When I offered to contribute to this edition of Justice Report, which I had been informed would deal with Aboriginal issues, I wondered where to start, what to say, and how to craft my message.

Two comments I recently heard came to mind:

1: “How many more times do I have to hear about Native culture? I’m getting sick and tired with the excuses!”

2: “It is fundamentally immoral not to have a good understanding of the Aboriginal experience”.

I then thought: where do I fit into relative to these comments? I concluded that these would be good end posts with which to frame my comments!

WHAT DO I BELIEVE?

I believe that learning/knowing of Aboriginal culture and experience is key for non-Aboriginal Canadians to fathom Aboriginal/Indigenous issues, in this case within a framework of criminal justice. It seems that certain preconceptions regarding the perceived ‘inferiority’ of the Native has entered mainstream Canadian thought via some of the early histories of Canada. To varying degrees, these preconceptions became embedded in Canadian culture and prompted among other failed initiatives the development of the residential school system. The intolerance of difference, while perhaps no longer operating at a collective or cultural level in Canada, persists in the minds of some individuals and is as far-reaching as it is well-documented. Native people have made great strides in overcoming misconceptions and stereotyping by making their voices heard, but the over-representation of Aboriginal people in Canadian justice system may be a cautious reminder that cultural intolerance and racial tensions may still be a contributing factor in the current Aboriginal experience.

MY JOURNEY TO UNDERSTANDING AND APPRECIATING THE INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCE

Maybe it will be helpful to outline my journey in coming to appreciate the Indigenous experience; this will include some testimonial comments as well as observations from some extraordinary colleagues and friends.

In many ways, this journey was framed by the Aboriginal people I have met and by two books: Halfbreed by Maria Campbell, her highly acclaimed Aboriginal autobiography of the 1970’s, and Reservations are for Indians by Heather Robertson, which has become a classic. These two books were so successful at relating an untold history that they changed my way of thinking about “Indians” forever!

THE ROAD-ALLOWANCE PEOPLE

I grew up in a small east-central Alberta town where virtually everyone was Caucasian – a few Chinese and a few East Indian people were the only visible minorities. I recall from elementary school that three Native kids were in my class for a while. Joe, Jimmy and Gilbert were terrific ball players so I tried to get them on my team whenever possible. I remember being enthralled to learn they lived year round in tents, out in the bush just east of town. Much later in life, it dawned on me that they had actually been some of the “Road Allowance” people that Maria Campbell writes about in Halfbreed.

Campbell’s road allowance accounts help readers understand the humiliation and shame that led to alcoholism and drug addiction in many Métis communities, and to the ensuing struggles to restore families, culture and language. She informs readers that a road allowance constituted Crown land, which until a highway was built, was open to squatters. It was the Métis, the only Aboriginal group in Canada with no homeland at the time, who came to occupy road allowances. Campbell tells the history of the Métis after the Battle of
Batoche, when they fled to northern Saskatchewan and Alberta and as far south in the United States as Louisiana. Always on the move, they were often burned out of their homes, evicted from land, pushed out by settlers, moved by governments, and eventually lost their children to adoption in the 1950s and 1960s. Of the 15 families in Campbell’s village, only two had kept their children.


MY POSITIVE FAMILY TEACHINGS
Our family enjoyed fishing and we made many trips by car during the summer to the lakes in north eastern Alberta. En route, we passed signs saying “Indian Reserve”. I learned a bit about Indians from my parents, mainly that their life experience was different than mine. When I reflect on my early years, I feel fortunate that I did not hear many racist, prejudiced or ill-informed comments about Native people; none from my family and only a few negative comments from people I knew in town.

CAUCASIAN GUARDS AND NATIVE INMATES… A POWERFUL IMAGE
My eyes were abruptly opened when I toured the original Fort Saskatchewan provincial goal in 1965 as part of a criminology class at the University of Alberta. I’ll never forget the powerful image: Caucasian guards and Native inmates. That got me thinking: why are all the staff White and most of the inmates Native? What could explain this? I don’t recall gaining any deep insights, but the questions became engrained in my mind, and I wondered about this issue from time to time as I completed my degree.

OVER-REPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN THE CANADIAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM
The next step in my journey came as a result of being hired by Alberta Corrections as a Probation Officer in Edmonton. It didn’t take long to actually see what is now called “the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system” – lots of Native people being arrested, appearing in court, and serving time in jail. I supervised quite a few Native people on probation. Part of my work took me to Indian reserves west of the city and I started to notice what I considered to be squalid living conditions, poor levels of public service, the lack of community development, shoddy infrastructure, and some cultural values very different to what I was used to.

NATIVE INITIATIVES… DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES - COMMON GOALS
At this time, too, I was fortunate to meet a director at the Edmonton Native Friendship Centre, Chester Cunningham, who worked at the Courthouse where I worked. His job involved making sure that Native people appearing in court understood the court processes. He spent a lot of time with judges, prosecutors, lawyers, court staff, staff from other agencies and with me, explaining some of the realities of being Native, and how these factors were evidenced in the courtroom. An example here was the tendency for some Aboriginal people to plead guilty to whatever they were charged with just to get out of a very foreign and frightening situation – the courtroom. For the most part, this was new information for those of us who worked around the courts. Chester later founded Native Counselling Services of Alberta (NCSA) and has been awarded honorary degrees, the Alberta Order of Excellence, the Order of Canada and many other awards for his outstanding work in Alberta, across Canada and internationally as well.

CULTURAL ACCEPTANCE…
I also met three new Native probation officers: Danny Sinclair, Lloyd Auger and Gilbert Anderson. Initially, I heard that they were hired by Alberta Corrections as “labourers” as they did not have the “formal qualifications” to be probation officers. Although they were not university graduates or trained as counselors, pastors or police, they had a wonderful “people skills”, including a terrific sense of humour, empathy with co-
workers and clients, extensive knowledge and experience in the Aboriginal community and a dedication to helping the probation service meet the needs of all clients, regardless of race, gender or age. They soon proved their worth. These men worked for many years as Probation Officers, in addition to volunteering in leadership positions with Native agencies and being role models in the Native community. Danny, Lloyd and Gilbert gave me a new awareness of Native issues and Native culture, such as the impact of the reserve system, the dynamics of extended family, some differences between Indians and Métis and cultural traits of communication such as the practice of avoiding eye contact. This information proved very helpful in my work as a probation officer.

DIFFERENT CULTURAL TRAITS CAN CAUSE MISUNDERSTANDING WITH FAR-REACHING, SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES

One time I became very frustrated, even angry, with a young man from a reserve west of Edmonton who would not look at me when I was asking questions of him in my office to gather information for a pre-sentence report. After he left my office, Gilbert tapped on my door and asked if he could come in. He said he noted the frustration in my voice during the interview, and then, after asking if he could make a few comments, proceeded to explain that some Native people have learned it is disrespectful to make eye contact with authority figures. I explained to Gilbert that this was sure different than I had learned when my parents would demand: “Look at me when I’m talking to you!” Gilbert smiled and said: “Now, you are learning – there are different ways to do things; different beliefs, different values.” He then gently asked: “Did it help to get mad?” “No”, I replied. “Now I realize it is no big deal if some people don’t look me right in the eye”.

About this time, I bought the two books that had such a profound impact on me: Halfbreed by Maria Campbell and Reservations are for Indians by Heather Robertson. These books were full of personal stories and a tremendous amount of information about the Native reality. Most of the information was new to me but it fit into what little I already knew in a powerful way… and I was changed! I was beginning to more deeply realize that within a framework of the criminal justice system, cultural traits, such as this tendency to avoid eye contact, and social conditions such as poverty, can have an impact on criminal justice and corrections.

DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

I moved to Lac La Biche, Alberta, to head up the Probation office in that community which is north-east of Edmonton. One colleague asked me why I would go there to work – didn’t I know it was the ass-hole of the province; another commented: “And all the Indians there, you know?” I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Lac La Biche, especially the long drives to various communities and courtrooms in the region with Harry Pruden, the local Native Courtworker. From this quiet and gentle man, I learned about important issues such racial tensions, Native politics, community resources and Indian medicine. In discussing with Harry the issue of some Native offenders on probation not reporting to the POs, he wondered why would we breach them; couldn’t we go with him into the settlements and reserves in the region to meet the families and community resources and find out what the client was up to? That’s what we did and we rarely had to consider a breach.

THE VALUE OF COURTWORKERS

I left Alberta Corrections to work on a Master’s degree at the University of Alberta and I accepted summer employment as a Parole Officer in Edmonton. From time to time, I had coffee with Chester and on one occasion, I gave him a copy of a paper I had written for a Sociology of Law course about the impact of Native courtworkers. He said it was the first time he had seen anything written about courtworkers and he asked me to prepare a position paper that would be presented at the 1973 criminal justice conference in Regina. Concern was developing in the justice system about the over-representation of Aboriginal people and he wanted to be there to address this issue from an Aboriginal perspective.

I eagerly accepted the offer to work on the position paper – what a challenge, what an opportunity! (The $100 honorarium
was “big money” for me at that time and was a helpful motivator as well). I gathered my university skills, such as reading, questioning, challenging and immediate answers/responses, and formulated three questions to be the basis of the position paper. I attended a meeting of the NCSA Board of Directors and, with pen and paper at the ready, asked the Board members for their thoughts on the three questions. I waited in anticipation for the expected rapid response, as I was accustomed to at the university. No response. I became nervous …what was happening? I waited. Still no response. Eventually, almost panicking, I turned to Chester and quietly asked: “What’s wrong?” “Nothing”, he said. He paused, then replied: “You asked some good questions and now they are thinking of good answers.” I relaxed! Once the responses came, they were wise and thoughtful insights into the issue of Aboriginal over-representation in the justice system. I had been part of an Aboriginal experience, where periods of silence are not uncommon, especially when important matters are being considered.

Once my course work at the university was finished, I started work again with Alberta Corrections as a caseworker in a minimum security prison in Edmonton. One Native inmate on my caseload applied for a weekend pass. Initially, the decision-making committee refused him the weekend pass because of concerns that he would drink while on the temporary absence. I called Chester Cunningham and asked if one of the NCSA courtworkers could check in with the guy over the weekend to encourage and support him, and to make sure he was following the terms of his temporary release. This satisfied the committee and the inmate was released. The weekend pass was successfully completed and on the following Monday, I phoned Chester to thank him and the courtworker for their assistance.

NATIVE COUNSELLING SERVICES OF ALBERTA (NCSA)

It was during this conversation that Chester asked if I would be interested in working with NCSA, doing staff training. After several more phone calls to flesh out employment details, I handed in my resignation to Alberta Corrections, then excitedly (and nervously) headed off to work at NCSA, one of two “white guys” in that Native organization at the time.

Native Counselling Services of Alberta was established in 1970 with the objective of providing Courtworker assistance to Aboriginal people in conflict with the law. Agency leaders recognized that Aboriginal people often feel alienated by legal and court procedures, and require special support in navigating the judicial system. In response to these unique needs of Aboriginal people, NCSA established its flagship Courtworker Program, starting with a single courtworker working out of a single office (http://www.ncsa.ca/online/).

INDIVIDUAL RACISM AND FEAR OFTEN GO HAND IN HAND

For me, the next eight years were fascinating. One of the first training sessions I organized was called Public Speaking and we contracted a local Toastmaster to lead the session. I remember one of my speeches was entitled “White man in Indian Country” in which I spoke about the support and encouragement I had received in my first few months at NCSA. I felt I was fitting in, being accepted and beginning to meet the training needs of the staff. The following week, an experienced staff member resigned. When I asked why, she looked right at me and replied: “Too many Whites.” This was said in a straight forward manner, blunt and matter-of-fact. I was stunned. A day later, my supervisor commented that maybe this was all for the best, for everyone in the organization.

CULTURAL ACCEPTANCE…A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

A few months later, as I bounded up the stairs beside the reception area toward my office on the second floor, a voice from a seated Native client sent chills up my spine: “What’s that f------ White guy doing here?” I felt hate and contempt in his voice. I was accustomed to hearing negative comments and criticisms from disgruntled clients in my previous work as a probation officer, parole officer and prison caseworker but this comment was different – I was badly shaken and I was scared! Fortunately, one of my colleagues commented right away to the client: “He works for us – he’s OK”. That seemed to put an end to the matter and I heaved a sigh of relief.

I traveled all over Alberta conducting training sessions, attending staff meetings, visiting the families of co-workers, and meeting justice officials. My family often hosted BBQ’s at our home on the last evening of training sessions held in Edmonton, in the hopes of matching the friendliness and hospitality that staff members and their families extended me when I was on the road.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES WITHIN ABORIGINAL CULTURE

My understanding of the Native experience continued to deepen, thanks to the NCSA staff and staff from other Native
organizations that I worked with on training matters. Now, the similarities and differences among the Native tribes, languages, histories and cultures became clearer. I started hearing about residential schools, systemic discrimination, Native rights, Native self-determination, self-government, Native protest, Native Pride, the Red Road, the 60’s Scoop and the American Indian Movement. I continued to learn about important similarities and differences within the Aboriginal culture itself.

PAST CRIMINALIZATION OF CERTAIN SACRED CULTURAL CEREMONIES
I began hearing about ceremonies such as smudging, the sweat lodge, the Sun Dance and pipe ceremonies. An elderly male courtworker from Calgary mentioned one day after a training session that he had been imprisoned for taking part in sweat lodge ceremony. This really brought home the reality that some Native ceremonies had been prohibited, not just discouraged, but outright criminalized.

I found some of what I was learning to be intriguing; some was inspiring; some was frustrating; and other things made me mad.

FEDERAL REVIEW PROCESS FOR NATIVE COURT WORKER PROGRAM ACROSS CANADA
While at NCSA, I was assigned to represent the organization at a series of meetings hosted by the federal Department of Justice to develop a review process for Native courtworker program across Canada. Justice cost-shared the funding of the courtwork program with provincial governments, and various Native organizations were contracted as the carrier agencies to supply the actual courtworker services. These meetings took a central group of courtworker agency representatives, such as myself, all across Canada with the goal of advising and informing Justice officials about what courtworkers do, the impact of courtworker services, why the service was needed, the challenges facing the court agency and what changes were needed make the courtworker services even more effective in the Native communities and the court system. This review, however, was seen by some Native organizations as a way to limit or shut down their courtworker programs.

At various meetings, federal Justice officials reassured courtworker representatives that the review was not going to be a vehicle to slash funding but many courtworker agencies remained skeptical. They said that they had seen too many program evaluations pave the way to significantly reduce or cancel a variety of programs for Native people. The tensions in many of these meetings were obvious and I was learning firsthand about government-Native relations. I made sure my role stayed focused on service delivery issues (need, services and intended outcomes) and to leave the politics to the Native leaders. I had learned this working with NCSA. While I can be eloquent and persuasive, the Native people I worked with at NCSA were very capable of expressing the views, perceptions and aspirations of their communities. I was very comfortable playing a support role, such as helping out with staff training, taking part in review processes for several programs and the like. There was no need for me to think I should speak for Native people and I was careful not to place myself in a position where others saw me as speaking for the Native community.

A TREACHEROUS DIVIDE BETEWEEN NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE ORGANIZATIONS
At one courtworker review meeting in Toronto in 1980, attended by the agency representatives and Ontario Native political leaders, we met to prepare for the meeting the next day with federal Justice officials. In a small, crowded room with about 20 persons, one Native political leader walked into the room, looked around, fixed his gaze on me and demanded: “What’s that White guy doing here?” This time, I wasn’t alarmed by such a comment but I felt the tension in the room spike instantly. One of my colleagues on the committee, a courtworker from Ontario, immediately responded: “He knows his place; he is here to give us a hand; don’t worry about him – he’s OK!” The Native leader nodded, the tension dropped and we got down to business in preparation for the meeting with federal officials the next day.

I KNEW MY PLACE!
This was a good lesson for me – knowing my place. Despite the credibility I developed through the work I did with the NCSA and the courtworker program across Canada, some people still held me in suspicion, at least initially. I came to understand that it would take a long time for me, a white guy in Indian county, to be accepted as someone with something positive to offer. I also came to believe that it would take a lot of good work and a long time to bridge the divide between the Native and non-Native organizations and communities. I am comfortable with the small part I played in changing the skills, knowledge and attitudes of the terrific people I worked with at NCSA and elsewhere. I watched the staff become
more knowledgeable about law, legal processes, courts, prisons, interpersonal dynamics, their job descriptions and the jobs of a wide range of justice officials with whom they worked. They became more skillful and adept at performing their jobs and they became more confident in themselves, both as employees and as people. Not surprisingly, justice officials noticed the positive changes and the impact that staff were having on the court and prison systems, including staff and clients.

I worked with a number of non-Native people who were contracted to lead specific training sessions. Two such people who had a tremendous impact on our staff were Brenda Robinson, who taught report writing sessions, and Geneva Ensign, who led personal awareness sessions. Initially, they were contracted from Grant MacEwan Community College, then later through their own businesses. They helped the staff develop skills and knowledge in their respective areas of expertise; but, in my view, the biggest difference they made was in the confidence the staff felt about themselves, their work, their families and their communities. Brenda and Geneva mentored many NCSA staff, especially the women, long after the training sessions ended.

HAVE CANADIANS BEEN QUIET RACISTS?
My knowledge of and appreciation for the Aboriginal experience continued to develop through my job at NCSA. One particular understanding came from an Inuit man working with us in Edmonton. He said:

“I have found Canadians to be quiet racists. They generally are not like Americans who tend to be in-your-face racists. Canadians are more subtle in their racism but the impact is just as powerful and it is tough to deal with quiet racists, maybe tougher.”

CULTURAL INFLUENCES CAN BE LEARNED
I left NCSA for health reasons and a year later started working as an Instructor with the Correctional Services program at Grant MacEwan Community College (now MacEwan University) in Edmonton. I enjoyed dealing with the students, faculty and community agencies as well as teaching a variety of courses but the course I loved the most was entitled “Cultural Influences”. Here, students learned how cultural traits influenced criminal justice and corrections. Initially, the course focused on Native culture but over the years expanded into other cultures and faiths as well such as Sikhs, Vietnamese and Black, and then into the theme of Diversity.

KNOWLEDGE WAYLAYS PRECONCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS THAT CAN LEAD TO RACIAL TENSIONS
The course content about Aboriginal history, values and beliefs brought out a wide range of reactions from students. I always co-taught the course with Aboriginal resource persons. For many years, I partnered with the late Diane Jeffery, director of a young offender group home with NCSA. Diane was gentle and quiet in her teaching style. Many times, she had a class of 50 students totally enthralled in what she was explaining or demonstrating. For example, when we dealt with smudging and sweet grass, I would introduce the topic by relating some of the misconceptions I had heard in my career about sweet grass:

- the Natives use it to get high
- they use it to cover the smell of “pot”
- anyone near it gets high, even from second hand exposure

SWEET GRASS & SMUDGING…
A PURIFICATION AND CLEANSING RITUAL
Diane then took over. She handed around a braid of sweet grass, explained how it was picked, how it was prepared and lit, the symbolism of the braids and that it was used for the purpose of purification and cleansing. She gently invited everyone to stand and form a circle. She explained that if someone did not want to participate, they could say “Pass” or step back. She asked women on their “moon time” to pass, then explained why this is done. She demonstrated a smudge by waiving the smoke over her eyes, ears, mouth, heart and body, saying:

“We do this so we will see good things in people, hear good things about others, say good things about people and have good feelings for ourselves and others. If our body hurts somewhere, waive the smoke over that part and quietly asked Creator to make it better”.

Initially, there would be some snickers, nervous glances around the room and a shuffling of anxious feet. As the ceremony progressed, a calmness settled over the students; they became very quiet, settled and attentive; many seemed to reverently await their turn to smudge.
SWEET GRASS IS NOT A DRUG!
When we debriefed following the ceremony, I would ask; “Did anyone get high?” Heads shook “No”. Diane would then ask: “Can you tell me what you feel?” Students would quietly offer that they felt peaceful, relaxed, calm, and gentle. A few commented that the experience was no big deal but it was OK to try it. Some students then asked to start each class with a smudging ceremony while others asked Diane if they could use sweet grass on their own.

LEARNING FROM AND ABOUT THE ABORIGINAL EXPERIENCE
I believe these were powerful testimonials that went a long way to reduce the wrong information that some people had about this Aboriginal experience, to help the class see how culture influences policy and procedure in criminal justice (such as the use of sweet grass in a prison) and, maybe more importantly, that there is a lot to gain from the Aboriginal experience.

DECONSTRUCTING STUDENT PRECONCEPTIONS
In the classes, two frequent statements, sometimes said with considerable anger, often came up: “The Aboriginals don’t pay taxes” and “They get their education free”. Patiently, we would explore these statements, ensuring the class received complete and accurate information on the issues. Most students were satisfied with and appreciative of the explanations; they could now go forward with good information. We explored many other issues where people had wrong or incomplete information about the Aboriginal experience. Nearly always, students developed an understanding at a deeper and much more positive level than they had previously. Incidentally, I use the same approach with neighbors, friends and others when improper statements or questions are raised about the Aboriginal experience. Nearly always, students developed an understanding at a deeper and much more positive level than they had previously. Incidentally, I use the same approach with neighbors, friends and others when improper statements or questions are raised about the Aboriginal experience.

THE PE SAKASTEW HEALING CENTRE… WHAT IS A SWEAT?
In order to increase the intensity of the experience of learning how Aboriginal culture influences the delivery of correctional services, we take the class to Hobbema, AB to spend a day at the Pe Sakastew Healing Centre. This minimum security facility is run by the Correctional Service of Canada with major input from the local First Nations community. Each year since it opened in 1997, students had an extensive tour of the facility and met with staff and residents. Some students had the opportunity to attend a sweat on site with the Centre elder. The first time this was offered, two students attended the sweat along with Diane and I.

In later years, up to twenty students participated; twelve students participated with me in April, 2013.

A SWEAT IS A CEREMONY AND A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE FOR SOME
There were always a variety of reactions after the sweat. A few would comment: “Is that all there is to it?” Others would comment: “Well, that was interesting. At least I know what is involved. I can see where this might be helpful to some Aboriginal offenders”. This was the most frequent kind of comment. A few would quietly say: “Wow, that was awesome! What an experience. Now I can see why this is important; now I will promote it”. We always asked the class to write a personal thank you note to the Elder, if they wished. Several times I noted a comment such as: “Thank you, sir; for me, the sweat was a life-changing experience!”

As we covered various topics in class, some students were quick to loudly point out: “I already know this stuff – I learned it in elementary school!” Interestingly, others would say: “Gee, I never knew that before. I wonder why we didn’t learn this in junior or senior high school?” A few students quickly dismissed what we were teaching: “You mean we have to know this stuff – will it be on the exam?” These same students also seemed to relish the opportunity to challenge, almost attack, Aboriginal guest speakers that we brought into class with comments such as: “What education do you have?” “Are you serious?” and “That’s not the way things are!”

Most students, however, were respectful of what they were learning and the Aboriginal resource persons they met. Course evaluations revealed similar conclusions: some said the course was OK; some said it was a good course and some said it was excellent. Diane reported meeting quite a few students during field placement or in the community, and some said to her: “The Cultural Influences course was the best of all the courses in the program”.

ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES AND TEACHINGS ARE USEFUL AND HELPFUL
In teaching the course, I was reminded of the existence of racism, prejudice and a lack of awareness about the Aboriginal experience. I was also encouraged, however, by the enthusiasm that most students had for learning the Aboriginal experience – these folks could readily see how this awareness would help them in their career, and quite a few spoke of how some of the Aboriginal teachings were helpful in their personal lives.
A HARSH REALITY: THE HISTORICAL TREATMENT OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN CANADA

I continued to read what I could about Aboriginal people. I attended conferences and listened to Aboriginal speakers. I came to hear more about concepts such as genocide, colonialism, assimilation, eradication, oppression, systemic discrimination, individual racism, collective racism and dislocation. The reality of the intergenerational effects of experiences like residential school, colonization and discrimination became clearer to me. I heard the phrase “survivor” quite often, in reference to Aboriginal people as survivors of their experiences at the hands of non-Aboriginal people. Over time, I started hearing about concepts such as traditional lands, consultation, Aboriginal title and “It’s our responsibility”. I recall hearing the Seventh Fire prophesy. Interestingly, what used to be a rarely-heard phrase, “Mother Earth”, is now rather mainstream. So, too, is the word “healing”.

HEALING JOURNEYS: A PATH TO REHABILITATION

The term “healing” is popular today. I first heard this word used in criminal justice in the 1990s from Indigenous offenders. My company, KAS Corporation Ltd., was fortunate to be contracted to coordinate two research projects sponsored by the Nechi Training, Research and Health Promotions Institute at St. Albert, near Edmonton. Nechi was established in 1974 to meet the growing need for addictions prevention and recovery resources for Aboriginal people. Through culturally sensitive training, research and health promotion initiatives, Nechi provides counselors, health care workers, social workers, educators, community service agencies, government agencies and other members of the helping professions with the tools and resources to help heal the pain and devastation caused by addictions and abuse. (http://www.nechi.com/)

These research projects examined the lifestyles of Aboriginal offenders who had extensive criminal records or had committed very serious crimes, then had turned their lives around to become respected, law-abiding citizens. Maggie Hodgson, then CEO of Nechi, recognized the power of the life stories of this group of offenders and she spearheaded these research projects and a related video.

For her work at Nechi and elsewhere in Canada and abroad, Maggie has been awarded the Order of Canada, along with a host of honorary degrees and other significant awards. She knew others would be impressed by these ex-offenders in that they had turned their lives around to now be seen as role models in their communities. These men and women attributed the remarkable changes in their lives to a number of factors, such as family support, becoming clean/sober, and learning about Aboriginal spirituality. Many spoke about their “healing journey” and did not use the term “rehabilitation”. One of the researchers who interviewed dozens of the respondents concluded:

“We forget to forgive, support, enhance, and love our brothers and sisters back to health and wellness. We forget about creating harmony and balance. It is better to pick someone up when they have fallen than to kick them when they are down.”

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE ME TODAY?

In my career in justice/corrections, I’ve met some angry people. They lash out at anything Aboriginal, they seem to reject factual information related to Aboriginal experience and they see explanations as excuses. Do I want to be like that? Definitely not! Are they afraid? I believe they are — afraid of something they don’t know or don’t want to understand.

I want to be like others I have met, particularly Aboriginal people, who are optimistic about the future. They are at the forefront of changing things for the better for Indigenous people and, indeed, for all Canadians. I recall viewing a video about the Stan Daniels Healing Centre, a minimum security facility in Edmonton run by NCSA with support from the Correctional Service of Canada. In the video, two scenes stand out for me. In one, there is an image of a hand with the palm facing upwards. In the other, a hand is positioned as in a handshake. My paraphrase of the audio is: “In the past, we approached Canadians with our hands held out; now, we approach Canadians in partnership.”

PARTNERSHIP: A POWERFUL WORD

To me, the word “partnership” seems to be the right framework for discussions and actions related to the Indigenous communities. It means we must learn about the Indigenous experience, with all the joys and sorrows that go with it. It offers insight and direction into how to deal with the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system. A friend working in the justice system recently said to me:

“We have a window of opportunity to help bring about change that benefits Indigenous offenders and their communities. This will benefit all Canadians.”
We can embrace the idea that people really do have different needs, see what contributes to these different needs and we can go forward with optimism and partnership to meet those needs.”

WHERE DOES THE NON-ABBORIGINAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE WORKER FIT IN?
All this seems to me to be easy to understand, to grasp the direction in which we in criminal justice/corrections should be taking, and to understand what role we can play to make it happen.

For those who react with anger or frustration at what they hear about the Indigenous experience, aren’t they just getting in the way? Aren’t they making life as a Canadian and as a justice worker difficult for themselves and for their colleagues, family and friends? How can they be expected to maturely deal with issues raised in Gladue (1999, Supreme Court of Canada), the recent Idle No More demonstrations, blockades, protests and all the Indigenous issues that keep coming to the forefront? I wonder how the “nay-sayers” deal with the incredible success evidenced by Indigenous people in Canada in medicine, law, politics, business, education, tourism, art, writing, architecture, television, sports and public services? Have they not seen the Aboriginal Achievement Awards?

TESTIMONIALS
So much for my thoughts… here are some recent comments from some colleagues with whom I have had the privilege to work:

MICHELLE ANDREWS
(former chair of the Correctional Services and Mental Health programs at Grant MacEwan College, now MacEwan University in Edmonton):

I continue to be humbled by how little I knew about the experience of Aboriginal people in Canada before I started my academic career at MacEwan. Not ashamed, not saddened, not angry...just humbled. Why? Because humility has allowed me to be open to all the teachings that have been offered to me, directly and indirectly from the Aboriginal colleagues I have worked with, and from students. For example, when students ask questions about residential schools - and they ask many - I’ve come to realize that their questions are genuine and that they almost always come from a place of appreciative inquiry. I’m humbled that I am the person that provides at least a partial answer and then encourages them to seek out clearer, more comprehensive answers in many places...from elders, from fellow students, from the literature, from colleagues in the workplace. What a privilege to be part of the learning journey.

CHESTER CUNNINGHAM
(founder of Native Counselling Services of Alberta):

I think we sometimes put too much emphasis on culture. Culture does not solve problems, just as it does not create problems. Considering the influence of culture, though, can help with solutions. What is more important is the individual and the influence of family. Culture does not make decisions for me – I make the decisions. Can I look in the mirror and like what I see? I see me, not a culture. What can I adopt from culture that will help me make good decisions and influence good policy? I think culture sometimes gets confused with selfishness.

By the way, I was recently asked to sit on a selection committee to advise on hiring for an important position in criminal justice. A senior-ranking politician walked into the room. The first thing they said was: “I’m not selecting an Indian!” Others on the committee squirmed but said nothing. I responded: “I don’t care if the person is green, pink, blue or a member of your political party. I want the person to be the best person for the job!”

Do we still have to deal with decisions based on racism?

MAGGIE HODGSON
(founder and former Executive Director of the Nechi Institute; former Board member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada)

“I have been involved with justice and Indigenous issues for over 4 decades. In 1973, a small group of us wanted to make a presentation at a national criminal justice conference at a hotel in Regina. We were not allowed to attend the conference – it was for government officials only. We were not allowed to leave a position paper about Aboriginal engagement in justice and corrections at the information table – that table was for official government documents only. We were not even allowed to go into the conference room to distribute our paper.

So, we stood outside the conference room in the hallway and handed out copies of our paper to people as they left the conference. What we proposed then is, for the
most part, mainstream in justice and corrections today. We have come a long way since then! By “we”, I mean the Indigenous communities, criminal justice professionals and government officials.

What if we had decided not to go to that conference? What if we hadn’t prepared a position paper? What if we decided not to give out the paper in the hallway? What if the people we gave them to had not had the good sense to read them?

I have worked with various agencies and with many officials. Some have come and gone. I stay an Indian and I don’t go away. The Indigenous people today continue to have a vision of their place in this country and of how things can be better for all Canadians. Many of the programs operating today are part of that 1973 vision paper. Through culture and ceremony, Aboriginal people continue to create new beginnings within the system. We have come light years over the last forty years. We work towards our shared vision. Despite the existing government we work towards our shared vision. It is rooted in ceremony. We have been told and we follow the direction the grandfathers have given us. Through the hills and valleys we move on, one step at a time. Our spirit is not in the dark anymore. Our eyes are wide open on the road set out for us through visions of what is possible. Will that take another 40+ years to happen? What those people who stand in our way do not know is that, while they think it is in their hands, really it is not. It is in the spirit of those who continue to follow the ceremony and the directions given therein.”

CONCLUSION

Through my journey, I have come to understand the mindset behind the first of the two comments quoted at the start of this article. I have become a firm believer in the second comment, for it truly is fundamentally moral and practical for all Canadians, especially those working in criminal justice, to have a good understanding of the Native/Aboriginal/Indigenous experience.

Mitakuye Oyasin ••