

STEPPING INTO MY IDENTITY ON THE ROAD TO RECONCILIATION

By Lauren Golosky

Reconciliation. It's a word often heard, but if you were to ask someone what it really meant, could they tell you? Dictionaries define it as "the restoration of friendly relations." It's often thrown around as a buzzword, or seen as a box to check, with little to no thought to whether friendly relations ever really existed.

For me, the word is two-fold. Reconciliation is acknowledging the wrongs of the past, understanding how the damage is still perpetuated today, and taking sincere, meaningful action to right those wrongs.

There is also a need for all of us to seek reconciliation on a personal level. It's a journey that will look different for everybody. For me, it's coming into my own as an Indigenous woman, understanding how colonization has impacted me and my family and addressing my own ignorance and shortcomings.

I'm Métis and that identity can be... complicated. Many of us feel too white to be Indigenous, but not white enough to be, well, white. It's even more complicated when you didn't grow up in the culture.

I always knew I was Métis. For as long as I can remember, my dad and grandpa always instilled the importance of being proud of my culture, but I didn't fully understand what that meant, or why I might not be proud of it. I was disconnected enough from my culture to not experience racism in the ways my dad or grandpa did.

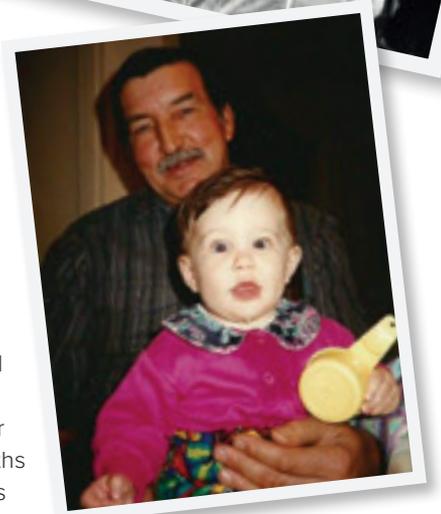
When I was nine, my grandpa died, as did the strongest connection I had to my culture. We stopped crossing the river to go to the family trapline. I no longer could hear Cree, the language my grandpa worked hard to reclaim. All I was left with were stories passed down from my dad and aunts.

I call on those stories when imposter syndrome rears its ugly head on my journey of reconnecting to my culture, a path I

started walking in 2019.

I'd been living in Regina, Saskatchewan, away from my home of Nistawâyâw for nearly a decade. I was feeling out of place and restless on the bald, flat prairie. I longed for the rivers and trees of the land my family has called home for generations, and I started feeling that land calling me to return. Perhaps serendipitously, a job opportunity with the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo presented itself and I joined the Indigenous and Rural Relations (IRR for short) team.

I was happy to be home, working at an interesting new job that selfishly helped me on my journey to reconnect. I became even happier when I found out a few months after moving home that I was pregnant with my first child. In August 2020, I welcomed my daughter, Cecelia, at the same hospital where I was born, not far from where my father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all born.



Having a daughter lit a fire within me to step into my identity as a Métis woman. I want Cecelia to be proud to be Métis, but also to understand what that really means – where we come from, what that meant for our grandfathers, and what it means today.

I also want this world to be better, kinder and safer for her – and all Indigenous children.

As an Indigenous woman, reconciliation is something I think about daily. Working in IRR makes that twice daily, at least. Last year, the Municipality hosted its inaugural Reconciliation Challenge, which encouraged people to actively participate and learn through activities and information about local Indigenous culture and history, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action and the Principles of Reconciliation and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Over six weeks, people explored the region, and learned about Elders and Knowledge Keepers, residential schools, and what economic reconciliation means, among other topics. They explored the Seven Sacred Teachings, and the Dene Laws, and learned how to incorporate these traditional teachings into their own lives.

This August, the reconciliation challenge is returning as the Truth and Reconciliation Challenge, an important nod to the reality that reconciliation cannot happen without the truth first. This year's challenge will dive deeper and explore further.

You don't have to wait until August to begin your own journey of reconciliation. It is a lifelong commitment and again will look different for everybody.

If you haven't started your journey yet, and aren't sure where to start, a good first step is knowing whose land you're on.

Wood Buffalo is Treaty 8 territory, the traditional lands of the Cree, Dene and Métis. Treaty 8 was signed in 1899, between the British Crown (later the Government of Canada) and Indigenous People, a formal agreement intended to encourage peaceful relations "as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the river flows." That means for all time, and, yes, we are all treaty people.

Once you know whose land we reside on, learn more about the beautiful region we are so fortunate to call home. Wood Buffalo is home to six First Nations and six Métis communities, all with distinct, diverse, and rich histories. Take time to learn something new about the communities in our region. You'll find yourself surprised by the rich history that pre-dates both the fur trade and the discovery of bitumen (the important stuff of oilsands). I'm constantly learning something new. Despite growing up in Fort McMurray, I had no idea Fort Chipewyan was the oldest settlement in Alberta until my corporate orientation at the Municipality!

An easy way to commit to learning – a cornerstone of reconciliation – is immersing yourself with content by Indigenous creators, writers, and artists. Following Indigenous social media influencers is a fun, easy way to familiarize yourself with Indigenous culture. Looking for something to listen to on those long drives south? Tune into Indigenous podcasts like Matriarch Movement, Unreserved, Two Creeks in a Pod and the Secret Life of Canada. These podcasts cover ways to actively participate in reconciliation and help get to the truth of Canadian history.

If you're a fellow reader, join me in the It's Time to Read book club. Launched this year in partnership with the Wood Buffalo Regional Library, this virtual book club highlights Indigenous authors to increase understanding and awareness of Indigenous culture, history, and current issues, with the goal of building bridges through books. Find out more at participate.rmwb.ca and look for the It's Time to Read section.

If there's anything I've learned on my own journey of reconciliation, it's that the most meaningful change comes through connection. Listen to people's stories with an open mind and open heart. Check your preconceived notions – and your ego – at the door.

I still have a long way to go – we all do. The road to reconciliation is long, full of roadblocks and setbacks. It often feels like an uphill battle, one that we realistically won't win in our lifetime. But then I look at my daughter and hope returns. Every parent wants to give their kid the best life possible, and for me, that means helping her grow in our culture, even if it means I'm growing with her. ■

