

A Look at Ourselves

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Allow me to introduce myself.

I am a middle aged, female, Lutheran, Canadian pastor. My ethnic roots are of German and English descent and were planted in North American soil by my too-many-greats-to-remember grandparents. They made their homes in the Appalachian and Blue Ridge Mountains of the United States. After spending most of my life in Minnesota, I brought my twig of the family tree to Ontario in 2002.

My move from the American Midwest to Ottawa was largely without duress. There were a few minor inconveniences associated with my immigration, of course. The officer at the border was less than thrilled with the fur my Alaskan malamute deposited on the leg of his uniform, for example. But other than that, I entered into my new country pretty much unhindered. To look at me, no one would suspect that I wasn't born here, and if I avoided pronouncing words like "schedule" and "been" with an American accent and remembered to add a "u" after "o" in words I had always spelled without one, I fit in just fine.

Canadian stores stocked the makeup, shampoo and conditioners that were appropriate for my skin tone and hair. I was treated with courtesy most places I went and was casually accepted as a part of the social and professional circles in which I traveled. When I worshipped at a Lutheran church on my first Sunday in Canada, I found the liturgy and hymns to be pretty much what I'd expected. I had no problem following the flow of the service or joining in the singing. Even unfamiliar hymns were in keeping with the style and metre I anticipated.

Aside from Ottawa's tendency to change the names of streets and avenues at every intersection, I encountered few obstacles to life in my new city. I made friends. I was treated fairly. As a middle aged, female, Lutheran, Canadian pastor, I was right at home.

(I should mention, by the way, that my skin color is a pinkish light-tan commonly referenced as "white.")

That last parenthetical statement speaks volumes.

I "fit in," was accepted, had confidence that I would be treated fairly, experienced minimal upset in the process of adjusting to life in Canada, because I was easily identified as part of this country's dominant culture; because I looked and sounded like most people I met. My "whiteness" afforded me the privilege of being accepted, treated without partiality, and knowing what to anticipate in my worship, social, and professional circles. That same privilege also insulated me. Because I am White, there are things that I just didn't have to think about: Like whether or not the store where I shopped would carry appropriate cosmetics or the possibility that I might be passed over for a job because I did not look or speak like the people who interviewed me. Nor did I have to think about how to "fit in" to a Lutheran church that defined "the" liturgy in terms of a cultural heritage not my own. What's more: I knew that what I projected as the norm wouldn't change all that much as time went by. Things would remain the way they were because... well... that's the way it is. Isn't it?

You may be wondering what this introduction has to do with the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or the establishment of the residential schools. My lack-luster cultural profile may seem an odd launching pad for a discussion of these painful and difficult issues. Perhaps *your* cultural profile seems an equally unusual place to begin. It has become clear, however, that your story and mine is precisely the place to start. "The work we need to do is to look at ourselves," says Pastor Jonathan Schmidt, Co-Director of Canadian Churches Forum, an ecumenical organization whose mission fosters intercultural ministry. "There is a danger when we place our focus on the residential schools or on First Nations people. They are not the problem. We are."¹

Let me be clear: My identity as a White person is not in and of itself problematic. What is problematic is the unnamed and often unconscious assumptions that my (White) dominant culture makes about that identity, and in so doing, about the identity of others. It is a very short step from a casual acceptance of my cultural identity as *normative* to the subconscious assumption that it is *better*, and thus, prescriptive for others. That my values, religion, musical tastes, worship style, language, et alia define the identity of most Canadians is separated by a hair's width from the supposition that these things ought to define the identities of groups and persons who are not like me. What is equally problematic is that it is not incumbent upon me, in our current cultural and religious milieu, to think intentionally or even consciously about that assumption. Those of us who are part of the dominant culture don't *have* to think about the ways in which our behaviours impact the lives of other people. We might even assume that we do others a favor by integrating them into our way of being, thinking, believing, speaking or acting.

If we are Christian, we might conclude that we do a service by suppressing non-Christian religious practices in favor of a Christian alternative. If English or French is the language of our dominant culture, we might conclude that we are helping children by providing an educational environment that will teach them the languages they need in order to find their path in the mainstream of Canadian life. If we do

not question the assumption that our culture offers a better way to live and worship, we may see no harm in removing children from their homes and placing them in residential schools, away from the cultural and religious identities of their families, social systems, and communal life. If we assume that our dominant culture is better and thus, other cultures are inferior, the assimilation of those other cultures into our own may seem a well-intentioned goal.

We are not dealing in 'maybes' however.

We are dealing in historical facts to which the testimonies of residential school survivors bear painful witness through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. We are dealing, as White Canadians, with a tragedy deeply rooted in our own cultural profiles and our assumptions about them.

Which brings us back to where we started:

*"The work we need to do is to look at ourselves."*²

¹ Jonathan Schmidt in interview with the author, April 14, 2014

² This essay is an outgrowth of conversations with Jonathan Schmidt, Phil Heinze and Allen Jorgenson