

CRY! OF THE LOST ONES

THE BATTLE

The biggest battle
for a person to ever
have to fight is a
battle of yourself.
Can such a battle be won?
Or will it go on until
it destroys you?

Richard Cardinal

On June 26, 1984, 17 year old Richard Cardinal committed suicide by hanging himself, after being in 16 foster homes and six group homes. His story and memory will live on in those of us who have shared life experiences similar to his.

This essay will focus upon the anger, hate and rage that native foster children have encountered within themselves and within capitalistic bureaucratic Canadian society - a society that rejected them since birth. In order to facilitate understanding of the tragedies of children like Richard Cardinal, I will attempt to explain the hardships these children must endure by seeking answers to two specific questions:

- (1) Why do native parents give-up their children?
- (2) What happens to these children as they grow-up in foster homes?

In order to appreciate the history of the native foster child, the background of the child's parents and the reasons they gave the child up in the first place must be known. One must look at the parent's background and understand their personal history, and try to understand the effects this may have had towards their own children.

The era of 1880 - 1960 was a period when native communities saw many changes, since this was the time when native children were put into residential and industrial schools. These children were alienated ten or more months of a year from their parents and not allowed to speak their own languages. In the residential

schools the living accommodations were often below standard and a high carbohydrate diet resulted in undernourishment. They were also confined to close sleeping quarters with inadequate health and cleaning facilities. Further more, they had to conform to the harsh authority of their white religious masters. As many as 67% of these children died in these schools some years, due to the diseases obtained from inadequate living conditions.

When these children returned to their parents, if they returned, they were deemed as being useless, due to the fact that they were so alienated from their own communities while in the residential schools. They became marginal people unable to adapt to either the Native or Euro-Canadian way of life. These children are now the parents of today's generation - a generation struggling with their own identities, for these very obvious reasons.

Patrick Johnson believes that "Children placed in residential schools lost meaningful contact with their families and communities. There was discontinuity and disruption in the centuries-old process of passing down from generation to generation customs and traditions about a multitude of issues, including methods of child rearing. Some children may be coming into care essentially because their parents did not learn how to raise children in the traditional way as a result of their own placement in residential schools"¹ Even though many aspects of the traditional way of life were lost to the residential school generation, they were still able to revive a strong closely-knit spiritual bond, one which the American Indian Movement demonstrated during the 1960's. The 1960's was an era which saw the spiritual wakening of the North American Natives. The active resistance of some of the native leaders during this time, brought about a resurgence of the spiritual awareness among all native people. If a person takes time to look today, they will notice that this strong awareness is starting to make a full come-back.

Through understanding this awakening, one can begin to understand how these people were able to re-establish themselves in some of the old traditions, such as when it came to child rearing. One must first understand that a native's way of raising a child is quite different from that of a white person and that consequently, conflict arises between cultural norms and values as to the "proper" way to raise and educate children. The native child may be allowed a great amount of personal freedom in their lives in order to grow and develop in a natural way with the parents instructing them to make their own decisions. Further, as the child continues to grow the parents usually teach him to keep his/her emotions in check. This was usually started after childbirth when an infant was placed in a cradle-board. There he learned the discipline of self-control. On the otherhand, the Euro-Canadian child's parents seem to have complete control over the child's life and the child is expected to adapt and take on the characteristics of the parent. A Euro-Canadian child also needs more time to learn emotional control, since the child is taught by being punished by the parent. These factors play a great role when looking at the attitudes of a white middle-class social worker who, in addition, seems to know nothing about native values and child-rearing practices.

Another major problem with the social worker is that they sometimes fail to accurately view the socio-economic problems that exist on the reservations, or when natives move into the city and contend with adapting to a different lifestsyle. As Patrick Johnston stated. "Gradually, as education ceased to function as the institutional agent of colonialization, the child welfare system took it's place. It could contine to remove native children from their parents, devalue native customs and tradition in the process, but still act "in the best interest of the child".² Those who hold to this view argue that the "Sixties Scoop" was not coincidental, but was a consequence of fewer Indian children being sent to residential schools and of the child welfare system

emerging as the new method of colonialization.

During the 1960's a wide scale child-apprehension epidemic struck the native communities which is now termed as the "Sixties Scoop". It was during that decade that the welfare system continued the travesties of residential schools by apprehending Native children and placing them in white foster homes. Social workers decided what was in the best interests of native child, without recourse to either the child or his relatives.

Patrick Johnston briefly summed up this period by saying "In an interview with one longtime employee of the Ministry of Human Resources in B.C. referred to this process as the "Sixties Scoop". She admitted that Provincial social workers would, quite literally, scoop children from reserves on the slightest pretext. She also made it clear however, that she and her colleagues sincerely believed that what they were doing was in the best interest of the children. They felt that the apprehension of Indian children from reserves would save them from the effects of crushing poverty, unsanitary health conditions, poor housing and malnutrition, which were facts of life on many reserves.³ The horror stories about these social workers are legendary, although it must be remembered that there are some who really did care, and put in the extra effort and time to know these children. I was one of the fortunate foster children to know such a person who really helped me when my life was falling apart during my teen-age years. I am forever in his debt.

"Poverty is a big concern when dealing with Indian people. They are among the poorest in Canada, with an unemployment rate as high as 75-80".⁴ Poverty also takes a great effect on their psychological and emotional health, which manifests itself in alcohol-abuse. "alcohol related problems make-up for 30.8% of the reasons why children are placed in homes, while health related problems among parents are 11.3%, and parents abandoning their children are 29.6%".⁵ Social workers who apprehend these children, do so because 99 per-cent of the time it is due to neglect rather than abuse".⁶

Serious questions have been raised in various reports prepared by native and non-native case workers who do not work with the Department of Social Services. These questions are mostly concerned with native child-welfare statistics. These social workers, whom a majority of Native parents have confided in from the beginning, have lost trust because of lack of understanding and compassion the government social workers have towards their native clients. There are indications of ignorance on the part of the social workers when it comes to cross-cultural understanding of the native community. "There have also been cases in which the child was instructed by the social worker to speak out against the parents in court"⁷. It is cases like this that cause parents to give-up hope and faith in our legal system. The Health and Social Development Commission for the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations briefly sums this up by saying, "the most common response of this system is to remove Indian children from their families and place them with non-Indian foster families and institutions. The author will now deal with the statistical evidence of the amount of native foster children in care and the personal turmoil they must encounter. I was raised in foster homes until 17 years of age and know firsthand about personal hardships that a child endures. These hardships can emotionally sear the child for life. I came from a family of 14 children where many of my brothers and sisters were also placed in care.

The continuity of traditional Indian family life is effectively broken. Indian families and children enter a new crisis of self and cultural identity which causes new emotional and behavioural problems. These systems take Indian people further away from their culture and Indian lifestyle, causing new personal and social problems. And so the cycle begins again.⁸

It must be remembered that 41.1% of the parents have given-up their children because they are not able to look after them due to socio-economic reasons, and 21.3% of parents overall don't want their children back. Only 11.1% of these children are expected to go back to their parents, while 78% will not see their natural parents for one year, and 24.6% for over four years.⁹

The provincial Social Services system of Saskatchewan had 60.1% Indian children during 1983 in foster care, compared to the federal government who had 91.2%.

Ages of Indian children in the care of the Provincial Government of Saskatchewan, 1983/84.¹⁰

| AGES | PERCENTAGE |
|-----------|------------|
| 0 - 14 | 23.3% |
| 5 - 12 | 40.0% |
| 13 - over | 39.7% |

Ages of Indian children in the care of Federal Government in Saskatchewan, 1983/84.¹¹

| AGES | PERCENTAGE |
|-----------|------------|
| 0 - 9 | 15.8% |
| 10 - 16 | 84.2% |
| 17 - over | 26.1% |

It is hard to get an overall national per capita average on native foster children, due to the fact that Status Indian foster children seem to be studied more closely than Metis or Non-Status Indian. In 1976-77 it was estimated that Native foster children made-up 20.0% the national average for children placed in care throughout Canada. The highest estimate of Native foster children in care, in Saskatchewan during 1982 was 64.0%¹² Even though the Indian Nations might debate that, even if they are concerned with only Status Indian foster children. These statistics are disturbing and alarmingly high for a single minority group.

I empathize with the pain, hate, and rage which these children encounter within themselves while being raised in foster homes. I feel it is something that "must be told for the benefit of the native foster children of today. During the "Sixties Scoop" other members of my family and I were placed in foster homes because of the socio-economic position of our parents. I can remember the degrading circumstances I endured when I was placed, at the age of 4, in my third white foster home. Looking back, I can remember sitting outdoors waiting for my foster mother to bring me food, without a table or chair. I wasn't even allowed to sit on the doorstep. While I ate my meal quietly, when I was allowed a meal, the foster parents and their natural children were eating theirs. I lasted in this home for one year, becoming the families pet animal.

The next foster home I remember my foster mother crying when she first looked at me. Years later I was told, that I had been under-developed because of malnutrition. I was also told that I was unable to speak, and that I was unable to dress myself. This being the case, they had regarded me as mentally retarded. Another problem was that I lacked fluency in any one of the three languages I had been acquiring. This was the result of living in different foster homes of various cultures. Verna St. Denis expressed this well in a report by quoting Joseph Westermeyer "since native children are not as apt to be adopted, this means they are placed in foster homes. It has been noted that the repetitive placements have a shattering effect on the child.

They destroy self-esteem and lessen one's self-confidence in reaching outwards new inter-personal relationships. The alternatives offered by the welfare child care has shown to be detrimental to the mental health of the native child."¹³

Looking at statistics for 83/84, it is easy to see why 35.0% of Native children in care have mental or physical disabilities."¹⁴ Secondly, there is the cultural identity-crisis a native foster child must endure. When I was 11 years old, I remember other children calling me an Indian. At the time I was not aware of what they meant because I had not heard of Indians. An interview by Larry Krotz with Colleen Morreseau, an ex-adoptive child, illustrates this situation. "I found when I was going to school that some of the kids were really mean to anybody who didn't fit. Even if you were fat or if you wore glasses they picked on you. To me they used to say that I was dirty, that I shouldn't be there, why didn't I go back to the reservation? They would ask who did I scalp last night. I'd say "why do you ask me those questions."¹⁵

After getting into several fights my foster parents finally decided to tell me what an Indian was, and about my background. As Colleen Morreseau goes on to say "The first time I asked, "What am I, what nationality am I," because I had noticed that everyone else around me had blond hair and blue eyes, or brown hair, my mother sat down and told me that they had adopted me. They told me that right from the beginning. And she told me that I was an Indian person though they didn't have too much of my background from children's aid."¹⁶

That is when the self hate and confusion set in, knowing that I was different from the rest of the children, because of the colour of my skin. There were instances where I would take a hand brush and rub my skin till it bled, in order to scrape away the brown dirt. I hate what I was. After this my school marks went down and I didn't care what happened anymore. As far as I was concerned, I was just another lazy, good for nothing Indian

that would never amount to anything. My white foster parent's who I satyed with for nine years weren't much help either. I lived during those nine years being called stupid and good for nothing. There was never a time, when they said anything positive about native people. I received most of my self-hatred from them, even though I had never seen a native adult.

A report written by the Saskatoon Legal Assistance Clinic Society addressed to the Minister of Social Services states that "the Department of Social Services places apprehended native children in non-native homes. If this is not the Department's explicit intent, it is nevertheless implied by actual practise. Practically, this is an example of the current assimilation of native children, and the denial of their native cultural identity. Such children are doomed to grow up conditioned to white aspirations, while simultaneously, subjected to white racism against Indian people".¹⁷

One of my worst experiences that I had being a foster child, was to find that I had no where to run. I didn't have any parents that I knew of, and I didn't have any close native friends who had their own families that I could identify with. Throughout this time I had one good friend who was white, who helped me a great deal later on in life. During these years the only positive thing I had in my life was the forest and lake at back of my foster parents house. I developep a close bond with nature during those years. I had more respect for nature than I did for people. When I think back, I hated people no matter what colour their skin was.

It wasn't until I was fifteen that I was consciously aware of who I was as a native person. This occurred when I met other members of my family at my father's funeral. After that I rebelled against my foster family, by standing up to my foster father for the first time. The next week I was removed from that home where I had spent nine years.

I was then moved to a Prince Albert group home with other native children, who were either foster children themselves, or who came in from the reservation for the year to go to school. This was the first contact I had with Native peers my own age and it was the worst period of my life. I began asking myself questions of who am I, what am I, and where do I come from. I found I couldn't adapt to being a native or being a white. This being the case I found myself up against a wall. It was then, that I noticed for the first time that I was by myself, and nobody really cared if I lived or died. The only solution I could think of, was to take my own life, and get this misery finally over with.

The Saskatoon Legal Assistance Clinic Society indicates "There is ample evidence to indicate that it has been the fate of thousands of Indian children to be placed in a series of non-Indian foster or adoptive homes, and evidence goes on to indicate that there is a high frequency of chronic insecurity, free-floating anxiety, panic reactions, and difficulty in adapting to family life and adulthood. Such Indian children, upon entering adolescence, exhibit runaway problems, suicide attempts, drug and alcohol usage, and truancy, as normal reactions".¹⁸

If it wasn't for an old friend who saw me deteriorating I would never have made it past this stage. I was fortunate that his family took me in and helped me straighten out my life, without the aid of Social Services. It is shocking to realize that that many other native foster children have shared my life experiences when I read child welfare reports. Another interesting point is that when these children reached adulthood they still encounter difficulty when trying to identify themselves with a culture. I know from my own experiences that it is a difficult process in re-establishing your roots.

I was twenty-one when I first met my mother during the death of one of my sisters. When I first met her I could feel nothing inside of me, no remorse, pity, love or hate. It will take quite awhile to get to know these people because of the length of time we have been separated. Nonetheless, today I have a great deal

of respect for my mother and my family, for the hardships they have encountered themselves.

The identity crisis is still real to me, even today when I've been back among my own people for only a few months. It is a painful and emotional process to try fit into a group of people who have been strangers to you most of your life.

In 1982 it was estimated that 85.0% of the native people in the Saskatchewan Correctional Centres were ex-foster and adoptive children.¹⁹ During the Assembly of First Nations in 1982, I attended a conference in which it was mentioned by informed native people that the North American Natives had the highest suicide rate in the world. Richard Thatcher clearly states how these children progress once they reach adulthood. "But as adulthood approached and they sought to gain independence from their foster or adoptive families, the subjects of Westermeyer's study found they could not "pass" as whites because of an unwritten racial bar. Not accepted as whites, but with no reference points in an Indian culture, the Indian adolescents who were raised in white homes were left in sort of cultural limbo. Westermeyer found himself treating the effects of such unresolved identity crisis resulting what he calls a "racial-ethnic-discontinuity".²⁰

It is discouraging to know how the public deals with the issue of native foster children, or foster children in general. Ignorance and stupidity can be the only terms used in describing how the news media used to exploit these children when advertising them in the newspaper or even television for that matter in finding them homes. The Social Services were also to blame because of their bureaucratic superiors who never went beyond their desks in finding the real sources behind these children's problems. The advertising may have nearly ceased but the basic attitudes of racism still persist.

The Canadian Lawyers Association illustrates this practice in a news column describing a 12 year old foster child. "She is healthy in all other ways. Although chronologically age twelve, Maggie is delayed physically, emotionally and mentally. She is physically developed to age ten and emotionally at about age six".²¹ It is cases like this that scars a child for life as they develop into adults.

I also direct my anger towards the Native associations who seem to bring the majority power's ambitions to our level, by classifying us into three different sectors, the Metis, Non-Status Indians and the Status Indians. When will this pathetic outrage stop? How much more must these children suffer before they all realize that we are all a single nation people? Once they take away the act of parliament that keeps us divided we can address ourselves and Indigenous People of Canada who share common problems and concerns because of our "Indianness".

The only people who seem to be getting their act together are the Native Women's Groups because they refuse to recognize these government imposed rules. More over, the Gabriel Dumont Institute must take a stronger stand when dealing with the foster child issue. It will be these children who will lead the way for the future generations. Unfortunately, the Native foster child issue seems to be widely ignored by Native educators from different professions, who are not prepared for the return of these children once they go for a higher education. I issue a challenge to all Native educators who can no longer ignore this area which should be one of today's top priorities. In conclusion I say, that I am dedicated to the betterment and advancement of our children. My goal in life is to be as a spiritual guide. Upon completion of my Bachelors Degree I want to lead children to their own purposes in life whether they are spiritual or not. The late chief Dan George said it all so well...