Childhood in the 1950’s – a story of reflection

Agnes Morin Pronteau arrives in our world in 1941. She is born in South End Reindeer Lake, Saskatchewan, one of 14 children in a poor but happy family. She has been born into a traditional Indigenous First Nations Cree family. She lives in the woods with 9 sisters and 5 brothers. Her father is a traditional trapper and fisherman. Her mother is a proud woman who sews clothing for the family, cooks and looks after the family. She also assists those who are ill in the community and prepares those who have passed on for their final burial. Agnes mother is a loving parent who believes that education is necessary for each of her children. Her parents practise good discipline at home in order to manage the large number of family members. Agnes has loving memories of her home life. Together with her brothers and sisters they spend much time roaming and playing in the woods around their home.

At the young age of six years Agnes must go to residential school at a small reserve in Sturgeon Landing, Saskatchewan. This school was run by the Catholic Church and the Grey Nuns. It is in this residential school setting that her life is altered and changes drastically. This is Agnes story. In 1947, Agnes is a student at the Sturgeon Landing residential school. In 1952 the Sturgeon Landing School burns to the ground. The children and Agnes are transferred to Sacred Heart Convent in The Pas run by the Catholic Church, Catholic Nuns and Catholic Priest. It is here that Agnes and most of her siblings spend 10 months of the year, only allowed to return to her mother and father and traditional upbringing for 2 months. She recalls boarding Tom Lamb Airways in the summer to go home. She longed to go home and looked forward to the summer months of July and August where she received the love of her family. She recalls how nice Tom Lamb was to the children. He also spoke Cree to them. Twenty children would board the plane and sit on the floor for the four-hour flight home. At first Agnes was scared as the plane took off and moved about in the air. She has good memories of the flight home and the pilots of Lamb Airways. She has wonderful memories of her life at home however, she cannot say the same about her treatment while in Residential School.

At the age of 6 years old she speaks Cree fluently. Once she arrives at Sturgeon Landing Residential school, she is told to never speak Cree again. If any of the children speak their language, they are severely punished. She quickly learns English and French. The Nuns run both schools at Sturgeon Landing and in The Pas at the Sacred Heart Convent. They are from Quebec and speak French. They enforce the language of French to be learned and spoken by the children.

Agnes and 98 other young children are moved away from their parents, their home and their families as young girls, a decision made by the church and the government. When they arrive, they are forced to cut their hair and remove all their traditional clothing. Even moccasins are taken away never to be seen again. They are re-dressed in shoes and clothes that are considered fashionable at the time. Not a single native tradition is taught in the school. Families are destroyed as siblings are not allowed to speak or connect with each other. They are taught that it is a sin to speak to a boy. If anyone acts out, talks back or disobeys there is severe punishment. The children experience being strapped by a belt. Other forms of punishment involve food deprivation and solitary confinement. The most devastating part of the experience was the pain, humiliation and loss of dignity for these children. Agnes quickly learns that if she is to survive, she must abide by the rules. She realizes today that all of this has been done as a means of removing their identity.

Each child is given a number and called that number instead of their name. She forgets what her name is. As she is the tiniest, she is given number 99. At the school, they follow a strict routine. Agnes cleans the kitchen, helps with the baking, assists with the laundry and learns how to sew, knit and crochet. Daily they make their beds, go to mass once or twice a day, eat the morning porridge breakfast and go to school. Although they are fed, often the children are hungry. She learns to hate porridge, but due to her resilient nature she serves it again in her adult years to see if anything has changed. When at home in the summer she recalls the farm on their property that gave them good food to eat. This is not the case at the Sacred Heart School.

When I think back today, Agnes wonders how the people of God could be so cruel to little children. Agnes recalls being called” Mon Petit Savage” by the nuns. At the time she did not understand what the word “savage” meant. Once she understands what they were calling us, it hurt me deeply. I was deeply hurt that a “lady of god” would say something like this to a little child. Words are powerful, we must remember this when we talk to little children and to each other. She recalls that no child would roll their eyes or turn their head when around the nuns. The nuns terrorized the children into submission. It was a sad time, growing up with fear, silence and extremely strict rules.

The Sacred Heart Convent is a school run by the nuns. They are very formal, structured and strict. 100% strict, not 99%. The Nuns wear a black habit with a white veil and the Sacred Heart Convent school is very disciplined and regimented with a fence around the outskirts. Agnes recalls that the children were not permitted to leave the grounds. Occasionally they would attend a Hockey game or go to the Lido Theatre. They were not allowed to mix with others in the community when out of the convent. They had to sit by themselves in their own group. It was a difficult time for a young girl to move to this type of environment coming from a place in the woods with a loving family where she could roam and play freely. Now she, her siblings and other native children were subject to the confines of the Sacred Heart Convent. She cried for one whole month when she first arrives at the Convent as she was so lonely. But eventually she begins to accept her situation and starts to do things differently as taught by the Nuns. Those who could not abide run away or suffer extreme punishment. Siblings were not allowed to speak to each other, and the children are not allowed to look at each other. Under the guidance of the convent they are isolated and taught to not speak to each other under no circumstances. These are lonely times for Agnes and other indigenous children that were uprooted out of their traditional homes and families.

The full impact of the residential school system on the individual health and wellness of each indigenous child was devastating. It impacted the lives of those that experienced it and in subsequent generations. The damage is still felt today as Agnes speaks of substance abuse, sexual abuse, various addictions, suicide, the loss of traditional parenting, culture and language. “When you take away someone’s language, you take away their identity”. The residential school was a prison, whose walls closed in on our culture. It was a monster who deprived us of affection. It was heart wrenching and painful and is responsible for the loss of aboriginal identity due to severe acts of physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual widespread abuse in many forms. Something happens to you as a child when you are deprived of love, hugs and touching in a healthy way.” She realizes this as an adult and has raised her family applying loving and caring principles.

For the longest time Agnes tucked away her feelings and emotions in her mind. Then she realized that she had to go over her life events in order to heal. She has reviewed her life and accepted and moved beyond her past. The support from her family and her faith pulled her through these times. Her family had strong bonds without the influence of alcohol in the home and her family looked after each other. She has always felt that she has been subject to discrimination and treated differently because of the color of her brown skin. She began a career in Nursing, working as a community health worker, then went back to school to take the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN). Agnes continued her education by becoming a Registered Nurse, training at Keewatin Community College. She values lifelong learning and improved her knowledge and skills through courses offered at McMaster’s University. Her nursing career has taken her in many directions. She enjoyed the life of a travelling nurse from 1960 to 1995 between the communities of Cormorant, Moose Lake, Easterville and Grand Rapids. She has nursed patients in Reindeer Lake, Pelican Narrows, La Ronge and Pukatawagon. As many of these nursing stations are distant from hospitals, she has taken advanced nursing training to ensure the patients are best treated. “The doctors come into the community once a week, so therefore you need to be able to do what is best for your patient in that absence.” Agnes also nursed in Palliative care and Obstetrics. She has delivered well over 100 babies into our communities as well as cared for the dying with dignity and respect.

Her mother valued the importance of an education and said to her that “If you want an education, you need to go to school”. Although Agnes paid the price of missing her family and her childhood, she values her education. Her Mother told her that she also paid a high price. Her mothers’ price was the loneliness when her children were at school. But the decision for Agnes to get an education was the price Agnes paid to build her future. Her comments to me were” Nothing is perfect. I have yet to meet a perfect person”.

After finishing school at the age of 17, Agnes worked in small communities and met the man that would become her husband. She had two boyfriends in her life. The second boyfriend became her husband. Out of this loving relationship Agnes became a mother herself to 5 children. The first child was born a boy. The second was also a boy, but she had trouble with the pregnancy. Her doctor told her not to have any further children as she experienced complications. Her and her husband desired to raise a girl, so they applied to the adoption agency asking for a girl. The adoption agency called and said they had a baby. Guess what! It was a boy. So, they adopted another boy. Still wanting a baby girl, she tried again to become pregnant. She got pregnant. Her doctor was terribly upset with her due to the complications from her previous pregnancy. She had another boy without any complications, so she tried again. On her fourth and final pregnancy, Agnes was greeted with a beautiful baby girl. She has 5 children, 12 grandchildren and 8 great grandchildren. Although her husband has since passed on, Agnes continues to be surrounded by her supportive family and friends. She feels blessed.

All her siblings are highly educated, and Agnes believes that this is because of the opportunity for education. She has 3 sisters who are nurses and one sister who is a teacher as well as an artist. Other siblings’ credentials include a Master’s in Education and a Masters in Linguistics. She commented on the oddness of her sibling all having such a good education. She believes this is because of the family structure created by her mother and father and their belief in the power of education. From the time that she entered school at the age of six, she has experienced different levels of discrimination because of her indigenous status. When she was at the nursing station, she recalls various people coming in asking to see the nurse. She would speak in her calm demeanor,” you’re looking at her”! Throughout her nursing career, Agnes cared for people of all races, nationalities and ages and nursed most of them back to health.

Agnes retired from nursing in 2010 at the age of 69 years. Today she is shining as bright as ever at the age of 79; 80 years in December. She continues to serve the community offering grief and loss workshops as a health facilitator for Beatrice Wilson Health Center. She volunteers with the Catholic Church Parish Council Women’s Group and continues to travel with the Priest to Sturgeon Landing and other outlying communities. Her finest hour is when she visits the McGillivary Care Home and sings and prays in her native language, Cree. She travels to St. Paul’s Personal Care Home, Pine View and the High Rise to bring prayer and singing in the Cree language to these centres. She has forgiven the people from her past so that she can move forward. Let us hope that we have learned from our past and never treat another child with such harshness.

She is an inspiration for our youth and is deserving of the title of honoured elder. Thank you Agnes Morin Pranteau for sharing your story.

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