



John Bird's Quilt Story

In the last two decades my heart has been repeatedly broken as I have listened to an endless stream of stories of abuse, trauma and attempted cultural genocide that my churches and government together have committed against First Nations people in the residential schools.

But my heart is also continually being mended by the gracious invitation of those who survived the schools (and their descendants who still suffer the generational impacts and the ongoing assaults of colonialism), to stand with them as an ally in the struggle for justice for Indigenous Peoples, for right relations between our peoples, and for recognition of the ongoing sovereignty of the First Peoples. My heart is continually being mended as I witness the difficult but beautiful healing that Indigenous people are accomplishing as individuals, as communities

and as nations, through courageous and hard, hard work against mighty odds. I thank the Creator for their leadership.

And my heart is mending as I see more and more of us settler people—including our churches—beginning slowly to learn the truth of Canada's colonial history, despite the cover-ups and falsehoods that have been perpetuated by much of our education system and media. My prayer is that more and more of us will come to know the truth, that the truth will set us free, and that we will have the courage and humanity to stand as true allies with our Indigenous sisters and brothers in the struggle against colonialism.

In my quilt block I am trying to offer a vision of a healthy education process, as I understand it once existed in First Nations societies, and indeed in all our Indigenous pasts. And a vision of what it can be again, and will be again.

I see it taking place in a circle, where all are equal and equally honoured, within the larger circle of a healthy Creation, our mother earth, where the water and air are pure, and the trees and all creatures are thriving. I see the Indigenous elders, complemented by their ancestor spirits, sharing their knowledge of life and offering guidance to the learners, the youth seated at their feet.

I have made one of those learners white to signify my own personal commitment to shut up and listen, to learn from my First Nations sisters and brothers, and also as a sign that we settler people all need to be quiet for a change, to sit at the feet of these beautiful elders, and to listen with our ears, our minds and our hearts to the stories that reflect their teachings and their wisdom.

I want to thank the Kawartha Truth and Reconciliation Support Group for welcoming me into their company. And special thanks to my beautiful colleague Alydia Smith at the United Church of Canada, without whose patient guidance and support, this quilt block would never have come to physical reality.

John Bird, February 2013