

# IF REINDEER COULD FLY: DREAMS AND REAL SOLUTIONS FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

CINDY BLACKSTOCK



I THINK I WAS THE SMARTEST WHEN I BELIEVED REINDEER COULD FLY. I mean I really believed reindeer could fly! I imagined them taking flight into skies of all colors and over landscapes of all textures. No matter what the weather, they flew. Most amazing was the fact that they knew where to pick me up – in Topley, BC – a town too small for a map, but with a small school and the Grill where I saw my very first chocolate dip cone (with sprinkles). Those cones were almost as great as the reindeer – but not quite. I never really tried to figure out how the reindeer flew because I was too busy dreaming about where they would take me next... I went to imaginary places and real places too, I had great conversations and sometimes just sat in wondrous silence, looking at the world below and the sky above.

Then someone told me the “truth” – that reindeer couldn’t fly after all. So I stopped going on these magical journeys. After all, if they didn’t fly, then they didn’t come to Topley and they couldn’t take me on journeys searching for the impossible and the possible. And something else happened too. I no longer looked with magical appreciation at the chocolate dipped cones with sprinkles. Now I wanted to know how they were made. When I found out, somehow they weren’t so special anymore either.

Even back then, believing what everyone else believed just seemed to run against my character. So, despite the “evidence,” part of me kept believing in flying reindeer and taking the paths toward the impossible and improbable. That’s why I believe that this generation of Aboriginal children can live in respectful coexistence with other Canadian children, with all their rights recognized. And it’s why I have devoted my life’s work and passion to this cause. Many would like to believe this is possible, but most think it is not probable – or not for a long while. But I am impatient, and I think we can make it true sooner rather than later. At first I thought believing in flying reindeer and working in Aboriginal child welfare were unrelated. But I am beginning to understand that one



**TOO OFTEN, ARRIVING AT AN ANSWER STOPPED THE JOURNEY FOR TRUTH, AND OUR ANCESTORS UNDERSTOOD THAT TRUTH WAS FRAGILE – GIVEN SHAPE BY THE MOMENT AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THOSE WHO CAME UPON IT.**

depends on the other, and has for millennia.

Our ancestors valued curiosity and the search for answers that is so endemic to being human. But as much as they encouraged us to ask questions, they also taught us to think through which questions we should not answer. Too often, arriving at an answer stopped the journey for truth, and our ancestors understood that truth was fragile – given shape by the moment and the interpretation of those who came upon it. Many Aboriginal legends and teachings put boundaries around arriving at answers and implementing what we saw as the truth before we truly understood the consequences of our actions. Our ancestors knew that we would run amuck if we interfered with Mother Nature, creating one problem as we fixed another. They knew that if we found “the truth” we would not be open to other possible truths – and most of all, I think they knew that true wisdom was found in exploring the interconnections between all forms of life, the environment and locating this understanding in a continuum of time that spanned millennia. These journeys in search of interconnections and along the shorelines of the impossible have helped me explore the values of our peoples, to see the thin line between the possible and the impossible, to see the arrogance in truth, and most of all to be fine with not knowing – to simply move ahead, guided by the values that served as the decision-making compass of my ancestors. Although circumstances have changed over generations, these values are timeless and allow for a continuity of our culture and humanity. They link us – one person to another, one generation to another and one community to the world.

What does all this mean for Aboriginal children today? What are the solutions to the problems that seem so numerous – impacts of residential school, poverty, poor housing, racism, and over-representation in child welfare care? These are complex issues, but I have come to believe that the most promising responses, at least in child welfare, really are the simple ones: redress the deficits in resource access for Aboriginal children and families, affirm Aboriginal peoples as the best decision makers for their own children, and organize national and provincial responses – not as programs but rather around a set of principles which we have called “reconciliation touchstones”, self-determination for Aboriginal peoples, respect for culture and language, structural interventions, holism and non discrimination. These principles were developed by Indigenous and non Indigenous experts working together at a gathering in the territory of Six Nations of the Grand River in October of 2005 and entitled *Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children*. Rather than presuming to be “the solution”, these principles are intended to guide Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples alike in designing and implementing practical local solutions to ensure child safety.

But I am getting ahead of myself here. Why is such an approach needed? What is wrong with the current child welfare system? I argue that the evidence suggests the system is overwhelmingly failing Aboriginal children, and here is why. The child welfare system was built by non-Aboriginal peoples who constructed its principles and assumptions on the basis of their own values and beliefs. It was then applied wholesale to Aboriginal peoples in Canada with neither acknowledgement of existing Aboriginal systems

**EN BREF** Les enfants autochtones sont lamentablement mal servis par le système de protection de l'enfance. Ils sont deux fois plus susceptibles de se retrouver en famille d'accueil que les jeunes non autochtones. En octobre 2005, lors d'un rassemblement sur le territoire des Six Nations de Grand River, des experts autochtones et non autochtones ont élaboré un ensemble de principes regroupés sous le titre *Réconciliation en matière de protection de l'enfance : pierres de touche d'un avenir meilleur pour les enfants, les jeunes et les familles autochtones*, afin de guider les peuples autochtones et non autochtones dans la conception et l'implantation de solutions locales pratiques assurant la sécurité des enfants. Le groupe demande au gouvernement de faciliter l'accès aux ressources nécessaires pour les enfants et les familles autochtones et de confirmer le rôle des Autochtones en tant que décideurs principaux pour leurs propres enfants.

for ensuring child safety nor critical analysis of the differences between the two populations. Research by Kathleen Earle Fox indicates that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples agree that child maltreatment is unacceptable.<sup>1</sup> In fact, there are very few differences in how Native American and non-Aboriginal peoples would describe child maltreatment – with one exception. Native Americans believe strongly that poverty should not be equated with neglect or be a reason to remove children from the family. Rather, family poverty should compel society to provide families with the resources necessary to care for their children. While there are very few differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal definitions of child maltreatment, there are substantial differences in the socio-economic and political context of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families, the types of maltreatment experienced by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, and the response of the child welfare system.

Most Canadians get their information about how much money actually goes to Aboriginal children and families from politicians. The government reports an \$8 billion investment per year to benefit Aboriginal people. This is a lot of money, and the average taxpayer asks the why Aboriginal people do not seem to be doing better. They wonder if the money is not getting where it needs to go, or if Aboriginal peoples are simply not ready to tackle the big problems in their communities. But let's look beyond the \$8 billion.

The evidence suggests that Aboriginal peoples actually get far less support and funding from the voluntary, public and corporate sectors than other Canadians. What the federal government fails to mention when it cites the \$8 billion for Aboriginal peoples is that this represents *half* of what Canada spends for their non-Aboriginal peers. A detailed economic study of child welfare found that the federal government under funds child welfare services to First Nations children by over \$109 million per year, chiefly in the statutory range of services provided to other Canadian families in crisis to safely care for their children at home. These services, known as “least disruptive measures”, are intended to ensure that families receive every opportunity to safely care for their children before social workers consider placing the child in foster care. The result of this inequity in funding is that a First Nations child is over 15 times more likely to be in foster care than a non-Aboriginal child who has access to these services.

And what about the voluntary sector, which is used by social workers all the time to get much needed services to families through food banks, domestic violence programs, parenting support groups, and recreation programs? A 2003 report found only six individual instances where a



First Nations child on reserve benefited from voluntary sector services during the previous year. This same report found that First Nations across Canada received approximately \$100,000 of the over \$90 billion per year in voluntary funding available to other Canadians. The child welfare system assumes that families have roughly equal access to the resources of the voluntary and public sector; it is clear that First Nations families do not. Moreover, the experience of colonization and persistent social and political exclusion makes the contextual experience of Aboriginal families different from that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. And yet the child welfare system rolls out without adjusting to these differences.

Differences in types of child maltreatment experienced by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children reflect a similar pattern. The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect found that Aboriginal children are less likely to experience four out of five primary types of child maltreatment than their non-Aboriginal peers, but surprisingly are more than twice as likely to be admitted to foster care. Overall, Aboriginal children are less likely to be reported to child welfare authorities for sexual, physical, and emotional abuses as well as for witnessing domestic violence. But they are twice as likely to be reported for child neglect.<sup>2</sup>

When researchers unpacked the definition of neglect, they found that poverty, poor housing and caregiver substance misuse among Aboriginal families were the only factors to explain the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care.<sup>3</sup> A few other differences showed up between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, but these differences did not explain why Aboriginal children were so much more likely to come into child welfare care. There was also no indication that Aboriginal children were more likely to experience harm resulting from child maltreatment than their non-Aboriginal peers. The child welfare system has very few services that incorporate responses to poverty, poor housing and substance misuse in neglect prevention or response; neither has it focused any sustained energy in redressing the inequities in access to services. As a result, Aboriginal parents are less likely to be able to access services relevant to their needs than non-Aboriginal clients. Layer that with the socio-economic and political difference outlined earlier, and the fact that the culture of the child welfare system reflects those of its architects – non-Aboriginal peoples – and it is no wonder that child welfare services are failing Aboriginal families.<sup>4</sup>

So, what is the solution? Back to the reindeer. I don't think the child welfare system believes reindeer can fly, so it settles in on what it sees as the only truth possible: the system as it stands, with only small adjustments at the edges. Child welfare is a new profession, as professions go. It was founded about 100 years ago and only really hit a professional stride in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Older professions, like older people, seem to get more reflective and less sure of themselves, over time. Child welfare really has very few mechanisms for meaningful self-reflection. We are overrun by good people who think they are doing as much good as possible for Aboriginal peoples. The problem is not with the good people but with the presumption that what is good for them, and the system they work for, is also good for others – no matter how different their reality or situation. This is not true of everyone in child welfare, of course – at a frontline level, where I spent most of my career, there were many compassionate and effective child welfare workers who believed the system was out of step with the reality of the people it served. But these voices were, and are, rarely heard in the legislative, policy or funding discourses that form the bones of the child welfare system. Child welfare is delivered by bureaucracies that are typically best at delivering standardized products or services using specialized service providers. Child protection workers who form part of a larger system may not see how their role connects to the broader reality of the organization or the impact of the organization on those it serves. Success in a bureaucracy is often measured by how well individuals do their jobs, but not as often by how well the system does *its* job. Bureaucracies do many good things, but their ability to care for children – particularly abused and neglected children – has been called into doubt by the



**WHEN A CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM BELIEVES THAT IT HAS ALREADY FOUND THE TRUTH, STAFFS ITSELF WITH BELIEVERS AND ROUTS OUT SOCIAL INNOVATION, IT CAN STAGNATE – OR WORSE, PRODUCE THE VERY OUTCOMES IT WAS DESIGNED TO FIGHT AGAINST**



ultimate experts, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in the foster care system and their families.

Families are unique and so are children, infused with emotional and spiritual needs. But the child welfare bureaucracies that serve them rely on standardization of service, objectivity, and conformity of workers to bureaucratic norms. These norms require an acceptance of the overarching assumption that the bones of the child welfare system are sound, in need only of fine-tuning. Although I have no research evidence to support this, my own lived experience, informed by the wisdom of many of my front-line colleagues at the bottom of the child welfare bureaucracy, suggests that being a caring social innovator in a child welfare bureaucracy is a quick route to the glass ceiling or unemployment line and that being a caring conformist in a bureaucracy gets you promoted.

When a child welfare system believes that it has already found the truth, staffs itself with believers and routs out social innovation, it can stagnate – or worse, produce the very outcomes it was designed to fight against.

We have taken quite a journey, and here is what I think we know. The child welfare system was designed to meet the needs of a population of children who have very different experiences than those of Aboriginal children. This, coupled with drastic under funding of First Nations child welfare programs, has resulted in an over representation of Aboriginal children in care, despite the fact that they are less likely to experience four out of five types of child maltreatment. We also have a child welfare system that takes the one-size-fits-all approach and enlists bureaucracies to deliver the child welfare services to families and children whose uniqueness and diversity defy the normative nature of the child welfare bureaucracy. Is this the best we can do for Aboriginal families? Along with many others, I believe

we can do much better by first taking another look at the underpinnings of the child welfare system – the values, beliefs and structures that drive it.

Criticizing the existing system has some value, but it does not make much difference for the Aboriginal children who are unnecessarily removed from their families. To make that difference, 200 people came together at Six Nations of the Grand River territory to identify a set of principles on which to base more effective child welfare design and delivery for indigenous children. This brings us back to the *Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children and Families*.<sup>5</sup> This is the foundation upon which many of us are trying to rebuild the child welfare system to better serve Aboriginal children, and – we hope – all children served by the child welfare system.

To make the touchstones a reality for children, we must begin by addressing the inequalities in service access and child welfare funding on reserves by ensuring the federal government acts on the recommendations of the *Wen:de We are Coming to the Light of Day* and *Wen:de the Journey Continues* reports (available on line at [www.fncaringociety.com](http://www.fncaringociety.com)). Implementing the *Wen:de* recommendations in full would cost less than one percent of the federal government's surplus budget and would provide a far better opportunity for First Nations children to grow up safely at home. We must then actively support Aboriginal communities in designing and implementing child maltreatment prevention and response programs that address structural risk factors such as poverty, poor housing, and substance misuse. The *Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope* provides guidance to the profession to reconfigure its practice so we can ensure we are optimally positioned to support Aboriginal families in caring for their children. Finally, we need to support Aboriginal governments to



## Problem? Solved.

With nearly 50 different comprehensive instructional booklets on equipment diagnostics, mechanical technology, repair, farm and safety management, horticulture, and more, John Deere Publishing makes it easy to find the answers you're looking for. John Deere Publishing has been providing key instruction and important information for students, teachers, professionals, and "do-it-yourselfers" for 38 years. Take your problem-solving to a new level with help from John Deere Publishing. Visit us online or call (800) 522-7448 to order your free catalog or obtain a complete list of titles.

**John Deere Publishing. Practical solutions to real-world problems.**

[www.deere.com/publications](http://www.deere.com/publications)  
John Deere Publishing, Dept. 706  
One John Deere Place  
W08-3SW  
Moline, IL 61265





address the pervasive poverty and housing issues at a community level through progressive economic development and community planning.

Some people say that at 42 I am too old to believe in flying reindeer, but I believe anyway. They inspire me, and I suspect many others, to journey past what we think we know in child welfare and to push the boundaries of what we think is possible to achieve. But dreaming is not enough. If you want to be a part of making the dream come true, go online to [www.fncaringsociety.com](http://www.fncaringsociety.com) and find out about four ways you can make a difference for Aboriginal children and young people. As educators, there is a special contribution you can make: learn about the contributions and histories of Aboriginal peoples; then share this with your students taking opportunities whenever you can to build respectful relationships with Aboriginal peoples. Reconciliation can happen – if we all believe in flying reindeer – and even more importantly in one another. **I**

**CINDY BLACKSTOCK**, a member of the Gitksan First Nation, is the executive director of the First Nations Child and Fam-

ily Caring Society of Canada ([www.fncaringsociety.com](http://www.fncaringsociety.com)). She has worked in the area of child welfare for over 20 years and is currently Co-convenor of the Sub Group on Indigenous Children and Youth of the NGO Group on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and a member of the board of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada.

*The Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope* is available on line at [www.reconciliationmovement.org](http://www.reconciliationmovement.org)

#### Notes

- 1 Kathleen Earle Fox, "Are They Really Neglected? A Look at Social Workers Perceptions of Neglect Through the Eyes of the National Data System," *First Peoples Child and Family Review* 1, no. 3 (2004).
- 2 N. Trocmé, B. MacLaurin, B. Fallon., D. Knoke, L. Pitman and M. McCormack, *Mesnmimk Wasatek: Understanding the Overrepresentation of First Nation Children in Canada's Child Welfare System: An Analysis of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003)* (Ottawa: First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2006).
- 3 Nico Trocmé, Della Knoke and Cindy Blackstock, "Pathways to the Overrepresentation of Aboriginal Children in Canada's Child Welfare System," *Social Service Review*, (December 2004), 577-600; Trocmé et al (2006).
- 4 Cindy Blackstock and Nico Trocme, *Community Based Child Welfare for Aboriginal Children: Supporting Resilience Through Structural Change in Pathways to Resilience: A Handbook of Theory, Methods and Interventions*. ed. M. Unger (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005).
- 5 C. Blackstock., T. Cross, I. Brown, J. George and J. Formsma, J., *Reconciliation in Child Welfare: Touchstones of Hope for Indigenous Children, Youth and Families*. (Ottawa: First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2006).

## Imagine a School... DVD

Students tell their stories of life and learning in a provocative, honest, moving and refreshing performance available on **DVD**.

The **Imagine a School... DVD** includes a documentary of the creative process of the actors and teachers, highlights of the symposium **Getting it Right for Adolescent Learners**, and an Animator's Guide to encourage exploration of adolescent learning in schools, school districts, communities, and for use in teacher education.

**Imagine a School...** Watch for the **DVD** launch in the New Year.

Call **866-803-9549** or visit our website [www.cea-ace.ca](http://www.cea-ace.ca) to order your copy. Multiple copy discounts are also available.

"I always believed in listening to the voices of students and now these voices have a platform. Let them echo across our nation."  
Bleema Getz, Teacher, Bloor Collegiate Institute.



Canadian Education Association  
Association canadienne d'éducation