

Maria Campbell, *Eagle Feather News*, August 2016

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We have to convert and reclaim things that made us strong

Decades of heartache, hopelessness and pain along with the dream that somebody would someday hear, all came together on August 3, in the Long House of Indigenous peoples, at the Museum of History, formally known as the Musuem of Civilization in Ottawa.

It is ironic that this building, this institution of civilization and history, designed by an Indigenous man, would be the place this Independent Inquiry would be announced.

Perhaps it is the storyteller in me who mused on this and also heard, mingled with the voices of Ministers Bennett, Hajdu and Wilson-Raybould, the long ago voices of Indigenous women who protested this violence which has been perpetuated on them and their children since first contact.

Voices like Mariah Vandal, who in the 1870s refused treaty and told her granddaughter, "I did that because I would no longer be an Neheyaw Iskwew if I took treaty.

I wanted nothing to do with them, I preferred my life, poor as it was, to be my own."

I also heard the voice of an old woman called MaryAnne, who carried her raped, beaten, half-dead daughter to Fort Carlton to ask for help and was turned away. And Wandering Spirit, the War Chief of Big Bear whose wife was raped by an Indian agent and when he tried to get justice was laughed at and ignored.

Elizabeth Whitford, who in the 1920s walked to Edmonton to report the murder of her daughter and was told to go home before she was imprisoned.

And even older voices, a woman called Marie, who in 1643, was described by the Jesuit priest Vimont, as "a savage woman, a rough, wild creature who gives a great deal of trouble to her husband."

She refused to convert or give her children to the Jesuits. It was native women like Marie, wrote feminist scholar Karen Anderson "who were the Jesuits most vociferous and relentless opponents, who challenged Jesuit beliefs, and teachings. As women they refused to conform to the behavior that the Jesuits knew God had ordained for their sex ... If the Devil's plans for the new world were to be thwarted, if the forces of good that the Jesuits believed they represented were to be triumphant and souls to be saved, native women would have to submit to the authority of their husbands and to the church. In order for that to happen, there had to be profound changes in the relationships between women and men and a drastic reduction in women's independence and powers."

These Jesuits were appalled at the freedom of Indigenous women, writing that they were "haughty and proud and had entirely too much authority and power."

And so they set in motion those profound changes creating the core of violence against Indigenous women and their children for generations to come. A violence that is today almost overwhelming.

So those were the voices I heard and the things I thought about as I listened to Minister Bennett announce an Independent Inquiry and name the Commissioners.

I cried when Minister Jody Wilson-Raybould spoke. I know her father and I met her when she was a little girl.

Who would have believed in the ugly Harper years that she would be the Attorney General when this announcement was made?

And, I know I'm sounding like I am a bit crazy, going on about Jesuits and old history but if we are to stop this madness then we have to, like the Jesuits, make "profound change." And profound change does not have to be complicated but it does have to be honest and courageous and, it has to start at home meaning we have to look at our own violence against ourselves, each other and towards our children.

How do we do that? I am not sure, but my elders and mentors always said we have to convert, reclaim and take back the things that made us strong, kind people. In other words we have to decolonize and that is hard work. Are we up to it? Who knows?

I do know we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the families and grass roots activists for their tireless work over all these years. I pray for peace and closure for them, for all of us.

And the Commissioners, let's help them in every way we can to do the work they must do. And that's really all I have to say. I thought I would fill pages and pages because I have, like all of you, waited so long for this day and now that it has finally arrived I am feeling exhausted, emotional and a bit frightened. Isn't that odd?

Hiy hiy, marci kinanaskomtinowow