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What do Indigenous land acknowledgments mean to you?

In 2016, when I was 12, my school started reciting the land acknowledgment daily on the announcements. There wasn't much of a discussion around it when it first started but we had learned so much about colonization, residential schools, and indigenous people that it felt really uplifting to hear the acknowledgment every morning.

Of course, a 14-year-old had no real expertise on a huge topic like settler colonialism, but hearing us openly acknowledge the wrongs Canadians committed against indigenous people throughout history and currently in the country every morning meant to me that we were on the path to "real reconciliation". I would stand during it willingly and pridefully knowing it was for a narrative I so deeply supported. The land acknowledgment meant to me that the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women we learned about in class the day before were no longer being forgotten. It meant there wouldn't have to be more protests about environmentally destructive pipelines going through indigenous land against their permission. The land acknowledgment meant that indigenous people living on reserves will finally have clean running water while living on the soil that was originally stolen from them. Overall, to me it meant the end of Canada oppressing people that have gone through too much already, and I related to that experience, so the land acknowledgment felt like a relief to me. To me, it felt like a win.

My grade nine geography teacher taught us about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: 99 Calls to action. She discussed how it covered topics from healthcare to language and culture and she told us that this policy change was a road to real reconciliation for the indigenous people of Canada. I thought that having an official document that tells us step-by-step how to create change would be the answer. Because there was no way that we would stand and acknowledge our wrongs every day if we weren't working to fix them, right?

However, one year became five and I got older, took more classes, and learned about a little something called critical thinking. I joined social media and started to see all the things I thought the land acknowledgment symbolized the end of, continue to take place. So every morning while standing for the national anthem and the land acknowledgment the gears in my head would be spinning. The land acknowledgment started to look very performative to me and to put it simply, it made me angry.

The specific moment I realized that the TRC's calls to action and the land acknowledgment didn't solve as much as I thought was when I did an essay on racism in the Canadian healthcare system with a focus on indigenous people. I remember researching the case of Brian Sinclair. Brian Sinclair was a 45-year-old Indigenous man who died of a preventable bladder infection due to being neglected for 34 hours in a hospital's emergency room. The aftermath of his death coupled with the way he was neglected in the hospital clearly concluded his death was a result of discrimination. The 18th Call to Action in the TRC's document states

“We call upon the federal,...and Aboriginal governments to acknowledge that the current state of Aboriginal health in Canada is a direct result of previous Canadian government policies, ...and to recognize and implement the health-care rights of Aboriginal people”. However in a separate research article, it was found that, “Fifty-six percent of First Nations people and 55% of Métis reported being diagnosed with one or more chronic conditions, compared with 48% of non-Aboriginal people” (Gionet & Roshanafshar, n.d). The fact that this is the reality despite healthcare being explicitly addressed in the TRC’s Calls to Action is when I understood that what the land acknowledgment originally meant to me is not what it started to stand for. It showed me that had the policy changes been properly implemented indigenous people wouldn’t be dying from preventable illnesses. The government should exhaust all possible solutions that allow indigenous people to have the best quality of life. A step towards the right direction includes making it mandatory for students in healthcare programs to take courses that highlight indigenous struggles in Canada that stem from stigma and discrimination and to emphasize culturally sensitive care. The assumption that just because they are Indigenous, they are destined to have a future society so harshly painted for them needs to be eradicated.

You see, ignorance is insulting because after a certain point it becomes willful, as if you're ignoring the truth so you don't have to face a harsh reality. So when I initially heard the land acknowledgment I thought it was better, Canada was done being willfully ignorant and was moving towards facing reality. But, the thing about acknowledgment is it's a slippery slope because acknowledgment leaves room for accountability. Acknowledgment means, “I know what's going on and I see what I did wrong. Acknowledgment mandates follow-up questions like

“What did you do to fix this?” and just by looking around and what I was learning in class the Canadian government and Canada as a whole would not have been able to answer that question.

So now when I stand for the land acknowledgment and hear the announcements say we recognize that “We are situated on stolen lands...” I feel less pride than I did before. I can’t help but think maybe the ignorance was better. Because willful ignorance is insulting but acknowledgment without accountability or action is just insult upon injury. It's a slap in the face to people who have already been oppressed far too long. It's like saying “I see you and I know what's wrong, I just don't care enough to actually do anything about it”. I can't help but think, about what it would take to bring about real change and if we as a collective will ever get there.

Subsequently, the land acknowledgment serves as a reminder to me, it reminds me of the Brian Sinclairs of the world and the unmarked graves found all over the country. It reminds me of the parents who said goodbye to their children not knowing it would be their last. It means to me that there is so much work to be done and so much accountability to be taken if we can ever get to be the just society I've always hoped for.

References

Gionet, L., Roshanafshar, S. (n.d) Select health indicators of First Nations people living off reserve, Métis and Inuit. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-624-x/2013001/article/11763-eng.htm>