

Prairie Messenger

 CATHOLIC JOURNAL

The journey of a feather



By Peter Oliver

08/31/2016

Among many Aboriginal people the eagle feather communicates respect, humility, courage and wisdom.

Several years ago I received an eagle feather as a sign of appreciation for my ministry at the prison in Saskatoon. I was honoured but troubled because the feather did not feel like it belonged to me. I brought my concerns to Harry Lafond (Muskeg Lake Cree Nation and executive director at the Office of the Treaty Commissioner). Harry received me graciously and heard my story. He then explained, “You are the carrier of the feather. One day you will meet the feather’s owner and you will give it to him.”

I would like to tell you about my meeting with the person to whom the feather belongs, but first revisit with me the events of June 26, 2002. On that day two men broke into Jo Oliver’s home and brutally assaulted her.

One of them attacked her with an axe, cutting off her ear. As she lay bleeding on the floor, they stepped over her as they carried the contents of her home out the door. The younger man kicked her as they passed.

The incident left in its wake a tremendous amount of fear and pain. Arrests and convictions followed. About two years later the older of the two men was designated a dangerous offender. This is the most extreme designation any person can receive in the Canadian justice system. Once designated a dangerous offender, the person is rarely released from prison.

Jo Oliver is my mother, and I work for an organization called Micah Mission. We promote restorative justice by reaching out to ex-prisoners, but we have never tackled the realities experienced by victims of crime.

The adage “lead by example” speaks to me, so I contacted Alan Edwards from Restorative Opportunities, a program sponsored by Corrections Services Canada. I asked him to set up a mediated encounter with Mervin, one of my mother’s assailants. He was the man who was designated a dangerous offender. Numerous meetings, calls and emails followed as Alan worked with my family and Mervin.

Gradually, we discovered the steps involved in the process. Alan explained that there were many ways a mediated encounter could happen. We could communicate through letter, video or we could meet with Mervin in person. We learned that we could involve as many people as we like (I come from a large family) and we could take as much time as we needed. We were invited to be as creative as we liked and the mediators supported us by attending to the many human and practical issues involved in setting up a meeting of this kind.

As the process unfolded we were encouraged to find that the mediators would take time to get to know Mervin. They assured us a meeting would not be set up with Mervin until they were confident he was ready for such a meeting.

One of the first steps we took was to ask Mervin to write his autobiography. We wanted to know more about him. What kind of life led to such destructive behavior? He willingly shared his story: 14 foster care homes before he was 12; no father; years in prison; Aboriginal and German heritage. He enjoys reading! The young offender who accompanied Mervin on the night of the break-in had taken his life a few years later. Bits and pieces of his story began to form a coherent narrative.

We were also surprised to find that in the 12 years Alan had worked with Restorative Opportunities they had never been asked to organize an encounter at the Prince Albert Penitentiary. Imagine: there are 700 men incarcerated at the penitentiary and no one had ever gone to the penitentiary to meet with any of them to talk about the offences that led to their incarceration.

As my family came to know more about the process and who Mervin was as person, we decided a meeting with him in the penitentiary was exactly what we wanted. Alan explained that they always engage two mediators in the kind of encounter we were planning, so we were introduced to his colleague, Jennifer Haslett.

A great deal of discussion followed as we decided who and how many family members would participate. In the end, my brother Diccon, my wife Madeline, my mother and I made the trip to the Prince Albert Penitentiary. Brad Taylor, one of the penitentiary chaplains, joined us. Coincidentally, Brad and his family had also been staying with us when we received news that Mom had been assaulted.

At our request, the meeting format was a sharing circle. The non-confrontational nature of the circle allowed us to tell our stories, hear Mervin's story, speak our truths and weep. Mervin listened, did his best to answer some questions and apologized.

During a short intermission in our sharing, my family was given some private time to talk about our experience. We all agreed that Mervin had received us into his life and we felt the sincerity of his apology. I proposed giving my eagle feather to Mervin as a sign that we recognized the genuineness of his apology. I suggested that Mom should be the one to give him the feather.

When we returned to the circle, I shared the story of the feather and the guidance given by Harry Lafond. I told Mervin that I believed the feather belonged to him. Handing the feather to my mother, I invited her to give it to him. Then, in an act of reconciliation, Mom crossed the room, offered Mervin the feather and gave him a hug.

A few weeks later, Mom received a letter from Mervin. He expressed his gratitude for the meeting with my family and spoke of an inexplicable joy that had come over him following our encounter. Mom was very pleased to receive the letter and plans to write to him. My wife and I have shared the story many times of our encounter with Mervin now and we have been touched by the warmth and goodwill it inspires.

The people with whom we share the story say we have acted courageously. That may be true, but I am more impressed by the fortitude of the man who owned up to his part in assaulting my mother. When he joined the circle he was utterly alone — a man condemned, disregarded and forgotten. He had no idea what we would say or how we would treat him. He came simply and vulnerably. He spoke sincerely and took responsibility for his behavior.

He apologized without making excuses or bemoaning the punishment of prison and, in doing so, he demonstrated more humility, courage and respect than I have seen in a long time.

I believe the feather has found its home.

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