



OPINION

How do we heal trauma suffered by native communities?

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It is not enough that the Attawapiskat First Nation has declared a state of emergency over the epidemic of suicides and suicide attempts among its youth. Our entire country should declare a state of emergency about the appalling health status, physical and mental, of First Nations and Inuit communities. Would we not have already if, instead of Nunavut or Attawapiskat, it was, say, the teens of Westmount, Forest Hill or Kitsilano who were killing themselves at 10 times the national rate?

I am often asked to visit First Nations communities across Canada to speak about addiction, stress-related illness and child development. The ordinary Canadian citizen simply has no idea, cannot even begin to imagine, what misfortunes, tragedies and other kinds of adversity many native young people experience by the time they reach adolescence – how many deaths of loved ones they witness, what abuse they endure, what despair they feel, what self-loathing plagues them, what barriers to a life of freedom and meaning they face.

At the core of the suicide pandemic is unresolved trauma, passed almost inexorably from one generation to the next, along with social conditions that induce further hopelessness.

The source of that multigenerational trauma is this country's colonial past and its residue in the present. The march of the history and progress Canada celebrates, from which we derive

done to undo the dynamics our past has dictated? Some may balk at such inquiry, fearing the discomfort that comes with guilt. However, this is not a matter of communal guilt, but of communal responsibility. It is not about the past. It is about the present. And it is about all of us: When some among us suffer, ultimately we all do.

To begin, native history must be taught fully and in unsparing detail in our schools. All Canadians should know, for example, that 50 years ago it was not unheard of for a four-year-old girl to have a pin stuck in her tongue for the crime of speaking her mother language and later endure serial rape by teachers, religious mentors. Such were the antecedents of today's drug use and suicidal anguish.

The resonant values, brilliant art, stories and wisdom culture of First Nations people should be introduced in Canadian schools. Canadians must be helped to see their First Nations peers in their fullness, which includes their humanity, grandeur, unspeakable suffering and strength.

We must renounce any political, economic or social policy that reinforces the colonial trauma of disempowerment, loss and dispossession. Not another square centimetre of native land must be disturbed, not a blade of grass cut, not one more drop of water diverted, not a millimetre of pipeline laid without First Nations agreement.

Institutions and individuals interacting with native people must become deeply trauma-informed. Judges, teachers, law-enforcement personnel, nurses, doctors, psychiatrists, social workers, public employees, policy-makers all must understand what trauma is, its multiple impacts on human mentality and behaviour, and how to address it. Without such information, as I have witnessed repeatedly, the best-meaning people can unwittingly retraumatize those who can least bear further pain and loss. Practices that devastate families must be stopped, such as the frequent apprehension of children without restorative and compassionate family-building support.