

A new "Call to Action" for a New Year



By Brock Weir

The dawn of a New Year is a dawn of renewal for many people around the world.

For Canada's Indigenous Peoples, renewal is part of an ongoing process and as Canada approaches its 150th anniversary this summer, the time is nigh for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous to renew and heal, according to area artists. Summer is, of course, still many months away, but there is always hope on the horizon explains artist and teacher Mary Louise Meiers.

"Winter is a long time when you're living in a village," says Ms. Meiers, an educator specializing in Canada's First Nations. "If someone is endangering the village, the elders would ask that person to leave the village for the winter and return when the strawberries were in bloom. (Tended to by an elder) they were counselled so when the strawberries bloomed they were welcomed back to their community."

"They shared their story about how they struggled with what they had done and learned the truth about themselves and how they affected the community. They talked about their healing process and they reconciled with the community during the time of the strawberry."

Newmarket-based Metis artist Nathalie Bertin's mixed media depiction of a strawberry, called "Reconciliation" forms the basis of a 16-artist exhibition "Call to Action #83" which has been touring Canada since last year, arriving at the Aurora Cultural Centre this summer just in time for Canada's 150th anniversary celebrations.

The exhibition takes its name from the 83rd call to action contained in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which calls on "a strategy for indigenous and non-indigenous artists to undertake collaborative projects and produce works that contribute to the reconciliation process."

Beginning with a group of indigenous and non-indigenous artists from Simcoe County, the exhibition has expanded to eight indigenous and non-indigenous artists from further afield.

Collectively, they began laying the groundwork for the vision at the home of lead artist Paul Shilling (Dazaunggee). After determining who would go first, the artists alternated between indigenous and non-indigenous, creating the works, each one inspired by the last, and known only to the successor. Only when each of the 16 pieces were completed did the collective get the full vision of their exhibition.

"I was a bit apprehensive at first (when asked to participate) because reconciliation is a huge deal," says Ms. Bertin. "It can be overwhelming. It is not just about residential schools, it's about all kinds of things that have infiltrated everyday life. On one side, there is the apprehension of, 'Am I the right person at the right time?' because it is so huge, but at the same time, I already know a lot about the Truth & Reconciliation Report and everything that is going on, I knew what I was going to do with this."

"When it came to be my turn in the process, I realized I had to put my ego aside because this isn't about me and my own thoughts. It was about the process and reconciliation."

In the end, the image she created was not what first came to mind, but the image of the strawberry proved too enticing. While it is

the traditional 'first fruit' after a long, cold winter, it also symbolizes heart, she says.

'I wanted to find something that was clear and direct that spoke to me about reconciliation,' she says. 'The strawberry is the first fruit, but it needs light, it needs soil, it needs water, and all of these things to become a full fruit that will nourish us. To me, it represents reconciliation in that we need to take a step back and remember the core of what it means to be human and treat one another, be kind to one another, and give each other what we need so we can all flourish as human beings.'

When you learn about truth and start to heal, you have to go back to the 'plant teachings', right down to the root and down to natural medicine, notes Ms. Meier. People need to be humble enough to be taught by the plants because inside 'there is an awakening.'

'Right now, we are historically at a time of great awaking to the truth and the truth awakening us,' says Ms. Meier, adding that First Nations believe each one of us is born with talents and gifts which are, in turn, our own medicines to impart to the wider world.

'When we take our gifts and talent to the service of the community, we are asked to put forth what we can do to heal people. What is our medicine? When we look at our gifts as medicine rather than objects or tools, it changes the heart, it goes back to that root teaching of quiet and unseen. When you take a pill, you don't see it acting.'

This was very much a theme the artists took to heart when coming up with their artistic vision. The elders invited the artists similar to traditions where elders would send people out into the wilderness to seek a vision when the village was under threat before reconvening, sitting in a circle, discussing their experiences, all in the aim of coming to a conclusion.

'What this project has helped me go through is healing of my own,' says Ms. Bertin. 'I didn't actually realize I needed some healing and when I was recalling some of the things I had inherited, it set me on a course of healing. My hope for the country is that it will do the same for whoever was touched by the project, that they will gain a deeper understanding of how it effects them, and how they are putting it out in the world so, as we move forward to towards the next 150 years, it is not going to be about assimilation, it is going to be about inclusivity.'

That is a sentiment shared by participating non-indigenous artists as well.

'Being part of this art project has been one of the most enlightening experiences I have had in my life,' says artist Jennie Clark, who took indigenous studies at Georgian College. 'I am not a person of a lot of words. The message to me is 'be quiet, listen to the stories, read the books, absorb the information, and judge not. Just be open.'

Adds Jeanette Luchese: 'Despite what everyone thinks, this is not a First Nations problem. This is all of our problem. This is something we need to move together and try to bring an awareness and try to heal. The only way we can move forward is through healing.'

And, in the end, healing can be one of the greatest challenges. Paraphrasing the elders leading the project, Ms. Meiers says they're at the stage of 'truth will make you free but first it will make you miserable.

'It takes courage, humility, respect, and a love of truth, kindness and sharing on both world parts,' she says. 'The beautiful part about Canada is the concept of cultures coming together in a respectful way is still closer to the surface of consciousness here than it is in the United States. We have people whose culture has been dominated and silenced because the trust has been broken. The truth is now coming out, it's painful, but we have to be courageous and listen. No blame, no shame.

'Amnesia can strike Canada, just as it has other nations. Because we are a nation of people who acknowledge the fact that we are immigrants, we can inspire each other now and that is what this project is.'

Call To Action #83, which hits Cobourg later this month, arrives in Aurora on August 12 through November 11 at the Aurora Cultural Centre. For more on the exhibition and participating artists, visit www.calltoaction83.com.