

Books & Big Ideas

Bob Joseph's new book, *Indigenous Relations*, a traveller's guide for the long road to reconciliation

Understanding the history, context, and customs of Indigenous peoples goes a long way to improving Indigenous relations and achieving reconciliation, says author Bob Joseph.

BY LAURA RYCKEWAERT

Canada is at the beginning of a long road to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, but getting there requires commitment and a willingness to learn, says author Bob Joseph, who offers up a useful guide to help along the way with his new book, *Indigenous Relations: Insights, Tips & Suggestions to Make Reconciliation a Reality*.

"It took us 130 years to sort of get to this place [of working towards reconciliation] and I think it's going to take a long time; I'm hoping it doesn't take 130 years to get out of it," said Mr. Joseph in an interview with *The Hill Times* last week from his home in Qualicum Beach in B.C.

Published by Indigenous Relations Press in early May, *Indigenous Relations* is a handy, 209-page how-to (and how-not-to) guide. It's Mr. Joseph's third print book and was compiled with the help of his wife and business partner, Cynthia, pulling together "core material" from training courses they've been putting on since 2002 through their company, Indigenous Corporate Training Inc.

Mr. Joseph, a member of the Gwawaenuk Nation, first started doing awareness and engagement training to help organizations and companies work more effectively with Indigenous peoples and communities in 1994. By the time he started his own company in 2002, he'd worked with more than 100 organizations across Canada and beyond, including in the U.S.,

Peru, Guatemala, and New Caledonia in the South Pacific.

But he said business "really exploded" after the Truth and Reconciliation released its 94 calls to action in 2015, many of which stressed the need for education about the history and culture of Indigenous peoples, and for compliance (and in turn, familiarity) with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

"At this point we're really struggling to keep up with the demand," said Mr. Joseph.

The following Q&A has been edited for style and length.

Why did you feel a book like this was needed?

"I think it's just sort of a follow-up from *21 Things [You May Not Know About the Indian Act]*, which went sort of crazy in terms of interest. We were trying to get people interested in reconciliation by providing a bit of background on why it was all happening, and *21 Things* seemed to sort of fit that mark and the logical next step is to try and give them hints and tips and suggestions for making reconciliation a reality."

A lot of the TRC's calls to action had to do with education: learning about the residential school experience, its impacts, and beyond. Since 2015, have you noticed a difference in knowledge? Or more desire to become knowledgeable?

"Absolutely, on both questions. When I first started doing the awareness workshops in '94, within a few sessions one of the experiences I had: there was a lady who came up to me in the coffee break, and she had sort of tears rolling down her face, and I asked her what was wrong. We'd just finished talking about residential schools—and don't get me wrong I never try to make people feel guilty or make them cry or stuff like that—but this was just, it was brand new for her at that time to hear about different churches involvement in residential schools. And I said, 'what's wrong?' And she said, 'I can't believe my church would be involved in what you were just talking about,' and it really upset her

to think that her church had been involved. And I said, 'I apologize, but this is valid and reliable information, and that it's definitely going to come to light and you're just on the cutting edge of it.'

"Today we blog, because we know that all of our clients aren't corporate clients and government clients and can't afford our training, so we started, as a way to help Canadians work effectively, we published a blog and I think when we first published [in 2012] ... if we had 700 visitors a month on the blog we were pretty happy."

"The last couple of months we saw over 100,000 a month come to the blog and read articles on residential schools and hints and tips on how to work with people in communities."

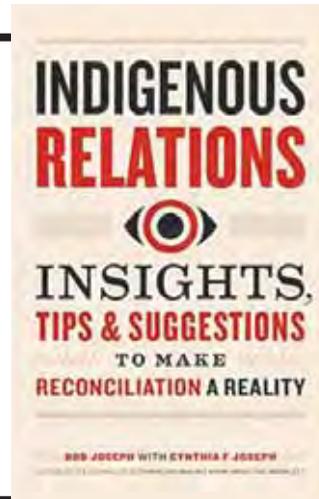
[Note: the last residential school in Canada—Gordon Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan—closed in 1996.]

Do you attribute that increased interest to the TRC directly?

"Yeah, for sure. And, I mean, people were already doing it before the TRC, but those 94 calls to action really put the workforce in front of reconciliation. So whether you're federal or provincial or local government or a big business or a non-profit or a healthcare provider, all of the calls say learn about the history, the culture, the UN Declaration. So that has put employers and employees across the country in front of reconciliation. It had been steaming along pretty good before that, but that definitely, just in terms of business, it probably bumped our business up an additional two-thirds just kind of overnight."

What's the most common mistake you hear or see people make when talking about reconciliation or Indigenous relations?

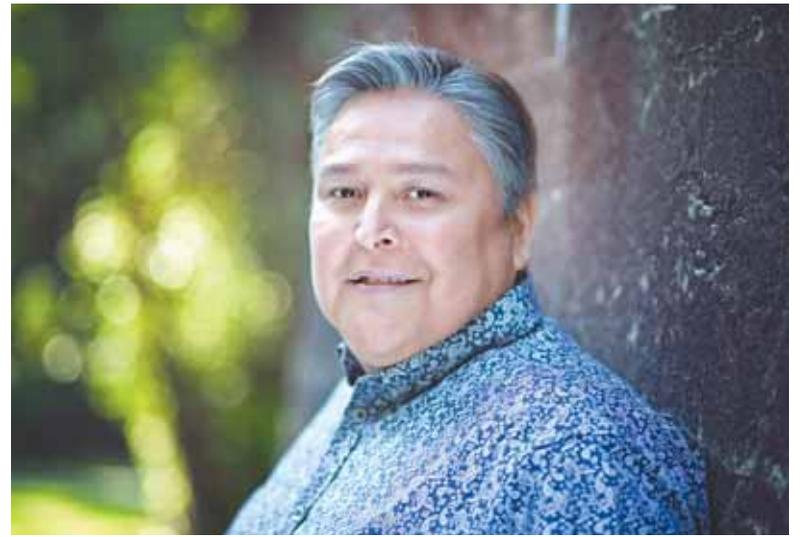
"I think the most common mistake around reconciliation is thinking that it'll be a short-term process. When we think about the Indian Act and that whole history up until the early 1980s,



Indigenous Relations: Insights, Tips & Suggestions to Make Reconciliation a Reality, by Bob Joseph with Cynthia F. Joseph. Published by Indigenous Relations Press on May 9, 2019. pp., \$19.95.

it took us 130 years to sort of get to this place and I think it's going to take a long time—I'm hoping it doesn't take 130 years to get out of it—but certainly nothing's going to happen in two to five years, I think that's just too short of a time frame.

"At about 15 years we'll start to see huge effects of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and quite a different country, because academia—K through 12, and colleges and universities—are really going after what they



'If we can clear up some of the myths and misconceptions, and see that there really is a lot of common ground and that it'll actually make the country a much better country—that would be a pretty good lifetime of work for me just to change that,' says Bob Joseph. Photograph courtesy of Bob Joseph

call Indigenizing their content and decolonizing their content, the institutions. And so give that a chance to work, and man, we are going to see a different country. Our kids are going to be so much more equipped and there probably will never be a time [like] when a lady came up to me in the coffee break and was crying because she didn't believe that something could happen.

"The challenge of course is that government support has to continue. Some governments have chosen to actually not act on the TRC recommendations, or have pulled back at least on the academic side. So I think we're going to have a pretty large cross-section of the country, but I think there may be some, I call them mushrooms, they're in the dark a little bit just about some of that context."

Is there a mistake that's particularly a pet peeve for you?

"Not for me but ... I think one of the biggest challenges is to get involved, but it's how you get involved. So I've had people come to me in my workshop and say,

'Bob, I see the plight and I get the history, and I really want to help.' And I'll say, 'that's great' or 'thank you, I really appreciate that, but try not to say that, because that's what the government of Canada was saying to justify all of this: [that] we've got to help these poor people who live short, brutish lives and in primitive

cultures, and we're going to help them and make things better.' So that's probably the biggest frame that I'm sort of trying to unravel: how can we work together collaboratively on reconciliation versus showing up and saying, 'I want to help.' And I think that sometimes just rubs some of the community peoples the wrong way. And so I would tell people in my workshop, 'Laura, if you want to help, that's great, but when you go to the community or you're talking to a community person, tell them

that you've got lots to share and that you've got lots to learn. You haven't really done this before, but certainly want to get involved, and what would be the best approach for doing that?' It's just a subtle sort of shift in how we get involved."

You write in your book that reconciliation is a 'journey of learning and discovery.' What part of the journey are we at right now?

"I think we're just in the beginning phases. And I feel that way because in every one of our training workshops one of the exercises we get people to do is a timeline exercise. So typically we have 10 to 30, 40 people in a workshop and at the start of the session to kick it all off I'll ask people for a date in history and a sentence to describe it that's specific to Indigenous peoples. What you find is you get a lot of early dates ... and then you get a lot of recent dates, you know Pan Am games, the 2010 Winter Olympics, the Calgary Stampede, Oka, that kind of stuff, but what usually happens is from about 1860 to 1960 or '70, there's always this gap in the timeline. We go through this exercise with just average sort of Canadians, and so that's the challenge. It's really important to understand that historical context if we're going to do any kind of work or build relationships or reconcile with Indigenous peoples, because when we look at intercultural communications one of the things is that different cultures bring a different history to the conversation, and if your history is different than the other culture then there's lots of room for misunderstanding and miscommunication. And so this is a way of just showing the learners that, 'hey, you have a different sense of history than they do.'"

Who do you hope reads this book?

"Anybody who needs to work with Indigenous peoples, just to have a better sense or a better understanding. I think if we can clear up some of the myths and misconceptions, and see that there really is a lot of common ground and that it'll actually make the country a much better country—that would be a pretty good lifetime of work for me just to change that."

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