



Dispatch

Planting a Healing Forest: Community Engagement

LEE ANNE BLOCK
University of Winnipeg, Canada



In Winnipeg there is a bridge over the railroad tracks. Those tracks are a dividing line between the North and South Ends of the City; historically they were a dividing line between rich and poor, between settlers, and Aboriginals and immigrants. At the foot of the bridge was a car repair shop famous for the writing on its roof, visible as you crossed the bridge heading North. The sign read: "Welcome to the North End, People Before Profit." Growing up in the North End, heading home from downtown, I saw the sign so often that I almost stopped seeing it. Now that it is gone, I see it better. I still cross that bridge often, even though I no longer live North. I cross it more often lately to work on the Healing Forest Project.

Correspondence Address: Lee Ann Block, Faculty of Education, University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, MB, R3E 2B9; Email: la.block@uwinnipeg.ca

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The Healing Forest is a place for learning and healing in St. John's Park in the North End of Winnipeg. The Healing Forest is a living memorial to Indigenous children lost to or affected by the residential school system. This land is a place for individuals, families and communities to gather, contemplate and heal. Our logo reads: "Land, Learn, Heal." The Healing Forest is also an outdoor learning space where place-based learning and intergenerational learning connect students to their histories and cultivate citizenship and sustainability.

The residential school system in Canada was a government policy focused on the assimilation of Indigenous children into dominant culture. The federal residential school system began in 1883, with the last residential school closing in 1996.¹ Approximately 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis students attended residential schools over the course of that 113 year period. Often children were forcibly removed from their families and placed in residential schools, where their mother tongues and cultural expressions were forbidden. Many children were psychologically, physically and sexually abused, and an estimated 6,000 children died in residence. The residential school experiences have profoundly affected the survivors and their families (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established by the federal government to gather evidence and report on the experiences of those who were part of the residential school system, while providing a safe space for survivors to tell their stories. This process took place through hearings across the country from June 2008 to December 2015. In its final report, the TRC generated "Calls for Action," which address policy and healing for Indigenous people and for all Canadians. The Healing Forest is one community response to those calls.

Jackie Kirk's work addressing education as a healing process in post-conflict contexts and in fragile states speaks very clearly to the intentions of this Canadian project:

Transformation of classroom processes, and teaching methods in particular, can mean that schools are places for healing processes to take place, encouraging war-affected children to feel part of a community and to play an active role in creating brighter futures. Transformation within the education sector can be a critical force for broader societal change. (Kirk, 2004, p. 53)

Kirk's research on Healing Classrooms (Winthrop & Kirk, 2005; 2008) for the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is embodied in IRC's Healing Classrooms for today's refugee children in countries including Lebanon, Iraq, Democratic Republic of Congo; and now her work resonates in Canada, the last country she called home.

Kirk acknowledged that as well as being part of a solution, education can also be part of the problem for marginalized groups. She identified education

¹ Church run boarding schools for Aboriginal students existed in the 1860s.

as a force for instability and conflict with two dimensions: education as omission and education as commission (Kirk, 2007). The residential school system epitomizes education *committing* cultural destruction, but the current educational experiences of many Indigenous students in Manitoba (Kanu, 2016) continue to be limited because their cultural experiences are *omitted* from their curriculum. The Healing Forest's educational project is one effort to address the integration of Indigenous/Aboriginal perspectives into Manitoba's school curriculum. (Existing Manitoba curriculum documents use the term "Aboriginal." Current discourse includes the term "Indigenous," which is used in this paper).

As a teacher educator in the Faculty of Education, University of Winnipeg, I have worked with schools in the North End, both as a practicum supervisor and as a researcher. My research and teaching focus on how difference is named and understood in educational locations. One of the differences I take up is that between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives. The Healing Forest has required examining the relationships between those perspectives more closely, both historically and in the present, both professionally and personally.

The Calls to Action of the TRC summon us to do what we can in local communities to further our learning about our history of colonialism. When the Commission closed, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR), located at the University of Manitoba, was formed to house the documents, to continue educating Canadians about our history, and to monitor the progress toward achieving the Calls to Action. In 2015, Indigenous lawyer Patricia Stirbys, and environmental and development advisor Peter Croal, envisioned planting a forest of 6,000 trees to represent Indigenous children who died in residential schools. The forest would include an additional 1,200 trees to represent missing and murdered Indigenous women. In discussion with the NCTR, the vision grew and changed. NCTR would host the project and communities across Canada would develop individual healing forests in relation to their histories. At a meeting in November 2017, when I first heard of the Healing Forest concept from Charlene Bearhead (the education lead for NCTR at that time), I was immediately drawn to it and could imagine the forest happening in St. John's Park.

How Does a Healing Forest Find a Place to be Planted?

Planning for a Healing Forest in Winnipeg began in February 2017 and St. John's Park was identified as the most fitting site. St. John's Park is bordered by Main Street on the east and by the Red River on the west, and is near many schools. It currently includes artifacts and statues focused on settler and military history with no public acknowledgement of Indigenous history. The park contains different stories of the North End and its many cultures. These

various histories will be enriched by including Indigenous histories within the Healing Forest. The educational project primarily engages communities and schools in the neighbourhood of the park. However, the Healing Forest is open to all as a living memorial where we can learn to heal some of the divisions amongst and within us. As a community-based project with a focus on examining and healing the tensions between Indigenous and settler perspectives, the Healing Forest Project contributes to learning our histories and to encouraging difficult and important conversations among and within our communities (Simon, 2013).

Those conversations were intrinsic to the early stages of the project, moving from a vision to a collective understanding of place and purpose. Some of the conversations were internal to myself: how can I position myself as leading a project for healing colonial wounds if I am not Indigenous? This question echoes one I hear from pre-service teachers: “How can I teach about Aboriginal culture if I am not Aboriginal?” I respond to my students by saying “I taught about Chinese culture and I’m not Chinese.” However, their question requires a more nuanced response, because what underlies it is anxiety about ongoing complicity in the destruction of Indigenous cultures. Neither I nor my relations were involved in the subjugation of Chinese culture. However, I, my relations, and many of my students and their relations are implicated in the subjugation of Aboriginal culture. Thus, how can I position myself as leading this project? It is my understanding that I am positioned by my privilege and also by inspiration from the people and place I am working with.

St. John’s Park is part of the landscape and history of the city and also is a place in my individual landscape. I walked its paths as a teenager but more significantly as a beginning teacher at a school a couple of kilometers north of the park. My two kids were also in junior high at that time and after a tough day at school, I would stop at the park to decompress before heading home, hoping to spare my children the responses that belonged to the different relationship I had with my students. At the time, I would not have used the word “healing” to describe my walks in the park, but I knew it was good.

St. John’s is one of the oldest city parks in Winnipeg, celebrating its 125th birthday in 2018. This timing was fortuitous to the Healing Forest as the city’s planning department was engaged in re-development of the park and thus more open to St. John’s becoming the site of the Healing Forest. Access to the city planning department was produced through community engagement. The process of community engagement for the Healing Forest is described below.

In my experience, community engagement often begins with a cup of coffee in a fitting place with some good people. For the Healing Forest project, the fitting place was Neechi Commons, an Aboriginal owned worker co-op. It was there that my colleague Deb Radi and I met with Judy Wasylycia-Leis. Having coffee with Judy, who lives in the neighbourhood and is a former Member of the Legislative Assembly (provincial) and Member of Parliament (federal) for the area, was an invitation to meet community members, as she connected us to others. Soon joining us at the table were Michael Champagne, Aboriginal Youth Opportunities (AYO) and Kyle Mason, who was the Executive Director of North End Family Centre at the time, and is the great-great grandson of Chief Peguis, a signatory to Treaty One.² Next to join was The Very Reverend Paul Johnson, of The Cathedral Church of St. John's, the Anglican church originally built for the Scottish Selkirk settlers in the 1800's. Paul and the Cathedral had been involved in Reconciliation projects since 2015. As we spoke, the concept of a Healing Forest captured our imaginations.

After a couple of meetings at Neechi, the planning group, as we now called ourselves, moved our meetings to the nearby Cathedral and expanded its membership.³ There is much talent and experience at the table. The demographics include people who are Indigenous, Métis, and White, religious and secular, and of many ethnicities. From the outset of the conversations about the Healing Forest, it was understood that Indigenous and non-Indigenous members had both shared and different perspectives on the project.

In retrospect, what brought us together was our mutual respect for healing and change in our relations and our shared sense of place. These values became apparent in the first community engagement event we developed. We piggy-backed on an existing community event, "Meet Me at The Bell Tower – Stop the Violence." Initiated five years earlier by Michael Champagne and AYO, the weekly gathering at Selkirk and Powers Bell Tower in the heart of

² According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia*:

Treaty 1 was signed August 3, 1871 between Canada and the Anishinabek and Swampy Cree of southern Manitoba. Treaty 2 was signed August 21, 1871 between Canada and the Anishinabe of southern Manitoba... From the perspective of Canadian officials, treaty making was a means to facilitate settlement of the West and the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples into Euro-Canadian society... Aboriginal peoples sought to protect their traditional lands and livelihoods while securing assistance in transitioning to a new way of life. Treaties 1 and 2 encapsulate these divergent aims, leaving a legacy of unresolved issues due to the different understandings of their Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian participants. (www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/treaties-1-and-2)

³ We were joined by Terry Price, a staff officer at Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS) whom Deb and I had worked with, and by Kerry Saner-Harvey, Program Coordinator for Indigenous Neighbours, Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba. Later Sarah Gazan, also from the MTS and an Aboriginal curriculum developer, and Norman Meade, an Elder at University of Manitoba, became part of the group, as did Jason Dyck, a member of the Cathedral community and a grant writer. Shaun Finnegan, a landscape designer who lives and works in the neighbourhood, was hired to develop the concept design for the Healing Forest and became integral to the planning process.

the North End was a way to build community and foster inter-generational learning. The community had gathered often in response to violence. Michael's belief is that the community also needs to meet to celebrate gifts. At the Bell Tower gathering on May 5, 2017, we shared the idea of the Healing Forest and came together after for a community dinner to talk further. Some of the people we met that evening became involved in the project, and others support it. We have met again at subsequent community consultations, such as North End Renewal Corporation's Picnic in St. John's Park on August 19, 2017, where, along with neighbourhood children, we planted fingerling trees in pots.

The Indigenous members of the planning group were activists and educators, not Elders. Then Elder Norman Meade joined us in early July of 2017. The timing was important as we had begun working on the design of the Healing Forest. Norman introduced us to important traditions, such as the sacred tree ceremony and the significance of an entrance from the East. As the concept design evolved through discussion with the planning group and community consultations, we met with a group of Elders for further guidance.⁴

Some of the ideas generated by the Elders were to add a path around the teaching circle for ceremonies as participants would walk the circumference of the circle before entering; include a Sacred Fire pit; incorporate a vessel for water and a vessel to offer traditional plants for ceremonial purposes; and have a prayer ceremony on site prior to construction. Many of the ideas were incorporated in the concept design. From that evening, our understanding of "knowledge keepers" deepened.

The Elders see the Healing Forest as a place where traditional knowledge can be practiced in an urban setting, which is the only setting many Indigenous young people have access to. Like the Bell Tower meetings, the Healing Forest is a gathering place for inter-generational learning. The Elders' insights enriched our understanding of the educational and spiritual possibilities of the Healing Forest and we continue to draw on them.

Between 2017 and 2018, the Healing Forest Planning Group was able to secure provincial and municipal funding, as well as donations. These funds were used to hire a local landscape architecture firm, *ft3*, which continues to work with Elders, Knowledge Keepers and the community to refine the design. Phase I of the construction, an outdoor learning space, was completed in May 2018 and phase II, which develops ceremonial spaces and a medicine garden and includes the memorial trees, will be constructed in the spring of 2019.

Development of a living curriculum for the Healing Forest is an integral part of the project. The process of developing that curriculum is participatory and place-based (Donald, 2009). I am working with teams of teachers in

⁴ We were joined by Norman and three other Elders, Myra Laramée and Thelma Meade and Ray Mason, both residential school survivors, at a potluck dinner in the Indigenous Family Centre on September 27, 2017.

individual neighbourhood schools who have elected to work together on integrating Indigenous perspectives. We have administrative support and some funding for release time for the teachers involved. The Healing Forest curriculum will emerge from existing Manitoba provincial curriculum documents, but will be aligned to individual school values, student groups, and teacher interests. It will be a living curriculum connected to Indigenous worldviews and focused on history from multiple perspectives, on ecology and sustainability. The Healing Forest is a place where students participate in intergenerational learning (Varley, 2017) and link learning to the land.

We are rooted in this place, St. John's Park, in the North End of Winnipeg, either historically or presently or both. Our stories cross over; our meetings are not accidental. There is an intention to weave stories together in the Healing Forest. If healing is understood as correlated with illness or injury, then the injuries of colonialism, of broken treaties, of power and privilege, must be addressed in order to begin healing. Those taking up the Healing Forest are positioned differently in relation to these injuries, but we all have been damaged by injustice. Coming together to plan, design and construct this place is a healing process through building relationships, and through materialising a place focused on the way we want to live together in the future.

I saw the sign so often that I almost stopped seeing it. Now that it is gone, I see it better.

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