

OUT FOURTH EDITION **of the** **DEPTHS**

The Experiences of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia

With a New Chapter on the Prime Minister's Apology

Isabelle
KNOCKWOOD

with Gillian Thomas

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Isabelle's parents, Deodis and John Knockwood, pose on the right with their youngest son, Noel. On the left are Isabelle and Stephen Francis from the Pictou Landing Reserve. Three of them are dressed in Mi'kmaw regalia, presumably because they were attending a ceremony. This photo was taken about 1936.

*This book is dedicated to all former students
of the Indian Residential School
in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia*

EXCERPT



Isabelle Knockwood, age 16.



Kwe'

I am holding the Talking Stick. I have been talking about the Indian Residential School in Shubenacadie for many years, and I still don't understand why the hurt and shame of seeing and hearing the cries of abused Mi'kmaw children, many of them orphans, does not go away or heal. I hope that the act of writing it down will help me and others to come up with some answers.

Our Mi'kmaw ancestors used the Talking Stick to guarantee that everyone who wanted to speak would have a chance to be heard and that they would be allowed to take as long as they needed to say what was on their minds without fear of being interrupted with questions, criticisms, lectures or scoldings, or even of being presented with solutions to their problems. An ordinary stick of any kind or size is used. Those seated in the Circle commit themselves to staying to the end, not getting up to leave or walk about because this behaviour is considered an interruption. Anyone who leaves the Circle can return and sit with the latecomers whose only role is to observe and listen. This is because they have missed some information and therefore cannot offer advice or make an informed decision. The person who has a problem or an issue to discuss holds the Talking Stick and relates everything pertaining to it especially everything they have done to solve it. After they are through, they pass the stick to the person on their left, following the sun's direction. The next person, *Nekm*, states everything they know about the problem without repeating anything that was already said. They tell what they or others have done in similar situations. They neither agree nor disagree with what others have said.

The Talking Stick goes around until it returns to the person with the

problem or issue, who then acknowledges everyone present and what they have said. Sometimes the solution or answer comes as soon as everyone has spoken. Maybe the person has already thought it out, or it may come as an inspiration on the long trek back home. Or else, it could appear in the form of a vision or a dream. Dreams were a very important part of problem-solving with the First People of the land. Maybe a Spirit Guide will come, or some new information be brought to light, or a series of events will fall into place. The Talking Stick is an instrument of free speech that gives people who were once silenced an opportunity to say what is on their minds in the language they choose.

EXCERPT



The Code of Silence

The long process of writing what became the first edition of *Out of the Depths* forced me to overcome what I call “the code of silence.” It has its beginnings in the time we were children in the Residential School.

My sister Rosie remembers one day when we were both quite small and were all in the recreation hall. Wikew came in and singled out several girls. She pointed them out — “You, and you and you. Come with me.” She lined up about twelve little girls, then went to the medicine cabinet and took out a pair of big dressmaking shears. She made them follow her into the bathroom — the room where all the sinks were — and into the back section where the tubs and showers were. They all had to stand around her in a circle. She said, “I don’t like being lied to and here’s what I’m going to do to anyone who lies to me.” Pointing to Jean — the smallest girl in the group she said, “Come here Jean. I’m going to use you as an example. I’m not going to hurt you. I want to show the others what’s going to happen to them if they lie to me.” She made her stick out her tongue. “Don’t worry,” she said, “I’m not going to hurt you.” Then she wrapped a piece of toweling around the little girl’s tongue. Taking the scissors she said, “Now I’m going to cut off your tongue.” She went snip, snip without actually cutting the toweling, then said, “That’s what I’m going to do if anybody lies to me.” Then she sent them back to the recreation hall. They all filed back with their heads down, too afraid to look at each other. Wikew put the big scissors back into the medicine cabinet. Rosie still recalls being bewildered by this incident as a little girl, most of all because at the time she had no idea what a “lie” was.

For me, the incident stands as an example of how the code of silence was enforced with a combination of physical intimidation and psychological manipulation which produced terror and confusion. As an adult, when I try to understand the motives of those who ran the school, I am still bewildered that someone would devise such an elaborate performance as a “moral lesson.”

Not only were we forbidden to tell whatever the nuns defined as “lies” — from our first day at the school speaking our own language resulted in violent physical punishment. Since we knew no English we had to hide to talk to each other in Mi’kmaq. Even after a few years had passed and we had learned enough English to communicate with each other, it still was often dangerous to talk. We were forbidden to talk at night in the dormitory. Brothers and sisters were strictly forbidden to speak to each other.

The nuns taught us about “sins” as well as “lies.” We didn’t really understand, but every Friday afternoon a priest would come over from Enfield to hear our confessions. Since we weren’t sure what they really meant by “sins,” we would usually make something up when we went into the confessional box. Usually the boys went first and the girls would be waiting. I remember one day when Father Divine couldn’t come because he was sick and Father Mackey was hearing the boys’ confessions instead. All of a sudden he jumped out of the confessional and opened the door where the little boy was kneeling, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, dragged him out and started to beat him. Confession, it seemed, was even more dangerous than we had thought.

Often we were silenced and repressed not so much by physical violence but by psychological intimidation. One woman told me about an incident when she was prevented from intervening on her brother’s behalf. Sister Paul of the Cross was beating her brother at the other side of the room and signaled to Wikew who went over and stood close behind the boy’s sister. The sense of the big nun standing so close behind her paralyzed her from speaking out or acting on her brother’s behalf.

Sometimes we were given specific instructions about not talking about the school. At Christmas and Easter class-time was set aside for us to write letters to our families. We would spend one whole class writing careful non-committal letters while the nun walked up and down the aisles reading over our shoulders. One year, I remember, one of the boys wrote that someone had tried to run away and had had his head shaved as punishment. Sister Adrian grabbed the letter and called in Sister Superior

and Father Mackey. Father Mackey ripped up the letter and Sister Adrian followed up with a lecture on loyalty. Loyalty to your family, she explained, meant not telling any of the neighbours if your parents fought. Loyalty to the school meant not letting anyone else know about anything bad that happened at the school. The boy was told that now he wouldn't be allowed to write to his parents until Easter.

Particularly for those who stayed at the school year-round, without the relief of the summer with their families, there was a sense that terrible punishment would follow talking about what went on at the school. As a result, when we became adults we had a tendency to avoid others who had been at the school. If we did meet them we rarely mentioned our school experiences. Sometimes alcohol would release people's inhibitions enough that they would tell each other stories from their days at the school. One woman told me that she used to go to the Warren Cafe, a dilapidated bar in the Roxbury section of Boston. There she would meet other native people, including some who had been at school with her. "I haven't seen you since the Resi days," they would say. And as they drank together they'd joke about their experiences at the school. After the bar closed they would all find an abandoned apartment building, known as an "empty" or a "chicken coop." These buildings had usually been stripped of all their copper plumbing and wiring as well as being generally vandalized. There was no heat or light so they would use candles and then go on drinking and exchanging stories about everything that had happened at the school. Later on they would take mattresses and use one as a bed and the other as a blanket against the bitter cold.

I was in Boston during those same years but was developing the confidence to go back and look at my Residential School experiences through a different route. I was involved in the American Indian Movement and the Boston Indian Council. I was also taking a Women's Studies program from Goddard College as well as joining a women's consciousness-raising group. From all of these, especially from the women's group, I got the message that not only was it all right to ask questions but that it was really important to do so.

By the time I moved back to Shubenacadie in 1985 after an absence of twenty years I was beginning to be ready to confront the past. From my car on the Maitland Road leading to the town of Shubenacadie, I could see the empty school on the hill. "The Resi" as we called it had been shut down for 19 years through the efforts of the Indian Brotherhood (now known as the AFN (Assembly of First Nations)). I took some photographs

from my car because I felt afraid that the priests and nuns could still be watching out of the now broken windows. A “No Trespassing” sign posted out front deterred me from entering the building that first day.

When the pictures were developed, I showed them to former students and the intensity of their memories and flashbacks startled me. They remembered even more than I had allowed myself to remember. I returned to the derelict school several times and finally took pictures of every room. The images helped to jog the memories of former students, their families and tribal members. The code of silence that was imposed on us as children was beginning to break and stories began flooding in.

But the code of silence still ruled on the reserve. People would only talk about the school when they came to my house late at night when it was dark. Nearly all the first interviews I taped with former students were done very late at night. After a while a few people would come to my house while it was still daylight. Soon I felt braver myself and would go to other people’s houses with my tape recorder. However, some people warned me that “they” would stop me working and that my computer would be damaged or my car or house vandalized. A man came to warn me that unnamed people would shoot at my house at night while I was sleeping. I had two children in the house at the time and for a while I stopped writing and began showing up in church, but I couldn’t keep it up. I took my chances on God striking me down with a bolt of lightning and resumed showing the photographs, taping people’s stories and writing them down. Someone took me aside and gave me a clippings file from the *MicMac News* from seven years earlier with copies of letters from the Sisters of Charity’s lawyer threatening court action if they were to publish anything further about the school. My own writings for the *Micmac News*, most of them not about the school, were also scrutinized by the Chief and Band Council who were apparently looking for an excuse to kick me off the reserve.

When I began to write what became the first edition of this book I was still worried that there might be some legal action to prevent me recording what people remembered. Gillian knew about the legal definition of defamation and I became confident that I could record my own and other people’s stories without being hauled into court. However, the fear of being sued never loomed as large as the lingering fears about the threats I had received. Even when the book was nearly completed I was sometimes so overwhelmed that I felt I couldn’t go on any longer. I didn’t want to hear any more stories of abuse. I was tired of crying. I

suffered from stomach cramps, headaches and nervous exhaustion. And I had nightmares. It was August and it was hot and I was tired. The book was almost finished, but I could not visualize the finished product. It was just too painful to write anymore. I was sitting in Gillian's office doubled over with stomach cramps from the tension. I said, "Oh I can't do this anymore. I don't think I can go on. It's too painful." "Okay," said Gillian, "We won't do this any more." Then she didn't say anything for a few minutes until she said, "So they won." "Who?" I asked. "Father Mackey and the nuns. They told you not to talk and you're not talking." That really woke me up. "Give me a minute," I said, "and I'll get on with the work."

The publication of the book in itself seemed to crack the code of silence. Some people talked about their experiences for the first time. The children and grandchildren of those who attended the school are usually the ones who want to talk to me about it since the book enabled them to understand much of what previously troubled them about their parents and grandparents. The question they asked their parents most often was, "Why did you let this happen?"

The book appeared at a time when it seemed as if the issue of residential schools was being talked about in native communities right across the country. Survivors of the Shubenacadie school took part in those discussions and eventually formed their own association in September 1995. Nora Bernard, the director of the association, says the groups has over 600 members who have documented their claim. The association's purpose is "to bring justice for aboriginal children who were incarcerated at the Indian Residential School by suing the federal government and the Roman Catholic Church for physical, mental and sexual abuse."

The silencing resulting from the Residential School experience has many different layers. Three times in my life I have had the experience of completely losing my voice with no physical reason to explain it. When Wikew used to grab my hand when I was reaching for a slice of bread in the dining hall she would repeat, "Say 'bread,' Isabelle. Say 'bread.'" The brown slices on the big plate to me were "*pipnagn*." And I was confused because at home if you wanted bread you just took it. As she repeated "Say bread," over and over, tightly holding onto my hand to keep it from reaching the plate I became more and more confused. I had to say "bread" to get the *pipnagn* but that meant calling it something it wasn't. All the muscles in my throat seemed to turn to rock and no sound would come out. On two other occasions years after I left the school I experienced that same sensation. In both cases I was feeling completely powerless and

being faced with choices as bewildering as the one I'd faced as a child trying to reach for a slice of bread. It's now many years since I experienced that feeling of the words being choked in my throat. Many individuals and groups with whom I've worked have given me the confidence to speak up and ask questions. It's taken a long time, but I've finally learned to speak freely.

EXCERPT

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Since the publication of the third edition of this book in 2001 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up by the federal government. When the TRC concludes, with its final hearing on May 1–June 3, 2015, it will have conducted seven hearings across Canada since the first one was held in Winnipeg in June 2010. I attended and testified before TRC hearing in Halifax in October 2011. On the occasion of the receiving of a Doctorate of Civil Law degree from Saint Mary’s University in October 2013, I made the statement below.

I testified before the TRC to bring awareness to the fact that the testimony given to the TRC by the survivors of the Indian residential schools in Canada was not a sworn oath. The risk is that historians will find ways to discredit the oral evidence and, like the holocaust of the Jews by Hitler’s regime, will be able to say that the “residential schools did not happen.”

I also testified knowing that I was contributing my personal experiences and my intellectual property free of charge to the world in order to bring global awareness to the insidious nature of genocide perpetrated against a race by isolating and then attacking their most vulnerable citizens, namely the children under their tutelage. In my case, it was the Roman Catholic Church who ran the residential school I attended in Shubenacadie.

As children, the residential school students were warrior children — we stood on the front line alone, unprotected and unarmed trying to defend our culture, identity and heritage. As adults we brought a lawsuit against the two most powerful organizations in the world, the federal

government and the churches. We empowered ourselves when we broke the code of silence of abuse.

One issue remains unresolved for me: that in order for truth and reconciliation to happen between First Nations and non-Aboriginal populations, the survivors need to hear the other side of the story. Both victims and perpetrators were operating in residential schools throughout Canada. The victims have spoken. The perpetrators have not spoken. I would like the perpetrators, their supporters and defenders to tell the world about their experience in a public forum. What did it feel like to violate the Aboriginal children entrusted to their care? What good did it do you to destroy everything Aboriginal including Aboriginal knowledge, wisdom, identity, native spirituality and indigenous language? I want to know why the code of silence was imposed on the children in residential school and what benefit that silence is to the perpetrators and their defenders.

I also would like to hear from non-Aboriginal people as to how they have benefited in past and continue to benefit in the present from Aboriginal losses of the land and the resources, and why First Nations are denied equal access to the social and political benefits enjoyed by non-Aboriginal populations, including the immigrants.

Honouring me with this Doctorate in Civil Law is also honouring my Aboriginal ancestors, my parents, my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren for the next seven generations. It is with much humility and pride that I accept this Honourary Degree for my life's work on residential schools on behalf of the residential school former students who died before they heard the apology and before receiving monetary compensation for the trauma suffered by the residential school system.

My truth is not dependent on the belief of non-Aboriginal historians who may be tempted to state that residential schools did not happen.

Isabelle Knockwood