

OPINION

To move toward reconciliation, we need to engage in challenging conversations

HEATHER MENZIES

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People attend the second annual Orange Shirt Day Survivors Walk and Powwow on National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Winnipeg, on Sept. 30, 2022.

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Heather Menzies's forthcoming book is Meeting My Treaty Kin: A Journey Toward Reconciliation.

When I asked myself what reconciliation requires of settler Canadians like me, I didn't start with reconciliation itself, which seems more like the goal or end result. I started with rapprochement: beginning again.

I discovered that it was an 1827 treaty that had legitimized my great-great-grandparents settling in Nishnaabe territory in present-day southwestern Ontario, in 1832 and 1842.

From an Indigenous perspective, such treaties are covenanted relationships in the sharing of land, with responsibility for maintaining those relationship – in a kinship-like state of closeness – passed down from one generation to the next. Having learned this in 2018, I then wanted to learn what my treaty responsibilities might be. I travelled to the Stoney Point Reserve, which the federal government had appropriated in 1942 to create the Ipperwash Army Training Camp, despite the same 1827 treaty having reserved this land as exclusively for the Nishnaabeg in perpetuity. Nishnaabe actions to reclaim their ancestral homeland in the early 1990s led to the police shooting death of Anthony O'Brien ("Dudley") George. The reserve seemed like a good place to start.

First I met Dudley George's cousin, Kevin Simon, his sister Cully George-Mandoka and two of his aunties, and soon I was being invited to help them tell the broken-treaty story behind that death. (The resulting book was called *Our Long Struggle for Home: the Ipperwash Story*.) I took on the work (pro bono) in the spirit of atonement and reparations of a treaty relationship, not just for myself but for my forebears. And that felt good.

What didn't feel good was how much my unconscious colonial and even white-superiority thinking, conveniently cloaked in writer professionalism, kept getting in the way. I bumped up against this while taping their stories and listening to how the Nishnaabe co-authors wanted the book framed. It was usually subtle: a tightening of their lips or a silence that I was forced to read as a withholding of trust that I was genuinely hearing and heeding what they were saying. But I paid attention. As one year turned into a second and third of working together on the book project, I grew to care about them as I got to know them better. I wanted to know them on their terms, not through the lenses and filters of how I'd been conditioned and taught to think.

So I went to work on myself, shutting myself up and learning to listen; interrupting my inner voice when I was reaching for a simile ("just like x") to

turn the unfamiliar into the familiar. I had to stay in the unfamiliar, stay with my discomfort. As I slowly learned to relax and just let the unfamiliar be, I became aware of a different pattern of being here in this Nishnaabe space I'd been drawn into, a different pattern of thinking. All of it relational. All of it connected to the land and a sense of belonging to it.

I began to see the promise of reconciliation on the treaty side of my heritage as a settler – the promise of sharing not just territorial space but institutional space, in keeping with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call to revise the 1763 Royal Proclamation and the 1764 Treaty of Niagara. If such a revisioning could gain broad public support, having an Indigenous language meet the bilingualism requirement to become governor-general would be a matter of course, as would support for the kind of climate-reparation measures that are needed to achieve "reconciliation with the earth," as the TRC commissioners put it in their report.

But reconciliation isn't just a matter of trading in a colonial relationship for a treaty one, with mutual respect following automatically. It requires work, taking on the challenge of transforming colonial patterns of thinking into ones receptive to diverse Indigenous ones. This cannot be done in isolation, merely by knowing more about Indigenous peoples. It requires the "getting to know you" kind of knowing too. It was by breaking the hold that 200 years of forced apartheid, assimilation and related colonial thinking had on me, by entering a relationship with four Nishnaabe and opening myself to being challenged by them that I learned to open both my mind and my heart to what reconciliation has to offer.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-to-move-toward-reconciliation-we-need-to-engage-in-challenging/>