

I BELONG TO MYSELF (E TEE PEE THA MA SU YAN)

Prayer

I want to thank you for honoring me by asking me to speak to you today. I confess that I am intimidated seeing the caliber of scholars, researchers, health professionals, social workers, mental health therapists, who have worked in the field for so many years. I asked myself what is it that I need to share in this conversation to support your work towards transformative change. Thank you for all that you do.

At this point I want to share with you a part of the speech I delivered when I received an honorary degree in law from the University of Manitoba two weeks ago. I made a similar acknowledgement to the community at Opaskwayak Cree Nation in The Pas, when I was appointed to the House of Senate in 2017. It shows what I carry with me.

I want to start by acknowledging our ancestors who have gone into the spirit world – for their tenacity, persistence, patience, love – to lay a path for us so that each generation would progress to the best of their ability. What they have done for us we will do for the generations yet to come.

I want to acknowledge my family, Elders, community who raised me, taught me and demonstrated the values of sharing, compassion, patience, love, laughter, humor, joy, acceptance, worth, belonging, safety, work ethic. They taught me it was okay to be creative, curious, spontaneous while they showed me the traditions of our culture so I would one day be able to tend to the fires of a home. This land-based education was interrupted by residential school.

It was these teachings, language and culture that were erased in residential school and that I would seek to reclaim for the rest of my life.

Today as I stand before you to accept this honorary degree I do so as the collective Mary Jane, not the individual Mary Jane. I acknowledge that I didn't accomplish my journey on my own. I wouldn't have accomplished what I have and gotten to where I am without the help of many.

This speech exemplifies the strengths that I carried with me into residential school at the young age of 5. I was already a success story when I entered the school.

My contribution today will be to further my and your understanding on how colonialism in residential school and reserve life contributed to my demise, as a young child, through the forced loss in my ways of being, and ways of thinking – me – that powerful spirit (Achak) that was created by Creator and that humans had the audacity to reconstruct. Work, like this speech, contributes by increasing my understanding of the adverse and cumulative impacts of oppression on myself. This work of decolonizing will last my lifetime as I go deeper, each time, in this exploration of myself – decolonizing because these losses followed me into adulthood.

I will also share with you my experience followed by my understanding of the western way of treating dental disease and how that, alone and without our ancient ways, is inappropriate. As a result targeted (western) interventions continue to blame victims and continue to work on outside interventions, many times by outside specialists, and this mentality continues to not consider and thereby continue to displace and continue to ignore appropriate self-care, self-determination and deflects responsibility by the patient. I have seen this same process with some medical doctors,

nurses, social workers, mental health therapists and RCMP I have worked with on reserves.

I believe my situation with dental disease parallels the treatment of other diseases/conditions/situations like hepatitis, HIV, intimate partner violence. Each of these situations may harbor historical violence and trauma that is carried within the persons/individuals.

I have practiced in the dental field, in various capacities for 48 years and just retired in 2020. After many years I witnessed that the Western way of dealing with dental disease whether it was preventive, restorative or rehabilitative, did not and still does not work for Indigenous Peoples. When I experienced this ineffectiveness while I was in the field, it took me years to decolonize what I was taught and to look at my clinic space as sacred space, the work I did as ceremony and the connection to my patients as spirits in a human body. It taught me that when I carried energy within me, I had to remove it when it was negative (anger) so that I wouldn't impart this energy into my patients. I carried and still carry historical and contemporary negative energy and trauma and hence the importance of acknowledging it to be able to leave it at the clinic or research door.

An important question: "Where does this negative energy come from and how does it continue to be refueled?"

In residential school I was forced to take piano lessons for 7 years. The nun who taught me was violent, uncompassionate, rigid, and I internalized her violence and the trauma that goes with it. I carried this violence within me, without realizing it, until 3 months ago. (Story of nun: Harboring violence, the results (blamed myself and then forgiving.) Even when I had done nothing wrong, I still convinced myself that I had done something wrong.

The preventive strategies in dental have not worked. In the communities where children had their treatment completed and a dentist went back into that community, the dental situation was as if no dentist had ever been there. The children who had not been treated had dental disease, and those who had been completed also had dental disease- the disease continued to be ubiquitous. That's because the root causes of the manifestations of soul wounding, including dental disease, were not addressed nor acknowledged. Prevention techniques may decrease the disease/condition for awhile but as soon as those techniques or health services are withdrawn the numbers will rise again. We have seen this same scenario with the HIV situation in Saskatchewan this year.

I had provided dental care on one reserve for a total of 6 consecutive years. I had a children's dental program and completed 30 children. When I went to do classroom education I didn't discuss dental issues I went to the classrooms to speak to the students about overall health, about the purpose of tradition, about the safety of community, goal setting, etc. When I went back in 2019 I saw former students whom I had completed and 3 of them were back home from University/work and they required very little dental work. I saw 3 other former students and they were in a very different situation – they required a lot of treatment. I could see that one group was inordinately impacted by the social determinants of health (married with children and living with family (homeless); food and water insecurity; domestic and intimate partner violence; loss of education opportunities; addictions, sexual predators.)

When the basic needs in life are difficult to get why would one practice self-care? What are their priorities? What are the impressions of the children as life unfolds for them? It begins with small things. (egs.) What types of danger are they facing at such a young age and what will they carry with them to adulthood?

When I asked some of the adults why self-care was difficult to maintain one told me that her addiction was a priority - that she thought of smoking from the minute she got up until she went to sleep. Using strategies such as over-pricing and taxing cigarettes or sugar because some clinicians/researchers/govt/policies think these strategies will work has not worked. More money will end up being spent on these addictions by people and will drive the situation/relationship into a more negative relationship. Have these people ever looked at the root causes of additions? If not then there is a danger of driving the situation into a more dangerous situation like intimate and child violence and drug use.

Moving away from dentistry I want to talk about the violent conflicts that we, as First Nations, have to deal with on a daily basis in the following areas: regulatory gaps between provincial and federal legislation, provincial and federal legislation, healthcare, police, research, court system, religion, child-care, over-incarceration, education from daycare to academia, it is not surprising that safety - feeling safe, being safe, feeling valued, learning to belong to myself instead of trying to fit in into different groups in society, - feeling safe, with and in myself, still remains a top priority. When people feel safe they are more likely to have the chance to dream, to be able to figure a way out of their situation, to be bold, to be creative. How do we create this safety for those who have reached out to us? (lifelines)

The government's unilateral action to remove children from their families and communities to be interred at residential schools started many adverse cycles of life circumstances for these children including myself: disempowerment; powerlessness, feelings of abandonment (not true but still internalized); motherless and fatherless children; dissolution of my inherent identity; dispossession of body, soul, spirit; grooming of sexual identity; dispossession of self-determination including the ongoing land-

based teachings we would have had; shaping of a foreign identity; dependence; poverty; sin; blind obedience, quiet acceptance which allowed me to accept inequality, marginalization, loss of responsibility for decision-making).

These combined effects of taking away my strengths and replacing them with weaknesses ended with me leaving the residential school as an amorphous mass with no knowledge of borders, with a loss of critical thinking skills and as a high risk situation – not because I was First Nations but because I had been made subordinate without lifeskills, without the ability to operate outside the residential school system. In effect I had been taught that I no longer belonged to myself – I belonged to others. And those others, oppressors though they were, abandoned me and I was let out into society.

I want to now share with you my journey and understanding of the oppression I went through, what I lost and how oppression looked like in the box. People talk about thinking outside the box but what first we need to know what is inside this box.

My mother had birthed 10 other children before me at home, on the reserve, including my sister closest to me in age. My sister was in breach and the midwife, Caroline, knew that – without any radiographic help. Caroline sent for a young girl of 12, whom I have since met and had a conversation regarding my sister' birth. Caroline guided this young girl in the process to turn the baby in the womb – because she had small hands – and to very gently turn the baby's head toward the birth canal and ensure that she didn't scratch the womb. This story shows the science behind what my people understood and practiced for millennia. How did these groups of professionals not recognize and acknowledge that we had survived through childbirth for generations and generations? They did not see our Indigenous way of being and knowing as comparable

to their system. Today you can see the reverse happening and people using doolahs and midwives.

The process of forcing my mother, without her consent, into the sterile halls of the hospital miles and miles away **dispossessed** the women, family and community of the culture and ceremony of childbirth and all that comes with it – celebration of new life, support provided by family and community, the practice of *wakotowin* (social capital/ relations), the practice of *e tee pee thee mis so yan* (sovereignty – belonging to oneself), the importance of language in the birthing process, the right to own your own body especially for women who were at one of the most sacred times in their life-course – giving new life.

This unilateral decision started the process of stripping women and girls of many things including the right to consent and decision making in many areas of their lives including the right to give birth and to continue to parent and educate their own children in their mother tongue through land-based education. (story of nurse – age of 4 and before residential school: threatening behavior through raising of voice, in her space and in control leads to silencing.)

The right to consent and decision-making are core concepts of **self-determination** and their dispossession forced my mother into a setting where she was unable to communicate to those around her especially in her time of pain. Here I see the foundation being built for inequity, exclusion and ignored diversity. It was the start of “one size fits all” built on someone else’s idea of fitting in and inclusivity.

*I didn't ask
for this
I didn't want it
but now it's*

who I am.
Topher Kearby
Watercolor words 2016

As a 5 year old who was sent to residential school 3 weeks after my mom passed on, I came to realize later in life that I was a success story when I entered residential school. I had already absorbed the many teachings demonstrated by Elders: work ethics, patience, spirituality, sharing, humor, laughter, stories, love, and it was this land-based education that saved my life and made it easier to recover my identity, spirit and power later in life. I realized that I had already come to understand and absorb the terms inequality, equality, equity, diversity and inclusion in my education that didn't come from a textbook. It was inequity, pan-Indian, monoculture and exclusion that I was to learn at residential school.

Later in life I realized that while I was in residential school problems were generated, for me, by oppression, because I was an Indian. I know I must first look inside the box that contained my life, my body, thoughts, actions, expectations, rules in residential school in order to untangle, understand and center myself to my history of oppression and my coping mechanisms. What was taken away? What took its place? How did RS shape me as a girl, a woman, a dentist, a Senator, a Chancellor?

Only when I understand what was inside the box can I start to take the walls down to challenge the acts of assimilation, of brainwashing, of injustices and discrimination first towards myself (because I can still victimize myself today) before I can challenge other institutions and systems. It is important to note that many times I could only make sense of my life experience later in life – when I could use my age and experiences as a sounding board as in the piano lessons. What did I look like inside this box?

Inside my box and what awaited me at Residential school was the belief by the nuns and priests that I and the other children/girls were sinners. The notion of sin eventually took away my purpose in life – that I didn't have a purpose.

In that box I learned to silence my voice, my dreams, my creativity, my curiosity, my critical thinking skills. What was wanted from me was blind obedience that I couldn't give. It reinforced to me that I had no to little control over my life. It reinforced to me that my voice had little purpose.

In that box I was taught that I was poor - residential school where we went to learn to be poor, to act poor, to think poor, and become dependent.

In that box I was groomed to look at sexuality as deviant – that I, as a girl, was responsible for this deviance. It's a shaming process.

In that box there was a loss of power, spirit and soul each time something good was taken away from me. You see I couldn't keep them – I was just a little girl.

Assimilative practices propped by the government authorized the nuns, priests and teachers to erase our culture and language while we were housed within the walls of their institution. My power and spirit were especially affected when I lost my language. Language has power and sets the context for history, teachings, accountability, ethics and moral, and spirituality. When I was taught to be silent I started to forget the contributions made by my people, my parents, my community. When my culture and language were taken away as well as my voice, the beautiful little girl started to fade to be replaced by a little girl with a haphazard form of identity. They took rich cultures and impoverished them – impoverished me.

In that box and that institution we were excluded from society and marginalized as less than. And I accepted this. In my 11 years my resolve had been eroded and replaced by quiet acceptance for many years. But the results were violent.

I cannot think outside the box until I know myself and how I can limit my capabilities, my intelligence, my place in life, and how I can continue to oppress myself. Many times I silenced myself – I do less of that today. Each time I give voice, I gain back some of my power and spirit. It is when our allies understand the role that patriarchy played in oppression of women, Indigenous men and race that they can unlearn or learn and support the work that we do in tearing down those walls that exist.

How did I start the change?

*How can you hope to help others
When you can't even change yourself.
Anonymous*

*What if I fail?
My darling, what if you fly?
Anonymous*

As I look north in the direction of my home, Brochet, Manitoba I remember the teachings of Elders learned from land-based education and the community's collective strength. As I look south to the residential school where I lived for 11 years and was taught a

foreign and punitive form of education that had reshaped my identity I considered my options. There is only one. To repair the damage done to me as an innocent young child and to regain the power and spirit I had given up slowly, over the years. What is it that needs the change and how do we understand how it is to come about?

How do we start to engage our patients towards regaining their spirit, their energy and their power?