is finding peace and contentment within. I think I have it right now in my life. All the things that use to haunt me and drive me crazy just aren't there any more. Once you find peace, and love of self, you never want to hurt anyone ever again, or be hurt by anyone else. I grew up at a time when I believed that white society didn't care about me because I was terribly, terribly hurt. I believed that we (Indigenous People) were the dregs of the earth. I've learned that there is only one force that is bigger and greater than all the hurt and darkness and it's the idea that I can love myself again. If I really truly discover how to love myself, I discover how to love everybody else. So this is why I say, reconciliation begins with you, as it begins with me.

Of course reconciliation expands out to how Aboriginal People have been treated in this country from the beginning of colonization, through the Indian Residential School system and ongoing even now. The definition of reconciliation expands and responds to this litany of harms that remain unresolved and continue to be practiced. But that's the beauty and excitement of reconciliation, that we can call on all of us, every colour and every race, not just Aboriginals and just talk about it. We can ask: is this our common humanity, to be treating one another in this

manner? Of course the answer will be no. None of us were ever born to be evil or bad or full of hate. It's not natural! So it's really about self reflection at the highest level collectively. We need to re-discover our common humanity so that we don't hurt each other.

Reconciliation has a multiplicity of meanings to all the people. But what's important is that we are thinking about it now and we build from the place that we are at to create the reconciliation that has outcomes that we desire as human beings - a loving, caring, just society.

Your definition of reconciliation, whatever that may be for this moment is a start and it's important. We can deepen its meaning by personalizing it and actualizing it in our own lives. Unless we find ways to actualize reconciliation, it doesn't really matter what the word means. Once we actualize it, it's something that grows and grows - if we care enough to want to be engaged. It will be true not just for our personal lives but also for our corporations who are plundering the environment. They are going to start to hear from all of us who care about this divine place. Because we are all going to be seeking what reconciliation means, even people in the boardrooms are going to be impacted and begin to think about their role and their responsibility to reconciliation. It's not about big companies extending the benefits or sharing the wealth. It's about together, how could we all pay reverence to mother earth?

Why is the walk important?

The walk is a powerful symbol of caring. Aboriginal People in communities where there is despair and hopelessness and brokenness and addiction, where bad things are happening, don't think things will every change - they believe that nobody cares. Then all of a sudden they see 70 000 people come out on a rainy Vancouver day and they think - oh my god, people do care! At that last walk, (in 2013) there were a lot of survivors of residential schools and they were crying because they were so overwhelmed. They said "we didn't know that people could care about us." Our history was so bad. It's been so bad that most of us grew up feeling that we weren't loved, even by our own parents. So to create this powerful demonstration of caring for each other is so important. This walk will be like the first walk, reminding Aboriginal People, former Residential School survivors, that Canadians STILL care.

The world is watching what we are doing here in Canada. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was founded on the ideas that came from the survivors themselves. Even in their anger and rage they thought that what would help to save them is if they can tell their stories. The telling of their stories is the very first step to the possibility of letting it go and moving on and healing. The entire truth commission premise came from those stories and people asking for safe places to tell their stories. It hurts so much to carry these stories and never have told your mother or your sibling what happened to you. We were too ashamed and so hurt. And then all of a sudden this walk happened. I think it's the most wonderful thing that's ever happened in my lifetime.

What is your vision for a future Canada should reconciliation take root?

Ahh it's going to take root and it's going to survive. There will be a lot of challenges of course. But when we are reconciled, I see a Canada that is one. That Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals all belong here and we finally recognize that the best way forward, a new way forward, is by working together, not marginalizing each other. I see a Canada where every child born to this country has the same potential and the same opportunity to dream and become whatever they want to become. I see that as so important. I see a Canada where we find ways to mitigate those silos of division, the bodies of racism and hatred and really see each other as one with each other. I see a Canada that celebrates the depth and breadth of it's diversity and that we are all valued, and all of us can find a purpose in this place. Of course I see a Canada where Aboriginal conditions are going to be elevated. We'll be sharing prosperity and wealth. There will be employment and training and education for Aboriginals. We are going to live in decent homes. Our kids are going to be able to look you in the eyes and say, "hi, I'm so and so" and not be ashamed of who they are, and really be proud of who they are. There are so many things that are going to change in this country and we won't be the only beneficiaries - all of us will be elevated to a real better state of collective consciousness. And if we can get there, we won't hurt each other as much. Instead we are cheering each other on. Everyone will have a place here. We can be different - we all are unique with unique gifts. We should be able to give full expression of those gifts without fear or shame, without regret. When we get there, to this future Canada and we are celebrating our diversity and difference we are going to be so rich. I think we could be a model for the world if we can do that here in Canada.

The Walk for Reconciliation takes place on September 24th, 2017 in downtown Vancouver.

Video Resources:

1. A video series produced by SFU, interviewing Chief Joseph about Reconciliation
Part 1: Culture and Ancestry https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge_pM9k1CPs
Part 2: Residential School Experience <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2hk7JEQtI>
Part 3: Reconciliation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLjcpO1JC84>
2. 2013 Walk Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJZWNN0egfo>

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