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# Engaging with Truth and Reconciliation: De-colonizing Pedagogies in Buddhist Spiritual Care and Counselling

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# Engaging with Truth and Reconciliation: De-colonizing Pedagogies in Buddhist Spiritual Care and Counselling

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses some of the ways in which I have incorporated decolonizing pedagogical principles and practices in the teaching of Buddhist spiritual care and counselling in a Master of Psychospiritual Studies (MPS) program at Emmanuel College, which is a multi/interreligious theological college of the United Church of Canada (UCC) at the University of Toronto. The MPS is a professional program that prepares students for careers in spiritual care and spiritually-integrated psychotherapy. As per current trends in academia, and particularly in light of the involvement of the UCC in Canada's residential schools, Emmanuel College is committed to enacting the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission through the principle of "right relations" with Indigenous peoples of Canada, and all communities who have experienced social injustice and marginalization. Calling all faith groups to engage with Truth and Reconciliation, this paper describes a Buddhist pedagogical response to the Calls to Action.

We invite you to search in your own traditions and beliefs, and those of your ancestors, to find those core values that create a peaceful and harmonious society and healthy earth.<sup>1</sup>

—Elders' statement, Reconciling Canada

## Introduction

In the summer of 2025, I became the Wutai Shan Venerable Dayi Assistant Professor of Buddhist Spiritual Care at Emmanuel College (EC) of Victoria University in the University of Toronto—the first and currently only position of its kind in an historically Christian theological college in Canada. Founded in 1928, Emmanuel was established for the training of ministers and theologians of the then newly-formed, United Church of Canada (UCC). Today, coming upon its centennial anniversary, Emmanuel, while still a UCC college, has become a unique interreligious and intercultural community with programs in Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim theological studies. This shift towards engaging in “an interreligious institutional experiment,”<sup>2</sup> and the emerging pedagogies that have resulted involve, in large measure, intentional practices of decolonization. Such practices work to both expose colonial epistemologies, systems, and attitudes “that are rooted in racialized Eurocentric systems of domination and exclusion”<sup>3</sup> and to transform these into equitable, inclusive, and interculturally grounded ones that honour the rights of Indigenous peoples and other

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<sup>1</sup> Reconciliation Canada, “A Shared Tomorrow,” Elders’ statement, n.d., <http://reconciliationcanada.ca/explore/elders-statement>. Also quoted in “Closing Words,” *The TRC*, <https://nevillepark.github.io/trc/challenge/#closing-words>; Jody Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation: How to Be a Force for Change* (McClelland & Stewart, 2022), 161.

<sup>2</sup> Pamela Couture, Pamela McCarroll, and Nevin Reda, “Shifting, Reforming, Transforming Spaces for Postcolonial, Interreligious Pedagogy,” *International Academy of Practical Theology*. Conference Series 1 (2019): 160. <https://iapt-cs.org/ojs/index.php/iaptcs/article/view/67>.

<sup>3</sup> Medina, Néstor, “A Decolonial Primer,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33, no. 2 (2017): 281. <https://doi.org/10.3138/tjt.2017-0149>.

racialized and marginalized groups in respect to their cultures, lands, traditions, spiritualities, and ways of knowing. In an academic seminary setting, this also means promoting indigenous knowledge traditions and ways of learning, while decentring Eurocentric epistemologies and power structures.<sup>4</sup> While on the one hand, Emmanuel and the UCC have a history and theology that is distinctive for its ecumenical ethos and commitment to interfaith dialogue,<sup>5</sup> on the other hand, they have also been complicit in the colonization of the land we now call “Canada,” including the “Indian” residential school system.”<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel’s “Dignity, Equity, Accountability, and Responsibility” (DEAR) document reads in part:

Emmanuel College has been blessed with the gifts and teachings of its Christian foundation. However, due to its colonial history, it has not always lived up to the principles of equity and respect. Inspired by Eurocentric expressions of Christianity, this legacy contributed to establishing systemic barriers that prevented minoritized/racialized communities from contributing to the church, as well as to the erasure and belittlement of Indigenous beliefs, forms of

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<sup>4</sup> See: Sa’ke’j Henderson, “The Indigenous Imperative: The Role of Seminaries in the Realization of Reconciliation and Indigenizing,” in *Honouring the Declaration*, ed. Don Schweitzer and Paul L. Gareau (University of Regina Press, 2021), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780889778344-004>.

<sup>5</sup> Couture, McCarroll and Reda, “Shifting, Reforming, Transforming,” 163.

<sup>6</sup> Sandra Beardsall, Sa’ke’j Henderson, and Don Schweitzer, “Introduction.” In *Honouring the Declaration: Church Commitments to Reconciliation and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, ed. Don Schweitzer and Paul L. Gareau (University of Regina, 2021). According to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, of the 139 church-run schools included in the settlement, 14 of these were operated by the United Church. Robert Joseph, *21 Things You May Not Know about the Indian Act: Helping Canadians Make Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples a Reality* (Indigenous Relations Press, 2018), 124.

knowledge, and religious traditions. Emmanuel College confronts that history of colonization head on and aspires to transform it.<sup>7</sup>

In responding to this call to confront and transform Emmanuel College from a colonializing space to an inclusive, and justice- and equity-fostering space, this paper addresses some of the ways I have incorporated decolonizing pedagogical principles and practices in teaching Buddhist spiritual care and counselling, specifically in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the resultant Calls to Action included in the *Final Report*.<sup>8</sup>

In the first section, I describe the unique interreligious dynamics at EC, and its shared commitment to live up to Emmanuel's values of equity and respect. In the second section, I explore what truth and reconciliation, and right relations means according to the TRC, Indigenous voices, and for Emmanuel's faculty, staff, and students. In the third section, I detail how I have attempted to work with decolonial pedagogical practices and learning materials that allow Buddhist and students of other religious and spiritual traditions to explore, reflect upon, and put into action practical dharma/theological responses and approaches to making right relations with Indigenous peoples, particularly in relation to their future professional contexts as spiritual leaders, spiritual care clinicians, and spiritually integrated psychotherapists. In the concluding section, I summarize my learnings around being intentional about change and working with difference, and point to the role of Buddhist spiritual care clinicians,

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<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel College, "Emmanuel College Dignity, Equity, Accountability, and Responsibility (DEAR) Declaration," 2014, <https://emmanuel.utoronto.ca/about-emmanuel/strategic-plan-mission-and-vision/>.

<sup>8</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Canada's Residential Schools: The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (McGill-Queen's Native and Northern Series 80. Published for The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada by McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).

psychospiritual therapists, and community leaders in engaging with and advancing the work of truth and reconciliation.

### **Buddhist Spiritual Care and Counselling in a Christian/Interreligious Theological College**

Emmanuel College offers a Master of Psychospiritual Studies (MPS) in Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and interfaith foci with the option for a Certificate in Spiritual Care and Psychotherapy (MPS-SCP Cert.), which qualifies Ontario residents for registration with the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO).<sup>9</sup> MPS students have the option to join the Canadian Association for Spiritual Care (CASC/ACSS), a national, professional organization, for Supervised Psychospiritual Education (SPE, including CPE) and later for certification if they choose. The MPS program prepares students for careers in spiritual care (in hospitals, prisons, universities, the Canadian Armed Forces, etc.,) or psychospiritual therapy in social agencies or private practice. Martin Luther University College also offers multireligious options in spiritual care and psychotherapy; however, Emmanuel is unique in having specific streams and foci, as well as advanced degrees, such as the Master of Arts (MA) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Theological Studies for Buddhists, Christians, Muslims and those of other religious and spiritual traditions.

The reforming and transforming of Emmanuel from a colonial space “of well-honed theological methodologies and practices” to a multi/interreligious space is in part a response to the increasingly diverse

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<sup>9</sup> Formally the Master of Pastoral Studies (MPS) program. In Ontario, “psychotherapy” is regulated under the Regulated Health Professions Act, 1991 (RHPA) and the governing body which implements the act is the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO).

demographics of Toronto, Ontario.<sup>10</sup> At EC, and in the larger University of Toronto community, the far-reaching effects of coloniality are all around us—for our Indigenous students, faculty, and staff as well as the many international students and those who have recently immigrated to Canada, whose countries of origin were also colonized by European and other imperial powers. Indeed, there is no place in the world untouched by the ongoing effects of colonization and its imperialist and capitalist structures and systems. Issues of coloniality, and importantly how to decolonize our pedagogies and institutional structures and practices are omnipresent in our classrooms and in our work as faculty. So much so, an existential question for EC concerns whether “a Christian school [can] ‘host’ other religions without perpetuating colonialism” or “in the search for justice and equity, do we need to develop a fully interreligious ethos as our institutional mission, potentially alienating EC’s faithful UCC constituency?”<sup>11</sup>

EC is in the process of repairing and making right in its relations with Indigenous peoples, including acknowledging the churches’ role in colonization and the residential school system. From a justice, equity, and truth-seeking perspective, this means being accountable for the deep spiritual and cultural harms to Indigenous peoples that result from ongoing colonization.<sup>12</sup> It also means committing ourselves to responding to the TRC, and its Calls to Action—of which there are several relevant calls (48, 49, 57, 59, 60, 61, 62, and 65) for Emmanuel as a UCC theological graduate school that educates and trains religious and spiritual leaders, theologians, spiritual care clinicians, and psychotherapists.<sup>13</sup> Up until now, I have been contextualizing the TRC and the Calls to Action in relation to

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<sup>10</sup> Couture, McCarroll, and Reda, “Shifting, Reforming, Transforming,” 160.

<sup>11</sup> Couture, McCarroll, and Reda, “Shifting, Reforming, Transforming,” 160-1.

<sup>12</sup> Beardsall, Henderson, and Schweitzer, “Introduction,” xvi.

<sup>13</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Calls to Action* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015), 5, 7-9.



the history of EM and the UCC,<sup>14</sup> but it is important to note that all faith traditions are called upon to engage with truth and reconciliation. Calls 48 i-iv, 49, and 60 directly speak to, and name actionable items for all faith communities, such as, but not limited to, adopting the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, developing in consultation with Indigenous spiritual leaders education strategies for congregants to learn the history and legacy of residential schools, and to “repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples, such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius.”<sup>15</sup>

There are several ways that EC is acting upon the Calls to Action. One such way is the creation of the Indigenous Healing Garden on the grounds of EC of Victoria University in the University of Toronto opening in the spring of 2025.<sup>16</sup> A space for reflection on truth and reconciliation, the garden symbolizes EC’s commitment to (re)building equitable and just relationships among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (see fig. 1). Ecologically sustainable and featuring sacred medicinal plants, such as sage and sweetgrass, as well as vegetables, grasses, and flowers, the garden honours Indigenous spirituality and knowledge of the land as well as the continued presence of Indigenous people on the lands of what is known today as “Toronto,” and at the University of Toronto. From a

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<sup>14</sup> For more on UCC’s work on “Reconciliation and Indigenous Justice,” see <https://united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/reconciliation-and-indigenous-justice>.

<sup>15</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Victoria University, of which Emmanuel and Victoria are constituent colleges, is a federated member of the University of Toronto, making the Indigenous Healing Garden an expression of a shared commitment to the Truth and Reconciliation process, not just of EC, but also Victoria University and the larger University of Toronto community. For more on the history of EC and Victoria University in the University of Toronto see: <https://emmanuel.utoronto.ca/about-emmanuel/history/>. For more on the Indigenous Healing Garden see: <https://emmanuel.utoronto.ca/news/planting-an-indigenous-healing-garden/>.

pedagogical and an ecojustice perspective, the garden actualizes a decolonizing and integrative approach to theological education in a multi-/interfaith and culture context, as well as directly speaking to the Call to Action 60 for “church parties to the Settlement Agreement and all other faiths [. . .] to develop and teach curriculum for all student clergy [. . .] on the need to respect Indigenous spirituality in its own right [. . .].”<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 1** *Indigenous Healing Garden, Victoria College. Photo credit Neil Gaikwad*

A primary way EC engages the Calls to Action is through Indigenous-focused courses, such as those taught by Assistant Professor and Special Advisor on Indigenous Issues, Jonathan Hamilton-Diabo. These courses include “Residential Schools: Enactment, Responses and Calls to Action,” “Engaging the Spirit: Indigenous Theological Worldviews,” and “Indigenous Relationships: Exploring Faith, Church and Family.” Many EC courses contain significant Indigenous content such as Professor Néstor Medina’s courses: “Ethics, Colonization, and Care of the Planet,” “Decolonial Ethics and Theology,” and “Justice, Truth-Telling and Reconciliation,” which is in direct response to Calls to Action 49 and 60. A large number of

<sup>17</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, 7.

EC courses, including my courses in Buddhist spiritual care and counseling, likewise take up and address the Calls to Action of the TRC in some way.<sup>18</sup> Outside of the classroom, students have opportunities to learn from Indigenous speakers and elders, engage with Indigenous groups such as through CPE/SPE placements, as well as attend other events and spiritual life gatherings at EC.

Upon graduation, all EC students are expected to have gained intercultural competencies for multi-/interfaith leadership,<sup>19</sup> including engaging with truth and reconciliation, in whatever context they work, volunteer, and engage in community with the sacred. Throughout their program, students learn together with folx of diverse backgrounds, orientations, and spiritualities, and through this gain skills, knowledges, and experiences that will enable them to build bridges of peace and friendship among diverse groups, and to foster diverse communities of equity, justice, and care. On their experience of interreligious learning, EC students have told faculty that they valued their “interactions with one another” and they expressed wonder “for the rare opportunity to bond deeply with classmates of other religions.”<sup>20</sup> Friendship is a core theological and spiritual skill. Rev. HyeRan Kim-Cragg, Professor and Principal of Emmanuel College, writes that “befriending others actually is the work of theological

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<sup>18</sup> Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto, “Implementing the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” September 2020: 4-5, [https://www.tst.edu/sites/default/files/2023-03/TST-TRC\\_Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_Updated\\_Sept\\_2020\\_0.pdf](https://www.tst.edu/sites/default/files/2023-03/TST-TRC_Calls_to_Action_Updated_Sept_2020_0.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> EC uses the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (<https://www.idiinventory.com>) to help students assess and plan how they can improve their intercultural competencies. A few faculty members, including myself, have been trained and certified as IDI administrators. All incoming EC Basic degree (MPS, MDiv, MTS, MSMUS) students are required to take “Multi-Religious Theological Education and Leadership” in the fall semester of the first year of their program.

<sup>20</sup> Couture, McCarroll, and Reda, “Shifting, Reforming, Transforming,” 165.

education” and a “brave act of faith” that tackles “complex and emotionally charged issues in intersectional, sustaining and persisting ways.”<sup>21</sup> We who work as spiritual leaders and care practitioners, multifaith chaplains, and psychospiritual therapists are perhaps what the Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould, Indigenous lawyer and former member of Parliament, calls “in-betweeners”: those who aspire to “build unity, cohesion, and harmony between peoples.”<sup>22</sup> Being an “in-betweener”—a very Buddhist notion!—“also means being able to recognize and navigate between distinctive worldviews and help build understandings about how they interact, intersect, and are expressed in balance with one another in society.”<sup>23</sup> Fostering patterns of relations among diverse people requires leadership, intentionality, commitment, and community—which we aim to inspire and equip our students with as they go into their work and ministry.

Buddhist students at Emmanuel learn about and engage with truth and reconciliation as part of the MPS program, as well as in my Buddhist-focused psychotherapeutic and spiritual care modality and special topic courses. The issue of coloniality and Buddhism (and Buddhist studies), and what this means for Buddhists engaging with decolonization, and truth and reconciliation in Canada, is complicated. Some Buddhists, including EC students of Asian backgrounds, may have experienced the harms of colonization in their home or ancestral lands at the hands of European or Asian imperial powers. They may experience anti-Asian racism and the “othering” effects of Eurocentric colonial systems and institutions. Or,

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<sup>21</sup> HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “One Year after Oct. 7, I’m Befriending Others as a Brave Act of Faith,” *Broadview Magazine* (blog), October 3, 2024, <https://broadview.org/israel-hamas-attack-anniversary/>.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 306.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 308-9.

because they were not “white settlers,”<sup>24</sup> Asian and other colonized groups and individuals may not see themselves as having to engage in reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, because they themselves did not cause these colonial harms or, they might resonate with and stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples, based on their own historical and ongoing experiencing of the effects of colonialism. Some of my students who are new to Canada are hearing about residential schools for the very first time.

Further complicating matters is Western Buddhism’s own ongoing entanglement with Eurocentric colonialism, often coined as its “whiteness problem.”<sup>25</sup> Not directly the focus of this paper per se, issues surrounding representation, the whitewashing of Asian experience, and whose voices are heard and whose are silenced are crucial issues in terms of “decolonizing the Buddhist classroom.” In some Western Buddhist spaces, including EC, Asian (or other minoritized or racialized) voices and perspectives are sometimes not heard or valued equitably, especially if

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<sup>24</sup> While “settler” is a common term to refer to non-Indigenous people on Indigenous lands, I prefer to use the term “newcomer.” As Candy Palmater points out in a video I use in my teaching, “Bringing Our Children Home: Exploring Grief and Anger,” “settler” is defined as one who arrives on a “land that is unpopulated, with no culture, and no social structure, and of course, we had culture and social structures.” Reconciliation Canada, “Bringing Our Children Home: Exploring Grief and Anger,” July 9, 2021, YouTube, 1:31:02, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fCz9uZiesQ>. Moreover, the “Indigenous-settler” binary subsumes and ignores the diverse range of racialized communities in Canada who experience similar and other forms of colonialism that should also be named and given attention. (Néstor Medina, personal communication, July 23, 2024.)

<sup>25</sup> Jørn Borup, *Decolonising the Study of Religion: Who Owns Buddhism?* (Routledge, 2023); Tara Brach, “Facing My White Privilege,” *Lion’s Roar*, accessed May 10, 2024, <https://www.lionsroar.com/facing-my-white-privilege/>; Constance Kassor, “Buddhist Studies Has a Whiteness Problem,” *Contending Modernities*, University of Notre Dame, accessed May 7, 2024, <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/buddhist-studies-whiteness/>; George Yancy and Emily McRae, eds., *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections* (Lexington Books, 2019).

speaking time is dominated by their Euro-Canadian peers. Or, as sometimes happens, traditional or familial forms of Asian Buddhism, which might tend to be more communal and devotional in nature rather than focusing on individual meditation, may be politely dismissed as cultural baggage that is not relevant to some pure, universal form of Buddhist “Enlightenment.”<sup>26</sup> EC students’ social location vis-à-vis Buddhism, Buddhist studies, and Buddhist dharma/theology can be dramatically different from one another, and a foundational task for them is to be able to learn from one another’s experiences, value a diversity of perspectives, and act as a bridge for different Buddhist communities. This complicated context of colonialism for Buddhist students at EC presents challenges and opportunities for growth and transformation.

As the reader might imagine, the positionality of the Buddhist theological Studies programs at EC in relation to the TRC and Calls to Action is institutionally complex, as is the experience of coloniality for each individual. Being “hosted” by a Christian institution that is working to repair its relationship with Indigenous peoples, and “confront and transform” its colonial history, Buddhist and Muslim faculty and students of diverse backgrounds have the opportunity to journey with our Christian peers as we also consider our intentions, responsibilities, and actions relating to Indigenous peoples of what is now called, “Canada.”

### **What does Truth and Reconciliation, and Right Relations Mean?**

Our vision of a renewed relationship is based on four principles: mutual recognition, mutual respect, sharing and mutual

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<sup>26</sup> A case in point of colonial interpretations of Buddhism, the use of the term “enlightenment” by Western scholars and practitioners to describe Buddhist Awakening or Nirvana derives from “modernist Buddhism,” the belief that Buddhism is rational and scientific, and therefore, “enlightened.”

responsibility... These principles define a process...we have chosen a circle to represent this process because a circle has no beginning and no end; the process is continuous [. . .].<sup>27</sup>

Canada's residential schools operated for over a century until the last one closed in 1996. In total, there had been 139 church-run residential "schools" with over 150,000 Indigenous children, thousands of whom never returned home.<sup>28</sup> Published in November of the same year, *The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* "urged Canadians to begin a national process of reconciliation that would have set the country on a bold new path, fundamentally changing the very foundations of Canada's relationship with Aboriginal peoples."<sup>29</sup> The report included 440 recommendations, one of which was to conduct a public investigation into the reported abuses and deaths of children in residential schools. Two years later, in 1998, in response to the report, then Minister of Indian Affairs, Jane Stewart issued a "Statement of Reconciliation," which, while falling short of an apology, acknowledged the government's "role" in residential schools and that "sexual and physical abuse" occurred there.<sup>30</sup> But truth must come before reconciliation.

It was not until 2008, 12 years after *The Report of the Royal Commission* was published, that the TRC was established to look into residential schools. Under the leadership of the Chief Commissioner, Justice Murray

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<sup>27</sup> René Dussault and Georges Erasmus, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Vol. 1, Looking Forward, Looking Back* (Canada Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996), 645.

<sup>28</sup> There are many books about residential schools, including many first-hand accounts by Survivors. I encourage the reader to refer to Goodminds First Nations, Métis, Inuit Books (<https://goodminds.com>) to learn more.

<sup>29</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation* (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 113.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph, *Twenty-One Things*, 116-129.



Sinclair, public hearings were held between 2010 and 2015.<sup>31</sup> In over 300 communities the TRC—and the rest of Canada—bore witness to the experiences of almost 7,000 residential school Survivors and their loved ones.<sup>32</sup> This testimony, gathered in the TRC’s six volume, 3,231-page *Final Report*, lay bare the devastating effects of colonialization, and the racist assimilation policies that legitimized what amounted to a “cultural genocide.”<sup>33</sup> The *Final Report* shows that the primary target and point of intervention of the government’s assimilation policy for its so-called “Indian problem,” was children.

“Reconciliation” can mean many things depending on the context, and indeed, it is a term used in many places in the world. The term itself implies the notion of restoring a relationship in need of repair. In the Canadian context, “reconciliation” is most often used in reference to Indigenous peoples, specifically in terms of repairing, and healing from historical wrongs and their ongoing effects.<sup>34</sup> *The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* describes reconciliation as “a great cleansing of the wounds of the past.”<sup>35</sup> The TRC Report’s commissioners, reflecting on their work, write:

To the Commission, “reconciliation” is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph, *Twenty-One Things*, 125.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph, *Twenty-One Things*, 116-129; National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, “Public Statement on the 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” December 15, 2020, <https://nctr.ca/public-statement-on-the-fifth-anniversary-of-the-final-report-of-the-truth-and-reconciliation-commission-of-canada/>.

<sup>33</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Final Report* Vol. 1, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, “Gathering Strength: Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan” (Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997), 5.



of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour.<sup>36</sup>

Canadian courts interpret the rights of Indigenous people through the lens of “reconciliation,” understood as the “proper political and legal relationship between Indigenous Peoples and their governments, and the federal and provincial governments.”<sup>37</sup> The notion of “reconciliation” is also closely connected with the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and has been employed by the TRC as a “framework of reconciliation” and appears throughout the 94 Calls to Action.<sup>38</sup> For example, Call 48 reads:

We call upon the church parties to the Settlement Agreement, and all other faith groups and inter-faith social justice groups in Canada who have not already done so, to formally adopt and comply with the principles, norms, and standards of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.<sup>39</sup>

Reconciliation and the decolonization of Canadian institutions and society also have a gendered aspect, which is described by the Native Women’s Association of Canada in the following way:

The ongoing violation of Indigenous women through systemic subjugation, marginalization and violence is a legacy of colonialism in Canada. In this context, gender balance and equality are fundamental aspects of both the process and outcomes for authentic reconciliation; not merely an option for consideration or an

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<sup>36</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *What We Have Learned*, 118.

<sup>37</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action*, “Call 43,” 4. Also quoted in Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action*, “Call 48,” 5.

add-on. Gender-responsive reconciliation addresses historical and contemporary harms impacting Indigenous women as well as men. Truth telling and reconciliation must represent a reparative process that promotes restoration of Indigenous women's dignity, safety, authority and agency.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, Indigenous peoples are not monolithic, and there is a diversity of thought-feelings about reconciliation among individuals, groups, and communities. Some people say that "reconciliation" is not possible or appropriate because no such mutual relationship between Indigenous peoples and newcomers existed in the first place or because colonization and its imbalanced power structures and systems are still ongoing.<sup>41</sup> Some say, given government actions, such as using police to "enforce land and resources decisions," that "reconciliation is dead" and "struggle and resistance, not reconciliation, must be paramount."<sup>42</sup> Given the complexity of the legacy of residential schools, ongoing colonial racism, disparities in health, education, and child welfare, ongoing litigation of land and resources, and the staggering number of missing and murdered Indigenous girls and women, responses to what "reconciliation" means and whether it is worth engaging with remain politically, socially, and spiritually challenging.

The Honourable Wilson-Raybould writes that she believes "there are three core practices of true reconciliation: *learn*, *understand*, and *act*. These practices are interrelated and interconnected. They build on each

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<sup>40</sup> Native Women's Association of Canada, "Culturally Relevant Gender Based Models of Reconciliation," March 2010, <https://www.nwac.ca/assets-knowledge-centre/2010-NWAC-Culturally-Relevant-Gender-Based-Models-of-Reconciliation.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *A Knock on the Door: The Essential History of Residential Schools from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 142-3. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780887555404>.

<sup>42</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 8-11.

other, yet they also should be operable in our lives at the same time; they are not linear.”<sup>43</sup> “Learn” speaks to “knowing what has transpired thus far, and why,”<sup>44</sup> through learning the truth of residential schools and the systems and policies that legitimized and caused them to occur. Truth is the first and necessary part of truth and reconciliation. “Understanding” centres on building better relationships with one another. True reconciliation, in the context of truth and reconciliation, requires “changes in how society is structured and organized, how we collectively live with each other, and the way we make decisions [. . .]. And [. . .] understanding how we all need to contribute and support these larger societal shifts through our conduct and choices in our daily lives.”<sup>45</sup> Understanding also calls us to recognize our own inner and interpersonal patterns in relation to Indigenous peoples, and working towards intercultural competency. “Act” calls upon each of us, as individuals, groups, and communities to play our part in making reconciliation a reality, and creating a more equitable, just, and prosperous society for everyone. Learning, understanding, and acting in the name of truth and reconciliation “is about building a vision of a future that addresses, and breaks away from, the legacy of colonialism.”<sup>46</sup> I have found Wilson-Raybould’s tripartite framework extremely useful in developing my own pedagogies of addressing and responding to the TRC and Calls to Action in teaching Buddhist spiritual care and counselling; I will return to this in the following section.

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<sup>43</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 21; italics in original.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 32.

<sup>45</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 185-6.

<sup>46</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 269-271.

“Right relations” is a guiding principle for UCC and EC, and related to the Mohawk phrase, “all my relations,” (Akwe Nia’Tetewá:neren),<sup>47</sup> which points to Indigenous spiritual worldviews of the interconnected and interdependent nature of all our relations—human and non-human.<sup>48</sup> UCC theologian, and Emmanuel professor emeritus, Pamela Couture defines “right relations” as a practice-oriented term “used by Canadians and indigenous people when they refer to their visions and hopes for a just relationship with one another [. . .] the norms [of right relations] exist within face-to-face relationships.”<sup>49</sup> Right relations at Emmanuel is inextricably and explicitly tied to the work of decolonization. Again, from EC’s DEAR document:

Dignity is the heartbeat of right relations. Emmanuel thus rejects any form of bigotry and discrimination—such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, ableism, and classism. We also commit ourselves to actively counter other social phenomena that threaten the flourishing of life such as colonialism, globalized market capitalism, Eurocentric cultural imperialism, and environment degradation; forces which demean, distort, and dehumanize the

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<sup>47</sup> The United Church of Canada, “All My Relations,” accessed December 30, 2024, <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/being-community/indigenous-ministries/all-my-relations>.

<sup>48</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 307. See also: Paul L. Gareau, “Storied Places and Sacred Relations: Métis Destiny, Lifeways, and Indigenous Rights in the Declaration,” in *Honouring the Declaration: Church Commitments to Reconciliation and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, eds., Don Schweitzer and Paul L. Gareau (University of Regina Press, 2021), 142; and HyeRan Kim-Cragg, “The Power and Practise of Indigenous Christian Rituals and Ceremonies,” in *Honouring the Declaration: Church Commitments to Reconciliation and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (University of Regina Press, 2021), 159–82, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780889778344-010>.

<sup>49</sup> Pamela Couture, *We Are Not All Victims: Local Peacebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. Vol. 18 International Practical Theology (LIT Verlag, 2016), 2.

sacred dignity of persons and creation and interrupt our capacity to approach the divine.<sup>50</sup>

A core principle of EC, right relations, speaks to how we should treat one another. Buddhist theologian and scholar Pamela Ayo Yetunde speaks of the “Platinum Rule” which is to “treat others as they need to be treated for their ultimate well-being [. . .]:”<sup>51</sup> an orientation that tasks us to be curious, respectful, adaptive, and inclusive towards difference. The Platinum Rule is an ever-deepening intra- and interpersonal process,<sup>52</sup> not dissimilar to the “action-reflection-action” pedagogical model used in CPE units, or Wilson-Raybould’s learn, understand, and act model. Right relations is an ongoing process of respecting, valuing, and honouring difference *and* finding common ground and points of resonance. We need to be able to balance both, otherwise the *status quo* remains.

### **Decolonial Pedagogies for Buddhist Responses to the TRC and Calls to Action**

Buddhism teaches us that nothing is ever static or permanent.<sup>53</sup> Rather, everything which exists, including ourselves, is interconnected (or

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<sup>50</sup> Emmanuel College, “DEAR Declaration,” 2014. <https://emmanuel.utoronto.ca/about-emmanuel/strategic-plan-mission-and-vision/>.

<sup>51</sup> Pamela Ayo Yetunde, *Casting Indra’s Net: Fostering Spiritual Kinship and Community: Wisdom from Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and More* (Shambhala, 2023), 50.

<sup>52</sup> Yetunde elaborates on twelve stages of the Platinum Rule as: 1) observe 2) be curious 3) recognize human complexity 4) form intentions toward the good 5) acknowledge imperfection 6) see others as kin 7) transform your narcissism 8) cultivate selflessness 9) speak the truth for the benefit of others 10) practice appreciative listening 11) witness the expansive potential in others 12) rest-reflect-recharge-return. *Casting Indra’s Net*, 51-9.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson-Raybould similarly writes, “nothing is ever static in life.” *True Reconciliation*, 22.

interdependent) and dynamically unfolding moment-by-moment via countless causes and conditions. We are not separate and independent from one another (or our natural environment) but mutually constituted and interdependent. As humans, with our tendency for dualistic thinking, patterns emerge in how we relate to one another which can be healthy or unhealthy, equitable or inequitable, kind or unkind—and this is where the core Buddhist ethical principle and practice of intentionality comes into focus. Drawing from both Indigenous and Buddhist frameworks, to engage with the relationship building work of truth and reconciliation, we must have right intentions, informed by learning and understanding, to relate to others as kin. All of the frameworks for being-in-relationship that we have looked at—truth and reconciliation, right relations or all our relations, and learn, understand, and act, the Platinum Rule, action-reflection-action, and being an in-betweener—describe processes that deepen our intentions and understandings of ourselves and others, and ultimately, they reveal our potential to mutually care for one another and peaceably live and share the resources of Turtle Island. These processes are also a practical roadmap for wise and compassionate action towards decolonization.

The Buddhist reader will likely already see many points of convergence in Buddhist and Indigenous values and spiritual worldviews, especially in terms of mutuality, interconnection, and the dynamic nature of existence. Wilson-Raybould explains how Indigenous peoples tend to “emphasize and see how everything in existence is interdependent and indivisible [. . .] [and] for this reason, in Indigenous culture and art, Indigenous worldviews are often reflected in a ‘circle’ that emphasizes connection between things.”<sup>54</sup> Dr. Evelyn Steinhauer, Associate Dean of Indigenous Education at the University of Alberta, reflects on Indigenous worldviews of interdependence as follows:

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<sup>54</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 203.

All things and all people, though we have our own individual gifts and special place, are dependent on and share in the growth and work of everything and everyone else. We believe that beings thrive when there is a web of interconnectedness between the individual and the community, and between the community and nature.

Everything we do, every decision we make, affects our family, our community, it affects the air we breathe, the animals, the plants, the water in some way. Each of us is totally dependent on everything else.<sup>55</sup>

Such Indigenous worldviews, wherein “all of creation is a circle” emphasize the “responsibilities inherent in the nature of each being, human and non-human, born and unborn, living and not living,” and that “they all have a responsibility to maintain the harmonious relations that were established in the beginning.”<sup>56</sup>

The notion of responsibility and interdependence—how we go about our lives and treat one another—the finds resonance in Buddhist dharma/theology, especially in the Noble Eightfold Path, which emphasizes wholesome or virtuous thoughts/emotions, speech, and actions, towards one’s self and others. In Buddhist thought, because we are all interconnected, each of us, whether monastic or layperson, has the responsibility to not cause harm to ourselves, to other sentient beings, and to

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 201. Alberta Learning and Teaching Resources Branch and Alberta Aboriginal Services Branch, *Our Words, Our Ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learners* (Alberta Education, Aboriginal Services Branch and Learning and Teaching Resources Branch, 2005), 16.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 204. Andrea Bear-Nicholas. “Responsibilities Not Rights: A Native Perspective,” in *Human Rights in New Brunswick: A New Vision for a New Century*, ed. John McEvoy and Constantine Passaris (New Brunswick Human Rights Commission, 1993), 35.

wider nature or the universe.<sup>57</sup> Being in relationships of mutuality, we have a responsibility, through our heart-minds, words, and actions, to be a cause for flourishing and freedom from the three poisons of greed/desire, anger/aggression, and ignorance. I appreciate Yetunde's elaboration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s words of "the inescapable network of our mutuality" through the Vedic image of Indra's net.<sup>58</sup> Imagined as a universal net composed of mirror-like jewels that reflect one another, Indra's net is a metaphor of the interconnectedness—and inherently sacred nature or Awakening-potential—of sentient beings. Yetunde's vision of *Casting Indra's Net* speaks to "the process of 'casting' the net by expanding our consciousness and heart's capacity toward radical inclusivity."<sup>59</sup> Similar to what we see in other processes of being-in-relationship, the responsibilities we have toward one another is grounded in our inescapable interdependence—if we want to be mutually happy and prosperous, we must be right in all our relations.

Part of my role in teaching Buddhist spiritual care and counselling at EC and within the Canadian context is to develop and implement course syllabi (assignments, readings, learning objectives, etc.), classroom discussions, and practice-based exercises that support and encourage spiritual, ethical, and practical engagement with the Calls to Action. Below, I describe some of the pedagogies and learning materials I have used to engage with truth and reconciliation from Buddhist and multi/interfaith perspectives. Like the 'being-in-relationship' models I draw from, I view the pedagogies I use as circular and dynamic processes that, with

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<sup>57</sup> Asha Mukherjee, "Responsibility (Buddhism)," in *Buddhism and Jainism*, ed. K. T. S. Sarao and Jeffery D. Long (Springer Netherlands, 2017), 1013–19, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0852-2\\_324](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0852-2_324).

<sup>58</sup> Yetunde, *Indra's Net*, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Yetunde, *Indra's Net*, 4.



consistent and sincere engagement, deepen our capacity to be knowing of ourselves and relate to others in equitable ways.

### **Safer, Brave, and Decolonizing Spaces**

In order to engage students in adopting decolonizing practices consistent with the goals of truth and reconciliation and the principle of all our/right relations, we must first be able to co-create “safer,” “brave,” and inclusive decolonial learning spaces and communities, that include practices of equitable sharing/speaking and consensus building. “Safe space” refers to the idea that individuals have psychological, spiritual, and in some cases, physical safety within a “space.” In some instances, these “safe spaces” have been created by those who identify as women or LGBTQ2S+, or other marginalized, racialized, or cultural groups who have experienced discrimination. A key notion of safe space is that people are given safety to speak of their experience, knowledges, and ideas without fear of being judged, silenced, or attacked. In university classrooms, “safe space” can also speak to the use of trauma-informed pedagogies. Yet, classrooms can never be entirely safe. As a professor, I can never account for every student’s triggers, tender spots, and unresolved issues, and indeed in the MPS program, it is necessary to teach students difficult material such as domestic violence and childhood physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (such as learning about residential schools). Moreover, some scholars and advocates have pointed out that when we engage in difficult conversations especially around biases such as sexism, racism, ableism, and transphobia, space simply cannot be guaranteed to be “safe.” This is not to say that no space can be safe.<sup>60</sup> For example, it is crucial for spiritual,

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<sup>60</sup> Danielle Tumminio Hansen, *Trauma-Informed Spiritual Care: Interventions for Safety, Meaning, Reconnection, and Justice* (Fortress Press, 2024).

emotional, and psychological healing that therapeutic spaces be safe—especially when dealing with trauma. “Brave space,” such as what we speak about at EC, refers to spaces, such as interfaith classrooms, where we might be theologically and ethically challenged, feel uncomfortable, or be exposed to emotionally difficult topics, and therefore, bravery is needed to enter into “safer” spaces, knowing that “safety” is not guaranteed. In EC classrooms, the aim is to co-create spaces with as much safety, caring, and support as possible so that we can be brave in doing challenging work that might push—and expand—our capacity to appreciate difference, relate equitably with others, and act as a bridge across communities of difference; to be the in-betweeners.

To facilitate the co-creation of safer and brave learning spaces, I have adopted de-colonizing pedagogical practices, some of which I have learned from my Indigenous colleague Hamilton-Diabo in his “Residential Schools: Enactment, Responses and Calls to Action” course. I consider the following three pedagogical practices as the foundational co-conditions for facilitating a decolonializing and equity-seeking community of learners: being seated in one large circle, having a check-in at the beginning of class, and co-creating a document of Learning Community Principles. I think of these three practices as interrelated ways of learning, understanding, and acting in the sense described by Wilson-Raybould. When we sit in a circle (instead of in rows with desks) each person is able to be seen, heard, and known by everyone, facilitating a way of learning and understanding that literally embodies our interconnection. In my experience, the learning circle, more so than sitting in rows of chairs, encourages students to learn in relationship with each other, rather than as separate individuals. This act of learning from one another’s subjective experiences challenges “enlightened” colonial privileging of the view that any piece of knowledge, or academic or intellectual writing must be done entirely on one’s own without help from others; this is why undergraduate students often learn in competitive, individualistic, and stressful

environments. It also challenges the colonial hierarchical system of learning whereby the instructor is front and centre and owns all the knowledge.

Another practice of circle-learning, is the “check-in” wherein each student has the opportunity to share with the group how they are entering the space; this might include their emotions or mood at that moment, day, week, or year, or a personal issue that was affecting how they are entering the space, such as a death or illness in the family, or as is often the case at EC, where many students and faculty commute to Toronto, their experience of the TTC and GO trains. As per the norms for a sharing circle, students may not interrupt one another or engage in a discussion, but rather they ought to attend to their practice of “deep listening”—listening to understand rather than to respond—and only speak when it is their turn. Disrupting the typical “enlightenment”-informed pedagogical emphasis on individual intellect and its concomitant norm of leaving our personal situations, embodied selves, and unique histories at the door, the “check-in” invites students to bring their whole selves into the classroom, fostering communities of care, mutual respect, and an appreciation for one another’s situatedness.

A circle-learning environment also encourages communal processes of decision-making, rather than the (power concentrated in the) top-down model that has been normalized in mainstream Canadian institutions and systems, including government, education, and healthcare. Wilson-Raybould describes “consensus building” as “central” to Indigenous ways of making decisions: “A communal decision-making process recognizes that the decision must come from the collective—that it is the whole that has the responsibility and authority to make a decision, and it is from the collective that the best decisions arise.”<sup>61</sup> As part of EC’s goal

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<sup>61</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 212.

of decolonizing their pedagogies, and honouring Indigenous ways of governance, practices of consensus building are embedded in classroom procedures, such as the EC-wide practice of having students and professors co-create a kind of “Guiding Principles of the Learning Community” document at the beginning of every course. For example, these are some of the principles created from a consensus building model I used in one of my Buddhism and Psychotherapy classes:

Everything you are and feel is welcome here

We respect confidentiality—What you say here stays here

We hold one another in unconditional positive regard

We have permission to think-out-loud and fumble together

We encourage honest feedback, including emotional experiencing

We acknowledge that we are each responsible for our own feelings

We honour a curious, gentle, and sincere pursuit of ‘heart-truth’

We have permission to laugh/invitation to humor

We strive for the equitable exchange of ideas and experiences; everyone has the right to have their voice heard and respected

We can respectfully debate and share our disagreements, and other points of view while maintaining a commitment to engage with the learning process

All of these principles come from students building consensus as to what they want their community and their relationships with one other to be like. As for the process, in my role as professor, I facilitate the discussion by recording the principle being offered to the group by a student, and then reading it back to them, and asking whether I wrote it correctly

or if they want to change anything. Once the student is satisfied with my recording of their statement, the group will then discuss the rule, principle or practice, including any potential modifications until every member of the group is in agreement. The final list of community learning principles is read aloud, and posted online on the course webpage, however, it is a living document, indicating that it can be changed, or added to throughout the semester. It is not uncommon to revisit the document at the midway point of the term or when the need arises, such as, for example, when patterns of inequitable speaking time emerge, and need to be addressed by the group. Through building consensus on the making and implementing of the document, students learn to engage in an equitable decision-making process and establish agreed upon responsibilities that benefit individuals and the whole community. The foundational practices of learning in a circle, checking-in at the beginning of class, and co-creating a document of Learning Community Principles, create a more decolonized, inclusive, and communal type of learning environment for students to engage with the material of the course, including Buddhist responses to the TRC and Calls to Action.

### **Making Dharma/Theological Meaning**

A key learning for Buddhist MPS students is developing a dharma/theology that can scaffold their ability to frame, make meaning, and tap into creative approaches as they offer and provide care to others. In their roles as spiritual health professionals and leaders, their ability to reflect dharma/theologically is necessary for a number of practical and spiritual reasons, not least of all, having a nurtured source of spiritual resiliency for journeying with others as they experience suffering, loss, and change. Hence, in my and other EC courses, students are frequently tasked with reflecting on, discussing, and writing about their personal

dharma/theology of spiritual caregiving, or of a particular situation or issue. A primary reason for this is that we cannot explore another's dharma/theology or spirituality, and uplift what is healthy, helpful, and life-giving if we cannot do that for ourselves. Similarly, we cannot explore complex ethical and spiritual issues if we cannot think dharma/theologically and practically about what these mean to us and to others. Engaging with a rich dharma/theology oneself, gifts us a capacity for theological imagination and a capacity to respectfully enter into the spiritual, religious, and cultural worlds of others. Dharma/theological reflection is also important for the spiritual health professional's capacity for introspection and awareness of one's own psychospiritual dynamics in relation to others. Spiritual health professionals do not impose their views and theologies on others—it would be professionally unethical and harmful to do so—but rather, they scaffold conversations to explore and nourish the dharma/theologies, and spiritual and religious worldviews of others in times of suffering and transformation. By learning together as a community, students have had a lot of practice and time to listen, reflect, and discuss dharma/theology.

One of the ways in which I invite students to engage with dharma/theological reflection is through the Land Acknowledgement. Students hear and participate in the Land Acknowledgment in many Emmanuel spaces, including during Community Spiritual Gatherings and events, and in the classroom, as it symbolizes and draws attention to our collective commitment in enacting truth, reconciliation, and right relations among Indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. The Land Acknowledgement has several purposes, including teaching those living in Canada about Indigenous connections to the land and Indigenous worldviews; representing the importance of the work of truth and reconciliation; and showing respect towards Indigenous peoples “in a way that breaks from

our legacy of colonialism.”<sup>62</sup> The Land Acknowledgment speaks to the principles of the Two Row Wampum treaty between the Haudenosaunee and European newcomers to “forever” share the land in mutual “friendship,” and “peace.”<sup>63</sup> However, while an important step in learning and understanding Indigenous experiences of Canada, merely reading or hearing the Land Acknowledgment alone does not challenge or change the current system of Eurocentric colonialism. As Wilson-Raybould points out:

Symbolic acts do not lift a child out of poverty or help keep them with their family. They do not address the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the justice system. They do not recognize and implement Indigenous rights, uphold the human rights in the UN Declaration, or do anything else tangible. And, for these reasons, they cannot be a primary focus of our attention, energy and effort [. . .] [or] taken to mean we have reconciled.<sup>64</sup>

The danger of performative Land Acknowledgement is that it can impede concrete actions to effect real change. With students, I first read, then contextualize the Land Acknowledgement along the lines of what I have noted above, and encourage students to also think of it as a useful medium (or even a kind of prayer) to continually reflect upon, discuss in our contexts, and to make real through our actions as spiritual health clinicians, therapists and leaders. Part of this is developing a dharma/theologically grounded sense of purpose, meaning, commitment, and hope to nourish and sustain doing the hard work of answering the Calls to Action. In this way, the Land Acknowledgement ought to continually renew in us

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<sup>62</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 292.

<sup>63</sup> Deyhowāhda:dih (Bradley Powless), “Two Row Wampum–Gaswéñdah,” *Onondaga Nation*, February 22, 2014, <https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/two-row-wampum-belt-guswenta/>.

<sup>64</sup> Wilson-Raybould, *True Reconciliation*, 293.

our commitment to live out the value of being right with all our relations, and be the change we want to see in the world.

To help get students to engage with their dharma/theology in relation to the Land Acknowledgement and decolonizing Turtle Island, questions I might ask include:

What comes up or stands out for you when you hear the Land Acknowledgment?

Why is the Land Acknowledgment important?

How do you connect with the land of Turtle Island?

What is your ethical and dharma/theological understanding of the Land Acknowledgment?

How might/do you see the Land Acknowledgement as informing your practice of spiritual care and psychotherapy?

How might/do you engage with truth and reconciliation in your spiritual community?

Again, by learning from one another's responses to these questions, students build the capacity to learn and understand in relation with others, which often works as a motivating influence in encouraging students to take seriously the Land Acknowledgment as a sacred call reminding them of their ethical and dharma/theological responsibility to act.

### **Doing our Inner Work and Situating Ourselves**

A central component of learning and understanding in community is developing self-awareness and interpersonal competencies. To be helpful and avoid harming others, spiritual care clinicians, therapists, and leaders



are ethically responsible to do their own inner work and be aware of how their social location, personal history, and unconscious (or conscious) biases and assumptions impact others; circle-learning is one important way to develop this. In my Buddhist and other MPS courses, I have adopted and modified writing exercises to engage students dharma/theologically on a number of issues, including truth and reconciliation and the Calls to Action. Two such writing exercises that I have found useful are 2-3-page “process notes,” and a social location journaling exercise. So-called “process notes” ask students to process—intellectually, emotionally, physically, and psychologically—what they are learning by tracking and exploring their inner reactions, wonderings, and growing edges. Process notes are normally used as the “reflection” part of the action-reflection-action model used in CPE education, but they can also be useful for classroom learning by helping students respond—connecting their head, heart, and body—to what they are encountering in the course materials and in the learning community. Process notes are context-specific and the writing prompts or questions will vary depending on how and where they are being used, and at what stage of the training.

Being able to regularly think/write/journal reflectively is a nourishing spiritual practice, and a vital tool for learning about one’s “self” and delving deeper into one’s situatedness vis-à-vis specific issues and learning goals. In my Buddhist-focused and other MPS courses, I assign podcasts and other materials that speak to the experience of residential schools, colonial violence, and Indigenous ways of healing, such as the excellent series, “Bringing Our Children Home,” created by Reconciliation Canada. For students training to be spiritually integrated therapists, spiritual care practitioners, and religious leaders, the episode, “Exploring Grief and Anger” hosted by the late Candy Palmater, a member of Mi’gmaq Ugpi’ganjig (Eel River Bar) First Nation, has been a particularly

rich resource.<sup>65</sup> I invite the reader to watch this episode and contemplate for yourself the kinds of process notes and discussion questions I pose to students:

How did you experience listening to the episode?

What new learnings and insights do you come away with?

What is your dharma/theological response to what you heard in the episode?

How do the panelists speak about grief and anger? How can it harm and heal?

How can reconciliation be a “core value” for Canadians?

What are you “going to do” with the testimonies of residential school Survivors and their families? What responsibilities might/do you have?

Using podcasts in conjunction with reflective written and discussion questions such as these allow students the opportunity to more carefully examine their own assumptions, knee-jerk reactions, and places for learning and growth.

It is also important that students incorporate their learning about residential schools and the work of truth and reconciliation with an ongoing and reflexive awareness of their own social location. To help with this, I have used a guided social location writing exercise, done individually but in the circle, which aims to help students to identify where they are socially situated vis-à-vis others. While not an exhaustive list, questions include:

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<sup>65</sup> Reconciliation Canada, “Bringing Our Children Home.”

Where and when were you born?

What is your family background (both your family of origin and immediate family)

Who do you currently live with and where? Do you own rent or own where you live?

What is your gender expression?

What is your sexual orientation?

What is your ethnic background?

What is your socioeconomic background?

What is your religious or spiritual background?

What is your first language?

What is your highest level of education?

What is your legal status in Canada? (Whether you are a citizen, landed immigrant, international student, etc.)

What is your history of trauma?

Here, I typically pause for a few minutes, allow students to finish writing, and then ask them to read over what they have written, and take a few moments to honour themselves and be proud of who they are and where they have come from. After some time for this, I move to the last three questions, giving sufficient time for each:

Where have/do you experience privilege?

Where have/do you experience obstacles, barriers, and hardships?

What skills and knowledges pulled you through these challenges?  
What were your sources of resilience?

At the conclusion of the exercise, I invite students to share their experience of the guided journaling exercise and what stood out for them. Interestingly, students often point to ways that they were surprised by what they learned about themselves—for example, their noticing where they had tender spots, or seeing some aspect of themselves in a new light. Oftentimes, students learn that they have more privileges than they had realized, such as being able-bodied, having English as a first language, or being a Canadian citizen. They also are able to see themselves and others as complex intersectional beings, which, for Buddhist students, can illuminate the causes and conditions for their ways of being in the world. The social location journaling exercise also works to foster equity and decolonize the privileging of (the fanciful notion of) “objective” knowledge, highlighting the subjective situatedness of knowing. This is especially important for spiritual care professionals and therapists in providing care to others—that people (as individuals, groups and communities) know their own situation the best, are the experts of their own lives, and already possess (personal, familial, religious/spiritual, and cultural) skills, knowledges, and sources of resiliency.<sup>66</sup>

### **Conclusion: Working together, Working with Difference**

I go back to the beginning of this paper, and the *Final Words* of the TRC that task each of us to search our own traditions and beliefs, and those of our ancestors, to find those “core values that create a peaceful and harmonious society and healthy earth.” This is a deeply spiritual kind of searching, and one that is highly relevant and necessary in Canada and around the

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<sup>66</sup> These principles are the foundation of narrative therapy. For more, see <https://dulwichcentre.com.au>.

world. It is vital that we have spiritual leaders—including Buddhist leaders—who can skillfully scaffold discussions on spiritual questions of meaning, purpose, values, identity, connection, and hope; honour difference and build relationships in interfaith and intercultural contexts, and nourish the conditions for peaceful and harmonious societies.

In working with decolonizing pedagogies and incorporating course content that engages with truth and reconciliation, what has become clear to me is that as educators we must be intentional and process-orientated in how we are teaching and supporting students in adopting the principles and practices of the Calls to Action, the DEAR document, and of their professional (i.e., CRPO, CASC/ACSS) and religious oversight bodies. Being intentional means formulating learning objectives, theoretical, practical, and dharma/theological frameworks, and setting aside space and time to focus on truth and reconciliation and the Calls to Action. For example, in my “Buddhist Approaches to Mental Health” course, I include a section Buddhists engaging with truth and reconciliation<sup>67</sup> within the larger module of Buddhism, Healing and Justice. Or, in my “Buddhist Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy” course, I include Indigenous content on decolonizing psychotherapy and social work,<sup>68</sup> and in my “Spiritually Integrated Mindfulness” course, I include a module, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion—Creating Safer Spaces, that focuses on intercultural competencies, and includes readings on the experiences and perspectives of Indigenous university students using mindfulness-based

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<sup>67</sup> Natalie Avalos, “Land-Based Ethics and Settler Solidarity in a Time of Corona and Revolution,” *The Arrow* (blog), July 9, 2020, <https://arrow-journal.org/land-based-ethics-and-settler-solidarity-in-a-time-of-corona-and-revolution/>.

<sup>68</sup> Kris Clarke and Michael Yellow Bird, “Chapter Three: Confronting Professional Imperialism and Moving towards Integrative Healing,” in *Decolonizing Pathways towards Integrative Healing in Social Work* (Routledge, 2020); Michael Yellow Bird, “Neurodecolonization: Applying Mindfulness Research to Decolonizing Social Work,” in *Decolonizing Social Work* (Routledge, 2013), 97–111, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315576206-16>.

interventions.<sup>69</sup> These are some of the ways in which I have been intentional about incorporating truth and reconciliation in the courses I teach. By embedding truth and reconciliation in our pedagogies, we seek to cultivate decolonizing and equity-seeing orientations, and instil new patterns of relating to one another that lead to truly transformative change in how we organize and govern our societies.

In building new, better, and lasting relationships, within and across communities, honouring and valuing *difference* matters. To be truly inclusive—to cast our jeweled net—we cannot ignore, deny, minimize, or gloss over difference; these tactics, conscious or not, allow colonialism to endure over time. Too quickly we might rush to “get along” and focus only on our commonalities—which is a first good step—but when we remain comfortable within our own worldviews, and do not truly engage with the experiences and worldviews of other cultural and religious/spiritual communities, we do not really build the bridges or relationships that can affect the change needed to bring about a healthier planet and more prosperous societies for everyone. *We must do the hard work of working with our differences.* We must learn about each other—our differences—if we are to

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<sup>69</sup> Shadi Beshai, Sharon M Desjarlais, and Brenda Green, “Perspectives of Indigenous University Students in Canada on Mindfulness-Based Interventions and Their Adaptation to Reduce Depression and Anxiety Symptoms,” *Mindfulness* 14, no. 3 (2023): 538–53, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-023-02087-7>; Laura Beaulne-Stuebing, “How Indigenous Yogis and Meditators Are Adapting and Reclaiming ‘Wellness,’” *Unreserved*, January 14, 2023, 50:04, CBS Radio, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/indigenous-wellness-yoga-1.6713178>. Other readings in this module include Rhonda V. Magee, “Teaching Mindfulness with Mindfulness of Race and Other Forms of Diversity,” in *Resources for Teaching Mindfulness: An International Handbook*, ed. Donald McCown, Diane Reibel, and Marc S. MicozziCham (Springer International Publishing, 2016), 225–246, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-30100-6\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-30100-6_1); Harold G. Koenig, “Person-Centered Mindfulness: A Culturally and Spiritually Sensitive Approach to Clinical Practice,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 62, no. 3 (2023): 1884–96.

understand one another; by understanding one another we can make wise decisions and act responsibly.

The TRC's Calls to Action tasks leaders of "all faith traditions" including Buddhist denominations and the institutions which educate and train Buddhist leaders, dharma/theologians, spiritual care clinicians, and psychospiritual therapists to engage in reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. In this paper, I have shared some of the ways that I have attempted to decolonize the classroom and nourish an equity-seeking environment wherein Buddhist students can engage with the work of truth and reconciliation with an integrated dharma/theological, social scientific, and psychotherapeutic lens. The pedagogies I use are a work in progress, and I am indebted to my students who bring their whole selves to the learning circle and engage with this work in generative and generous ways.

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