

# *The Occasional Evil of Angels*

How Cindy Blackstone challenges the rationalization of the treatment of Indigenous children at the hands of Social Workers in Canada.

**"We had different standards back then - no one talked about child abuse."**

Blackstone makes the argument that this mindset puts the blame for the mistreatment and neglect of Indigenous children on the sensibilities of the day. The report of by Dr. Bryce in 1907 revealed the conditions and abuse that was taking place in residential schools. This report proved that the treatment was unacceptable even by the sensibilities in those days.

**"We did not know."**

Social workers were actively participating in the removal of children from homes to residential schools. In Saskatchewan, child welfare placements accounted for 80% of the admissions of in six residential schools. During the "60's Scoop," social workers participated in the mass removal of Indigenous children and sent them to non-Indigenous homes. "If only we'd known" is a false comfort. Even today with all the information known, there are not adequate efforts to redress the issue.

**"It is not my responsibility."**

The government of Canada continues to puts its own needs ahead of the care of Indigenous children. The standard practice was to defer or deny Indigenous children government services that were "routinely available to other Canadian children until the dispute could be resolved, with little consideration of the child's safety or well being." In the case of Jordan River Anderson, an Indigenous boy from Norway House Cree Nation, he needed life-saving services and his parents placed him in child welfare care. Neither the provincial nor the federal government would take responsibility to pay for his care and he died in hospital because of bureaucratic debate.

**"We were well-intentioned."**

The belief that a good intention behind an action, regardless of the consequences, would "substantially absolve [a social worker] from moral responsibility." The idea was that evil would be obvious therefore what social workers were participating in could not be bad. Blackstone argues that evil can be grey and in degrees. The most notable perpetrators, the Department of Indian Affairs and the churches, used well-intention as a moral cushion. They used words like "educating" "integrating" and "civilizing" to "seductively legitimize the costs experienced by another."

**"We are needed."**

This is an assumption that social workers were and are the best response, foregoing any other option of responding to the care of Indigenous children. It neglects the impact that an Indigenous community can have on the well-being of a child. Blackstock looks closer at the suicide rate of Indigenous youth in BC. Although BC has one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world, 90% of the deaths occur in 10% of the communities. Those communities with low/no suicide had substantial community based decision making represented in community based services.

# **Social workers must look into the mirror to begin the reconciliation process.**

The two fundamental beliefs of social workers individually and institutionally are 1) the assumption of a pious motivation and effect, and 2) the desire to improve others. They have "little meaningful conversation about [their] potential to do harm." Social workers must look beyond the feelings of blame and shame so they can learn and change behaviour.

## **Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous children, youth and families.**

### **Blackstone's solutions...**

#### **4 PHASES**

- 1) Truth telling
- 2) Acknowledging
- 3) Restoring
- 4) Relating

#### **5 PRINCIPLES**

- 1) Self-Determination
- 2) Holistic Approach
- 3) Structural Interventions
- 4) Culture and Language
- 5) Non-Discrimination

**"It is not enough to issue a statement on [Indigenous peoples] from time to time or tinker with services if what social workers really want are justice, respect and equality for [Indigenous] children and young people. We must courageously redefine the profession using reconciliation processes and then move outwards to expand the movement into society."**

Source:

Blackstock, Cindy. 1. "The Occasional Evil of Angels: Learning from the Experiences of Aboriginal Peoples and Social Work". *First Peoples Child & Family Review* 4 (1), 2009:28-37.