



A Human Future

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Rev Dr Ruth Patterson is a Presbyterian minister and Director of Restoration Ministries, an interdenominational organization promoting peace, reconciliation and healing, which she founded in 1991. She has received many honours for her work and travels widely giving retreats and talks. She holds degrees from Queen's University, Belfast, the University of Toronto (an MSW) and Edinburgh University. In 1976 Ruth was the first woman ordained in Ireland. She served a mainly loyalist congregation for 14 years.

The Path of Peacemaking

An Interview with Ruth Patterson

In this issue we depart from our custom of interviewing Canadians to talk with an Irish woman who is having a profound impact on people engaged in the work of reconciliation. Rev. Ruth Patterson was recently in Canada to give an address during the L'Arche General Assembly and public talks in Vancouver and Calgary. She also spoke at the Wisdom on the Journey gathering in Alberta, that brought together people from diverse communities to examine the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and support the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. – *Beth Porter, ed.*

Beth Porter: What led you to do peace work?

Ruth Patterson: Most of my adult life has been shaped by the open conflict between 1968 and 1998 in Northern Ireland and its aftermath. Many decisions I took or ways that “chose me” were determined or influenced by that conflict. The path had many shadowy sides but, as with anything else, it was two-edged and those of us who journeyed through that time with a certain degree of awareness were gifted with so much that we might not have acquired in any other way.

You write about reconciliation and restoration.

How are they different?

When I think about reconciliation the phrases that come to mind are “walking together again” or maybe “discovering the gift we are to one another”—either rediscovering it or discovering it for the first time. Restoration implies some sort of healing or journey towards wholeness.

The two are inextricably interlinked, but for me the word “restoration” resonates more with a spirituality.

You are here partly to speak to a gathering of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Alberta. What are some of the commonalities and differences you anticipate between the situation of Aboriginal peoples here in Canada and the situation in Ireland?

On one level, human nature is the same everywhere and we start, as Jean Vanier says, with our common humanity. Suffering caused by a lack of recognition of the riches of diversity has been our lot in Ireland as it has been yours in Canada, though it has manifested in different ways. To my limited understanding, yours has been caused by what one might describe as an insensitive form of colonialism that looked on its way as the right way and maybe the only way for everyone. Ireland is part of the Celtic fringe that existed around a colonial power.

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Reading about Aboriginal peoples here, I am struck by the similarities—the emphasis on community and storytelling, the richness of culture, the respect of nature, the wholeness, the spirituality.

In our situation two groups are struggling to present their way as the right way and their identity as the right identity. Because one group saw itself more

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obviously as those sinned against, there was the conflict and all the lack of understanding. But the struggle has been less about a sense of injustice and oppression than about two interests needing to reach a point of under-

standing—to grasp that there will be no winners and that success will be achieving a sense of mutual understanding and acceptance of one another. We are not there yet. We do have a peace process and there has been much change but I question how much transformation there has been.

Chief Dr. Robert Joseph

Photo courtesy of City of Vancouver



Chief Dr. Robert Joseph (right) with Mayor Gregor Robertson at the City of Vancouver's Reconciliation Summit where the mayor proclaimed a Year of Reconciliation, from June 21, 2013 to June 20, 2014

The work of reconciliation ... is spiritual work, sacred work; it is moving beyond to where we have never been before as a society to have these deep, deep dialogues that shift our consciousness about each other... bringing ourselves in this moment to our highest self....

Peace is an eternal spiritual imperative....

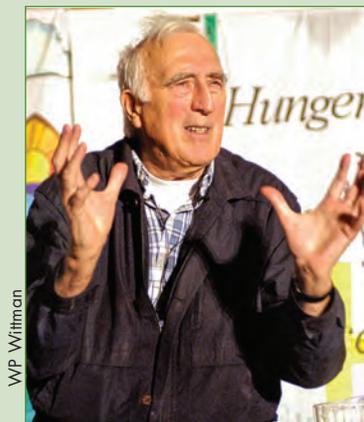
We had an elders gathering, not just of

Aboriginal elders but of elders of the Chinese community, Aboriginal community, Holocaust community, other communities, and as we sat together for two days talking about how the word 'reconciliation' might be embedded in our different languages, we discovered that indeed this notion of reconciliation has been embedded in all our mindsets. No matter who we are, what colour our skin, it is our duty to try to bring about reconciliation and harmony.

Excerpts from a speech by Chief Dr. Robert Joseph, Gwawaenuk Elder, Executive Director of the Indian Residential School Survivors Society, and Special Aboriginal Advisor to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. He is the hereditary chief of the Kwagwalth nation. • [Listen to his speech.](#) • [Visit Reconciliation Canada.](#)

Jean Vanier: Three Principles of Forgiveness and the Movement toward Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a bilateral affair; it is the completion of the forgiveness process, the coming together of the oppressed and the oppressor, each one accepting the other, each acknowledging their fears and hatreds, each accepting that the path of mutual love is the only way out of a world of conflict.



WP Whitman

Principle 1

There can be no forgiveness of ourselves or of others unless we believe that we are all part of a common humanity. What this means in practical terms is that no one individual, no one group is superior to others... Each of us has hurt another, each of us has been hurt. And so we must own and take responsibility for our lives as well as for the future.

Principle 2

To forgive means to believe that each of us can evolve and change, that human redemption is possible...

Principle 3

To forgive means to yearn for unity and peace. Unity is the ultimate treasure. It is the place where, in the garden of humanity, each one of us can grow, bear fruit, and give life....

From Jean Vanier, *Essential Writings*, ed. Carolyn Whitney-Brown



You counsel people who have experienced hurt and breakage. They may say I just need to walk away; it is too painful. Or I don't want to bother trying to reconcile. Or the other person may not want to deal

with it. What would you say in such a situation?

First, I want to draw a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. The former takes one. The second takes two. While it can never be forced and is a process and a journey, I think that forgiveness is vitally important for one's wellbeing, whether the other person ever accepts it or even wants to know. The one who is being damaged is myself if I hold on to the hurt and bitterness and refuse to forgive. Reconciliation is a next step and it may not happen because it takes two. But sooner or later in every conflict in the world people have to pick their way back over the debris of the broken relationships, the shattered livelihoods, the broken dreams, and dialogue. That is the only way forward and one of the first steps in reconciliation. And that can take years, even generations. We used to think that compromise was a bad word. Actually we need to redeem it and realize it is quite a holy word. There is a lot of give and take in it, and that is at the essence of mercy, justice, truth and peace.

Sometimes people may not want to reconcile because they feel they would be disloyal. For example children in a marriage break-up may feel that to be loyal they need to stay angry at the parent whom they deem to have been responsible.

I think every instance needs to be taken as unique. It depends on the person. If they have been very wounded no one else has the right to challenge them to let go of their anger and reach out. I think it requires a great deal of courage to reach out to the one who ostensibly is in the wrong, and yet that is part of the cost and the loneliness of peacemaking, where you're identified with neither individual or group, but have stepped a pace beyond. That puts you in a kind of no man's land, but that is a cost that almost has to be borne by the peacemaker. There is a great difference between a peacemaker

and a peace lover. The peace lover will stay with the one partly because of not wanting to cause hurt but also partly wanting to safeguard their own position.

The biggest peacemaking journey I will ever make is the one within myself, so that I become a little more self-aware. Just as outside there are so many facets to community so there are to the community within, and very often the way we cope with life is to segregate the parts within us; whereas all the time I believe the call is to welcome back the exiled bits of our inner beings and to realize that I and everyone else are multifaceted personalities. I cannot become a peacemaker unless I also begin the journey toward recognizing that I am loved, because if we try to love our neighbour as ourselves when we don't really love ourselves (and most of us don't), the conflict will continue. I believe that every human being is called to sense that they are beloved because every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and what God makes, God loves unconditionally and forever. "Beloved" is an old word. If you break it down it is also a command. But to my

A Knowledge of History...

The Hon. Mr. Justice Murray Sinclair is Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), a six-year project collecting hundreds of testimonies and researching the truth behind residential schools and their impact. Findings of the TRC will be published in a final report in 2015.

"All students need to know about the rich heritage of aboriginals... In too many schools, he said history lessons continue to promote misunderstandings, ignorance and racism for one group; shame, humiliation and festering anger for the other...."

A knowledge of history leads to understanding, and understanding leads to respect, he said. Reconciliation follows."

From *Reconciliation through Education: Justice Murray Sinclair's Appeal*, a report by Janet Steffenhagen in the *Vancouver Sun* on a speech by the Hon. Justice Mr. Murray Sinclair to the First Nations Education Steering Committee. [Read more.](#)



mind it goes beyond a command and is a vocation, and the choice is mine whether I pick it up. Hand in hand with that goes a self-awareness which is vital to so much else.

You say gratitude is healing. How is this so?

Because gratitude has something to do with being able to receive. Most of us in caring professions can be great givers, but when you are a giver you can keep a distance from people. When you are a receiver you allow yourself to be open, vulnerable, to say I need what the other person is offering. In being open and allowing some of your brokenness to be seen there begins to well up a sort of healing which would never come if you kept the wall up and remained solely a giver. So I believe there is a mutual flow and that in itself is healing. It's something about a generosity of spirit.

How was it for you being the first woman ordained in Ireland?

People largely stood back prepared to judge women's ordination on how one woman performed, so it was very lonely. One saving grace was a sense of humour. On the night I was ordained there was a great storm and at the reception one clergyman announced that it was a sign of divine displeasure! A big danger, which didn't thank God imprison me, was to fall into the Elijah trap—that "only I, I alone am left and they seek my life...." It helped to have the precious friendship of my father, also a clergyman and quite a visionary. And God places people along the way to listen and be supportive, as hopefully I would be for others.

What sustains you in your work of reconciliation?

I recall Desmond Tutu being asked if he was an optimist. He replied, "Oh no, I am no optimist, but what

I am is a prisoner of hope." It's no virtue of mine, but I would see myself as a prisoner of that hope. I have an enormous conviction that Ireland, out of its fragility and brokenness, still has the chance to show the world something through a restoration of that hospitality within ourselves, between ourselves, and with the whole created order, for which it is fabled. Because I was born in Ireland the dream of restoration is incarnated for me in Ireland, but it could be anywhere in the world. ■

For Your Information

Ruth Patterson books and related links

- *Looking Back to Tomorrow: A Spirituality for Between the Times*, Dublin: Veritas, 2009. [Sample pages](#).
- *Proclaiming the Promise: Reflections on the God of Love*, Dublin: Veritas, 2006
- *Journeying Towards Reconciliation: A Song for Ireland*, Dublin: Veritas, 2003
- *A Farther Shore* (foreword by Jean Vanier), Veritas 2000
- [Ruth Patterson reading "Give me your hand"](#)
- [Restoration Ministries](#)

Other links

- [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#)
- [The Hon. Mr. Justice Murray Sinclair on the TRC](#)
- [Yukon News, "Reconciliation after Truth"](#)
- [Wisdom on the Journey: Walking to a Sacred Place](#)
- [8th Fire Dispatches: Aboriginal People, Canada, and the Way Forward \(CBC Doc Zone collaboration\)](#)
- [Mindfulness without Borders](#)

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The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 137 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 29 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with intellectual disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

A Human Future is offered as a contribution to the Canadian conversation about values and the fostering of a society where everyone belongs and can make a contribution.