

Journal of Indigenous Research

Full Circle: Returning Native Research to the People

Volume 9 | Issue 2021

Article 9

April 2021

Light at the Core of Reconciliation in Canada - Introducing the path of Algonquin Chief T8aminik Rankin and Kokum Marie-Josée Tardif

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Recommended Citation

Lamalle, Sandy (2021) "Light at the Core of Reconciliation in Canada - Introducing the path of Algonquin Chief T8aminik Rankin and Kokum Marie-Josée Tardif," *Journal of Indigenous Research*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2021 , Article 9.

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Light at the Core of Reconciliation in Canada - Introducing the path of Algonquin Chief T8aminik Rankin and Kokum Marie-Josée Tardif

Cover Page Footnote

The author is very grateful to Kokom Marie-Josée Tardif and Comis T8aminik Rankin (the Elders), for their availability, kindness, generosity and medicine, as well as for their permission to share their teachings. Ci Mik8ec. The author met the Elders on her own journey for truth. She is very grateful to her ancestors, guides and helpers, and to those she encountered on her path. She participated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in Montreal and Ottawa (2013-2015), and has been conducting research on healing, reconciliation, the TRC's conclusions and implementation. Respecting the traditional way of communicating knowledge, this article was prepared on the basis of oral discussions with the Elders. The discussions took place in a series of informal meetings in Ottawa, Montreal, and the Laurentian mountains in Quebec, Canada (2016-2018). The article also quotes a part of the book they wrote: *They Called us Savages – A Hereditary Chief's Quest for Truth and Harmony* (2020). The article was drafted and edited in agreement with the Elders (2019-2020), and the author is thankful to the reviewers for their helpful comments. The author is responsible for any error in this article.

Light at the Core of Reconciliation in Canada

- Introducing the path of

Algonquin Hereditary Chief T8aminik Rankin and Kokom Marie-Josée Tardif

Inspiring men and women have been weaving profound change across Canada — contributing to the process of Truth and Reconciliation. Among the survivors of the residential schools, not only did they have the courage to resist oppression, to overcome trauma, anger and the destructive representations of themselves they had to cope with, but also the strength to engage in reconciliation and revitalisation of their cultures and languages. This article is a tribute to these weavers of hope and new relationships, and sheds light on their decisive role in leading and empowering transformation. In the perspective of sharing the testimony of such weavers, this article is dedicated to the life and experience of Algonquin (Anishinabe) hereditary Chief T8aminik Rankin and *Kokom* Marie-Josée Tardif, Elders from the Algonquin tradition.

The light of dawn has been warming up the earth and is now shining on the pine trees. After a good night's sleep in the fire lit prospector tent, tucked away in the arms of the forest, the medicine is now giving new energy. *Comis* Dominique and *Kokom* Marie-Josée¹ welcome us at their home in the Laurentian Mountains in Quebec. A stone's throw from their wooden house, the tent is a place for healing, filled with all the care and knowledge of the Anishinabe medicine man and woman.² With enthusiasm, we gather in the garden — *Comis* T8aminik is teasing us about the morning chores, and *Kokom* Marijo, as we like to call her, is warmly inviting us to join them for breakfast in their peaceful home. Near the bay window with a view on the forest, and under the sun's rays, we

¹ *Comis* (Shoo-miss) and *Kokom* (ko-koom) in Anishinabe mean Grandfather and Grandmother, and designate Elders with respect and affection.

² The Algonquin people refer to themselves as Anishinabe (ani-shi-nabey) in their language. It means 'human being'.

enjoy our convivial meal. We then take place in the armchairs and rocking chairs in the living-room for our discussion. T8aminik puts on a traditional headband with fine colourful patterns made of beads — he is now ready to share his experience.

Kapiteotak was born twice near the Harricana river, on James Bay territory (North-West of Quebec). One life was given by his mother Emma Moé, another by his father T8amy Rankin, who rescued him when he was a toddler. *Kapiteotak* is the name he was given by his parents in Anishinabe.³ It means ‘he who can be heard crying or singing from afar’. Dominique is the Christian name he was later given. He grew up surrounded by his parents, seventeen brothers and sisters, the community members of the *Mami8inni*,⁴ the communities of brothers and sisters animals, the standing beings like the majestic pine trees, Father sky and Mother Earth. He lived a nomadic life according to the change of seasons and learned to ride a canoe. He was taught the traditional medicine of his ancestors, a corpus of knowledge on how to live healthily in the body, heart and mind.

Kapiteotak’s father, *Kitci* T8amy was the *Okima*, the traditional chief, pillar of his community, respected for his wisdom and medicine. And, when *Kapiteotak* was seven, he received an eagle feather from the Elders and was designated as a hereditary chief. Around that time, nomadism was about to be forbidden. *Kapiteotak* and his people had then to struggle to find places to live outside the forest. After ten years of negotiations with the government, the Pikogan reserve was finally settled and *Kapiteotak* and his family moved to a house. But in the meantime, when *Kapiteotak* was around eight years old, he was taken away with five of his siblings, without his parents’ consent, to a Residential Schools for Indians.

³ The word Algonquin refers to a language family, gathering various Indigenous languages such as Anishinabe, Innu and Atikamekw.

⁴ In Anishinabe, the ‘8’ is a letter which is pronounced as a ‘w’.

In his narration, *Comis T8aminik* stands back and pauses for a while. He breathes peacefully, and resumes saying that ‘more painful than the suffering itself is the silence which covers it’.

Everything changed the very day he was brought to the ‘school for little savages’. His hair, symbol of his respect for Mother Earth and all women, was cut, and the clothes and shoes made by his mother were removed and burned. He was then defiled by physical, sexual, psychological, and moral breaches to his integrity. He could not speak his language anymore. He became number 47.

His stay at the residential school lasted almost seven years, and was marked by fear and deep sorrow. Dominique could go back to his parents with his siblings each Summer, but was unable to tell of his ordeal for years. Until one day, when he was 14, he had become stronger and decided to oppose his aggressors. With other teenagers, they organised a rebellion to defend themselves and the younger ones, and denounce the violations. Despite their heroic actions, the abuses continued and silence remained heavy in the school. Dominique then became determined to escape. He managed to get out of the grounds of the school, but was eventually caught. Refusing to go back again, desperate, he wrestled with so much force and anger, that he was brought to a court of justice. When his father came, Dominique finally told him and the judge what the children had been enduring for years. The judge understood the situation and declared that he was free to go back home to his parents. His liberation helped raising awareness of the truth about the schools.

Back to a divided society, with the trauma and destructive representations of himself, Dominique had to struggle with discrimination and alcohol during the following years. His different selves were in conflict — repeating the trauma, Dominique was denying *Kapiteotak*, forbidding himself to express in public his native language and ways of being. In that state of estrangement, Dominique felt at odds with his relatives. Until one day, his father was alerted by his dispirited state, aggressiveness and destructive behaviour, and decided to take him to the Elders in the forest, in order to help with healing his pain according to traditional knowledge and medicine.

Healing

In Anishinabe traditions, a very important medicine is called *Matato*, ‘the place of the spirit’. In English, it is translated as ‘sweat lodge’, referring to the effect of the heat on the body, but this medicine provides healing for all the dimensions of the being, including body, heart and mind. It creates a special space for people to become whole again, reconnecting with life forces. The hut where the *Matato* takes place is designed to form a womb, where complete darkness, humidity and heat contribute to the healing process led by a medicine man or woman. It is a collective process. Fire heated stones (called the *kokom* and *mocom*, the ancestors) are placed at the centre of the shell-shaped structure through the only door. The healing ritual goes through the teachings of the four directions of the traditional medicine wheel, and includes drumming and chanting. Entering the womb means accepting symbiosis with the elements: air, earth, water and fire. It means reconnecting with oneself and the different realms, including vegetal and animal, and joining past, present and future in spirit.

During this decisive *Matato* in the presence of Elders, Dominique, at the age of 14, is reconnected to all his relationships and life forces — his *Kapiteotak* self, family, community with the beings of the different realms, and to Mother Earth and all the elements. Mending his broken relationships, restoring spirit. During the ritual, after fundamental teachings and symbiosis, the medicine man explains:⁵

"*Kapiteotak*, it is time you drained yourself from your past. Have you ever noticed that all the animals on the ground go forward? Have you ever seen a bird flying or a fish swimming backwards? Is it what you are doing *Kapiteotak*? Is your mind returning relentlessly to the past?

- Yes.

- Then speak child, the ancestors are here to take your pain. What did they do to you?

⁵ This part of the teaching includes extracts from the book written by Grandmother Marie-Josée on the life of Grandfather Dominique: *They called us Savages/On nous appelait les Sauvages*, 2020/2011.

- They took everything! My hair, my mocassins, my pride, my language, the forest, my brothers and sisters, my father and my mother. And every day they dirtied us with their words, with their hands and their eyes. I hate them! Why, why?

The Elders then start singing a pacific warrior song accompanying the cries and tears of *Kapiteotak*.

- 'Why' kills the suffering man in the cage of his mind, and in the meantime, the pain remains stuck in the body, the heart and the soul. The remedy, child, is to accept what happened.
- How can I keep on living with all the people who stole our lands and beliefs? How can I accept to live among people who abuse and rape children?
- Who abused you *Kapiteotak*?
- The priests and nuns!
- No, not them, who abused you *Kapiteotak*?
- The Church!
- No, not the Church, who abused you *Kapiteotak*?
- The white and their government!
- No, you are wrong *Kapiteotak*. I am going to tell you who hurt you. This is not the black robes, the Church, or the government of the white man. Those who abused you, child, are the men and women who are ill. Such actions should never happen, but you need to understand this, child: when you judge or blame people, you are poisoning your own self. You fill your body with anger and hate. This is not good for you. And when you meet with other human brothers and sisters, your judgements builds barriers between you. This is not good for you, this is not good for them. Respect yourself. Acceptance will liberate you and start the healing."

In the medicine wheel, acceptance is the teaching of the direction of the West. Acceptance is an action which concerns the relationship between oneself and an event. It concerns how we perceive and judge something we experienced, and how we make sense of it. The concept of forgiveness is

different, and does not exist in the Anishinabe language and thought. Healing starts with acceptance of what happened in the past and the process of inner reconciliation. Reconciliation means ‘becoming one again’, and is a path towards unity within persons, communities, institutions and societies. Social processes, like institutions, may induce fragmentation in social relationships and within persons, causing violence, trauma and illness. In that sense, healing means addressing fragmentation by re-uniting at different levels, through truth, acceptance and reconciliation. Healing is then understood as a process of re-uniting.

Becoming One Again

The life of Dominique was changed by that powerful *Matato* experience. In the years which followed, helped by the Elders, his guides and his family, he continued his long healing process, eventually stopped drinking and started working. His first interest was in medicine, and although he did not study modern medicine, he worked in a hospital; as a social worker addressing drug addiction; as an inspector in Indigenous dispensaries; and as a patrol guard and officer protecting the forest against poachers; until the day he decided to engage in politics and reconciliation. He then met his life companion Marie-Josée Tardif, who was born in a Quebecer family. She was known as a journalist and news anchor in major TV and radio channels in Canada. In 2007, her life shifted when she was offered a Sacred Pipe by the Anishinabe Elders. This totally unexpected event showed a tremendous sign of respect and recognition from the Elders. But it also meant that she needed to commit her entire life to the study of the traditional teachings. After months of reflection, she embarked on the long ride of learning the language, philosophy and traditional medicine of the Anishinabe First Nation. Marie-Josée is now called *Kokom* (Grandmother), and as such she teaches and travels regularly with *Comis* (Grandfather). With much *Sakiti8in*,⁶ on their shared path of reconciliation, they wrote the book ‘They Called us Savages’ (2020; original version in French *On nous appelait les Sauvages*, 2011), an inspiring testimony about discrimination, trauma and healing.

⁶ Anishinabe concept meaning love, responsibility and harmony.

It took time for Dominique to heal what happened in the residential school, and to fully reconcile himself with *Kapiteotak* and all his relations — becoming one again. He was then admitted in the circle of Anishinabe Elders.

Elder T8aminik (this is how the name Dominique is written in the Anishinabe language) survived the residential school and became one of the leaders who opened the paths to healing and reconciliation in Canada. He is one of the last hereditary chiefs across the country. For decades, he has been conducting traditional healing rituals with *Matato*. His native languages are Anishinabe and Cree. He can speak other Indigenous languages, French and English. He was a chief of the Algonquin Nation in the years 2000, and became a senator for the 140 aboriginal Native Friendship Centres in Canada.

Along with Grandmother Marie-Josée, he founded in 2013 the non-profit organization *Kina8at*,⁷ and in 2020, the Dominique Rankin Foundation,⁸ both of which have the mission of fostering healing and cultural reconnection among First Peoples, as well as promoting reconciliation and sharing of Indigenous cultures with all. This joint mission brings them to work both nationally and internationally. Grandfather T8aminik is co-president of the World Council of Religions for Peace. He was appointed a Member of the Order of Canada and a Knight of the *Ordre National du Québec*, as well as receiving the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Medal and the medal of the *Assemblée nationale du Québec*.

Acceptance

After a pause during our conversation, *Kokom* Marijo and *Comis* T8aminik started to reflect on the meaning of reconciliation. *Kokom* Marijo highlights the distinction between acceptance, forgiveness and reconciliation. “It seems that reconciliation starts with acceptance, which is an action we do within ourselves. We first need to reconcile with ourselves, with what happened to us

⁷ www.kina8at.ca

⁸ <https://www.dominiquerankinfoundation.com>

in the past — in order to sewing the torn pieces of ourselves. Only then, we can reconcile with others and forgive. I have to say that the more difficult is what we have to do towards ourselves in the first place”. For those who have suffered such trauma, it is difficult to start the healing process without guidance and a conducive environment. People in that situation still suffer in a conflicted state, such as the state in which Dominique was after he left the residential school, as he found the same negative social representations and discriminations towards him. In such a context, reconciliation seems inconceivable. There are still many survivors in that situation, as well as people suffering from lateral violence and intergenerational trauma (NWAC Report 2011). Shedding light on their torment, *Kokom* Marijo believes “such persons are at the stage where they are unable to accept themselves and what happened. Healing is not yet in them.”

Remembering his own path, *Comis* T8aminik describes then his thoughts: “I would like to say that I had to process the question of judgement and blame. The residential school had an impact on my family life. I was uprooted from my family, my culture, my language, my beliefs, my nomadic life, from animals, from the trees... everything that was part of the beautiful life we had. At the residential school, I was built up to become an aggressive man, mean, and not like a human being. Our people is called *Anishinabe* in our language, it means a human being living in harmony with nature and his/her own nature.” One question is, in such a conflicted state, how to unlock and heal traumatic memory, sealed emotions in the mind, body and heart, such as anger, sorrow, anxiety and fear, without losing sense of oneself.

It seems such a step requires a favourable context for healing. *Comis* T8aminik’s mother and father, as well as strong Elders in his community provided such favourable context over the years. They helped him with a relational approach and environment in which he could start being himself, without judging, in which he could start healing: with acceptance, benevolence and compassion. Only in such a context can truth be welcomed. Then *Comis* T8aminik advises: “We have to start at the beginning, within ourselves. Your heart is here. You just have to speak frankly, be always honest

with yourself. It takes courage. When we find that honesty we are able to find our soul and heal the wound which has been hidden there for a long time. We have to do that for respect for ourselves, with pride for who we are and to believe in ourselves.” Acceptance of who we are implies thus to be true and acknowledge the harm done.

For *Comis T8aminik*, when he was still unable to accept — ‘when healing was not there and power and control were in place’, as *Kokom Marijo* puts it —, playing hockey was a palliative at the school for dealing with his anger. But years after the closing of the residential school, and after numerous *Matato* rituals on his path of healing and truth, *Comis T8aminik* was able to fully acknowledge the harm done. Among meaningful acts in that regard and towards transformation, *Comis* one day gathered with other survivors for a blowout session inside the abandoned building of their former residential school (the building was about to be demolished) — tearing down the walls of oppression, dismantling the scaffold of discriminations, eliminating negative representations, unbolting the doors of anxiety, fear and sorrow. Such collective and liberating experience prefigured the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Opening the bay window in the living room, we head to the terrace to breathe the fresh air of the mountain and contemplate the landscape. We reflect on the reconciliation process for the whole country.

The Truth and Reconciliation Process

Like *Comis T8aminik* and his siblings, more than 150 000 Indigenous and Metis children were removed by force from their families to be educated at church-run residential schools since the 1870s in Canada.⁹ Their native languages, ways of being and cultural practices were prohibited. They endured many abuses, and at least 6000 children died. Children and later adults also had to cope with silence. Their suffering was eventually publicly acknowledged in 1991, during the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) and in its Report. The last such residential school was

⁹ The schools were run by Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or United Churches.

closed in 1996. Thanks to survivors' initiatives, Indigenous political organizations developed and continued the task of documenting oral histories of the school system. In 1994, the Assembly for First Nations (AFN) published *Breaking the silence: an Interpretive study of residential school impact and healing as illustrated by the stories of individuals*. It concluded that 'the traumatic effects of residential school life, the regimentation, separation and violence have had far-reaching impacts resulting in scores of individuals being lost, isolated and turning to alcohol abuse to cope and/or forget'. It stressed that 'Healing must begin'.

At the time, groups of survivors were coming together to support each other and create associations to provide spiritual healing, raise awareness of the abuse suffered by former students and advocate for a just resolution of the legacy of the residential schools.¹⁰ In 1998, the government recognized the harm caused to Indigenous peoples, their families, communities and societies by the residential school system, and the *Canada Aboriginal Action Plan Gathering Strength* established objectives of restorative justice. The churches and the Government of Canada apologized publicly.¹¹ Survivors gathered and engaged negotiations with the Government, which finally led to the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement* (2006), setting up a mechanism for compensation for former students of residential schools. The AFN Grand Chief Phil Fontaine approached the dialogue with the government in the perspective of 'Justice as Healing'.

In the old Indigenous tradition of justice, the aim is to achieve "balance and harmony in families and communities", and its understanding "originates from the lived experience of people who feel deeply connected to their cultures and traditions". In that sense, "the reclamation of Indigenous heritage, culture, knowledge, and jurisprudence" is an integral part of the healing process (McCaslin

¹⁰ The Indian Residential School Survivor society was formally established in 2002.

¹¹ The churches in the late 90s and the Government of Canada in 2008. Reported cases of abuses by priests, nuns, clergymen and women of the different churches were tested in court with criminal convictions in almost all Canadian provinces. A mandate on the reporting and investigation of clerical sexual abuse was issued, and in 2019, the Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, issued an Apostolic Letter *Vos estis lux mundi* which established new procedural rules to combat abuse.

and Youngblood Henderson 2005: 17). Such steps and approach paved the way for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was established in 2008, and completed its mandate in 2015, with reports presenting its legacy and recommendations. The objectives of the TRC were to start healing — to witness, support, promote and facilitate truth and reconciliation events at national and community levels.

The work of the TRC is a milestone in Canadian law and society, creating public fora where Indigenous peoples could be heard, and where negative representations and discriminations could be publicly contested: recognizing and addressing the injustice and trauma inflicted on Indigenous peoples through the assimilation policies and residential schools system. The TRC opened spaces in different contexts throughout the country to empower individuals to speak their truth, free themselves from oppressive patterns and redefine collectively, in their relationships, new social representations (Lamalle 2015: 20).

The TRC also made space for Indigenous approaches, principles, medicine and law — including witnesses, sharing circles, traditional medicine and community support in order to address the relationship between the spiritual, emotional and physical in a holistic manner (TRC Report, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, 2015: 21). Healing, understood in Indigenous traditions as a goal of the reconciliation process, is both an individual and collective experience (Lane et al 2002). In that regard, the TRC's reports re-situate 'Justice' from an Indigenous perspective, and its work in a larger 'Process of Reconciliation' for the whole of Canadian society. Creating a healing environment on another scale, the TRC fostered a relational approach, based on the principles of respect, inclusion, comprehension, education, justice and fairness.¹²

Comis T8aminik Rankin and *Kokom* Marie-Josée Tardif, with other traditional knowledge keepers, medicine men and women, in partnership with specialists and helpers from Health Canada, contributed to providing guidance, medicine and a conducive environment during the TRC's work

¹² Working Group on Truth and Reconciliation and Exploratory Dialogues (1998-1999).

— enabling many survivors and other people to start their healing process. Indeed, people close to the persons who have lived traumatic events may also experience ‘vicarious trauma’, with similar impacts as those of survivors. And an “intergenerational trauma is any trauma, including historical oppression, that has an impact across more than one generation. This impact includes shared collective memories that affect the health and well-being of individuals and communities and that may be passed on from parent to child, and beyond” (Schiffer 2016). Such “traumatic events are part of larger historical formations that have profound effects for both individuals and communities” and are “not encoded as declarative knowledge but rather ‘inscribed’ on the body, or else built into ongoing social relations, roles, practices and institutions.” (Kirmayer et al 2000: 16).

In Canada, Indigenous responses, healing approaches and models have emerged to address intergenerational trauma within families and communities — notably by “restoring the cultural practices and relationships that historically promoted wellness in Aboriginal cultures and societies, many of which are connected to land through ceremony, collection and use of medicines, and other activities” (Schiffer 2016).

In its conclusions, the TRC addressed not only the different types of trauma, but also their consequences. As discrimination, loss of language and culture, and disconnection from the land have led to socio-economic inequalities and health disparities (McNally and Martin 2017), ‘reconciliation must create a more equitable and inclusive society’, with ‘real social, political, and economic change’ (TRC Report 2015). In that perspective, reconciliation aims ‘to renew relationships on a basis of inclusion, mutual understanding, and respect’, and fill the gap of inequalities in various sectors, such as health, education, business, legal and criminal systems. The conclusions of the TRC identified the structural forms of oppression and roots of inequalities, and designed a roadmap for social and institutional change with 94 Calls to action, fostering concrete Indigenous autonomy, self-determination and participation in decision-making. ‘This roadmap builds on substantive Indigenous leadership, resilience, and creativity’ (McGibbon 2019).

Social and Institutional Change

Since 2015, the last two Canadian governments have endorsed the reports and recommendations of the TRC, and started implementing the Calls to action at the federal and provincial levels, guided by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as a framework for implementation (TRC Call to action 43). A variety of actors are also implementing the Calls to action — such as churches, municipalities, businesses, universities and associations.¹³ According to the '10 Principles of Reconciliation' of the TRC, 'reconciliation is a process of healing of relationships', which requires using the 'knowledge of Aboriginal Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers', and supporting Aboriginal peoples' cultural revitalization and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems.

Such a change "is far more expansive than a notion of rehabilitation: it is concerned with simultaneously healing one's self and community. Individual and collective grief and loss become core issues that programs need to address rather than focusing on criminogenic need. Mainstream programs simply ignore the nexus between oppression and liberation, between collective grief and loss and individual healing. Indigenous healing programs start from this nexus, they begin with understanding the outcomes and effects of longer-term oppression, and move from there towards the healing of individuals" (Cunneen and Rowe 2014: 64). Recognizing and developing Indigenous knowledges and methodologies is therefore also a 'part of a transformative political process', fostering the revitalization of Indigenous language, culture and law, for a renewed 'vision of justice' (Cunneen and Rowe 2014: 53).

In that perspective (TRC Calls 13-15), the Canadian Parliament adopted the *Indigenous Languages Act— An Act Respecting Indigenous Languages* in 2019 (Bill C-91), as well as legislations on education, such as *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children, Youth*

¹³ Notably, on March 30, 2016, the United Church joined the broader ecumenical community in announcing a collective intention to implement the principles, norms, and standards of the UNDRIP as the framework for reconciliation (see www.united-church.ca/news/release-ecumenical-statement-un-declaration).

and Families (Bill C-92, 2019). Other Calls to action address not only the scaffolds of discriminations in various sectors notably in education — with important reforms in schools and universities —, but also the walls of oppression in the legal system, notably with the recognition and development of Indigenous law and traditional knowledge.

In the field of health, in particular, the TRC's Calls 18 to 23 recommend to recognize the value of Indigenous perceptions of health and knowledge of traditional healing and practice, to increase the number of Indigenous healthcare professionals, and to incorporate education and training in the health professions that ensure cultural competency (McNally and Martin 2017: 119-122). To that end, "the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada in collaboration with the Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada has developed a set of recommended core competencies for Canada's 17 medical schools, intended to provide medical educators with the knowledge and skills to engage in patient-centered and culturally safe care when working with Indigenous patients/service users" (McNally and Martin 2017:122).

Indigenous Leadership, Healing and Reconciliation

In the framework of the TRC, reconciliation appears as a concept with a specific meaning in relation to the Indigenous conception of 'Justice as Healing', and to a certain understanding of healing as both an individual and collective process. On his path, *Comis T8aminik* went through different stages of reconciliation, from speaking his truth and acknowledging the harm done, to addressing loss and grief and becoming one again — reappropriating his own life story — and helping others start healing.

Returning to the living room, after a pause on the terrace, *Comis T8aminik* talks about forgiving. "Later in my life, I went to see the missionaries who have hurt me directly. I met two of my aggressors and for me, it was a liberation. Prior to that, I had decided not to keep that suffering inside for the rest of my life. I had to accept first, and then forgive them before I went to meet them." *Kokom Marijo* highlights that forgiving is another step in the healing process: "When we are

able to accept and forgive others, it is because we are able to accept and forgive ourselves. It means we have been able to go through all our emotions and reconciled ourselves with our own life. Those who cannot yet accept and forgive themselves have aggressiveness in them. They continue to blame others. Their heart is hurt and they have not been able to open it.”

If acceptance and truth are the first steps to start healing, forgiving is then a different step which can happen at a later stage, when one’s experience has been processed and is seen in a new light. In that perspective, reconciliation, as healing, appears as a comprehensive process. It has to do with how we process the past and the memory we have of our experience, but also all our relationships, and how we make sense of who we are. In the case of such traumatic experience as the one of *Comis T8aminik*, the whole being is struggling: the body with the memory of the pain, the heart with the negative feelings, the mind with the judgements and inability to make sense of the experience, leaving one’s spirit in limbo. Such aspects hinder the ability to process experience in a coherent narrative of one’s life story. Acceptance makes peace by unlocking the processing. The *Matato* ritual seems to reconstitute the primordial context of life, without boundary, division nor shape — allowing coming to life again. The Anishinabe philosophy and medicine allow the whole healing process: releasing the mind from the judgements, the heart from the negative feelings, the body from the memory of the pain — restoring spirit, re-uniting ‘life’ with ‘being’. For *Comis T8aminik*, it contributed to healing his relationships, notably with his family and community, with non-Indigenous members of society and with his aggressors.

On another scale, such healing requires a transformation in society — creating spaces of reconciliation, developing equitable relationships, dismantling walls of oppression and scaffolds of discrimination. Some have questioned the possibility of reconciliation at the level of the country. *Comis T8aminik* then re-situates the debate: “I do believe in reconciliation between people and also between institutions. The time of such reconciliation is coming. In the Anishinabe tradition, we have the Prophecy of the Seven Fires. The spiritual guide who succeeded to my father on my road

as a hereditary chief and medicine man, was William Commanda.¹⁴ He passed away a few years ago, he was 97. Grandfather William was the protector of the Wampum belt describing the Prophecy of the Seven Fires. By that Wampum belt, we know that a long time ago, our ancestors had foreseen the arrival of the white people on the continent. They had announced that such a meeting could generate great suffering and pain among the peoples, but they also announced that there would be reconciliation in the end. At that time, it is said that the earth is not burnt everywhere and there is still hope. Each fire corresponded to a time in the future. With regard to the prophecy, one question remains: are we the new people of the Seventh fire?

I believe the new generations will be able to establish reconciliation between the peoples and with Mother Earth. But we need to have people who lead by example. We first have to learn ourselves how to accept, forgive and reconcile, if it is to happen at another scale in the society as a second step, between communities, between institutions, between societies. We have to show the example, we have to build that road.” In the Anishinabe understanding of society, justice means healing people and their relationships — with themselves, with other beings, with Mother Earth. Each and every person is concerned. According to *Comis T8aminik* and *Kokom Marijo*, “the more people start healing, the more robust is the road to justice and reconciliation”.

They are now both devoting their time to *Kina8at*, the non-profit organisation they created in Quebec, for healing, reconciliation and the revitalization of Indigenous cultures, languages and knowledge. *Kina8at* (pronouncing kee-na-wat) in the Anishinabe language means ‘together’. They organise various activities and events in order to share traditional knowledge and medicine. It

¹⁴ See about Algonquin Elder William Ojigkwanong Commanda (1913-2011), from Kitigan Zibi Anishnabeg, in Maniwaki, Quebec. He was the great grandson of Pakinawatik, the keeper of three sacred wampum shell belts of historic and spiritual importance: the 1400s Seven Fires Prophecy Belt about choice, the 1700 Welcoming Belt about sharing, and the 1793 Jay Treaty Border Crossing Treaty Belt, about borderlessness. He was a chief of Kitigan Zibi reserve and recipient of notably the Wolf Project and Harmony Awards, for his efforts to foster racial harmony through the creation of a *Circle of all Nations*. Central to Commanda’s teachings is the concept of equality, harmony and respect for Mother Earth, for all life forms, and for people of all racial and cultural backgrounds (Vasantha Thumbadoo, 2005).

includes activities for First Nations;¹⁵ activities for school and business environments;¹⁶ cultural activities for all.¹⁷ They have recently started organising Indigenous language camps with the sponsorship of Heritage Canada. They also offer talks, ceremonies and seminars in other parts of the world, mainly Europe and the USA. And as the culmination of years of campaigning, in Autumn 2018 in the Laurentian mountains of Quebec, they opened on their land a Cultural and Healing Centre. They can now welcome anyone who is ready to learn from these invaluable cultures.

Kokom Marijo and *Comis* T8aminik then conclude: “For us, reconciliation is replacing negativity by beauty. Knowing that everything starts with oneself.” Their role as Elders, survivor of residential schools, traditional knowledge keepers, medicine man and woman, has been decisive in the reconciliation process. Their initiatives for healing, education, language and culture revitalization are indispensable drivers of change, to help people become one again and reappropriate their own life story, but also to help rebalance relationships in communities and in society. These are the seeds, flowers and fruits of their dedicated path towards reconciliation. On their path, they have lit up and shared a guiding light: the culture of healing.

Accompanying us to the garden, *Comis* T8aminik points towards an Indigenous painting on the wall representing *Makwa*, the bear. With an expression of gratitude, he shares: “The healing happened thanks to his medicine and guardian spirit! *Mik8ec kitci Makwa!* And *Mik8ec kitci anicinapek* (Thank you to all the ancestors) for having given me another breath. *Kisakiinom!*”¹⁸

¹⁵ Such as healing workshops, cultural teachings, training for young leaders.

¹⁶ Such as awareness workshops for teachers, cultural activities, leadership training.

¹⁷ Such as inner journeys, canoeing, activities for the family and to reconnect with nature.

¹⁸ Thank you Bear! Thank you to all my ancestors! I love you.

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