

Reflections on conversations across the racial divide

BY SARAH NELSON, FARAH AHMED AND MELANIE HARDING

ONE CITY, MANY VOICES

Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

ON Feb. 6, more than 110 citizens in Thunder Bay gathered together at two events to share how we live with our neighbours across difference. The session was professionally facilitated by Aftab Erfan using the method of Deep Democracy, developed in post-apartheid South Africa to make reconciliation real at the local level.

The intent of our dialogues was not to find a single answer to the challenges we face, but to share insights into our lives in Thunder Bay through an honest look at our shared and fragmented history.

Together Fort William First Nation, Diversity Thunder Bay, Lakehead University's Office of Aboriginal Initiatives and LUSU, Nishnawbe Aski Development Fund, City of Thunder Bay's Anti-racism and Respect Committee, Racialized Young Professionals, and Youth Social Infrastructure Collaborative (YSI)

hosted these events. Three members of the organizing committee will share their reflections in recognition of the different experiences of each participant.

Farah Ahmed: I found myself aching deeply throughout the dialogues. Maybe I wasn't the only one, but the exact rhythm and force of my aching is inherently different from yours.

And there's that word again that most people who attended the dialogues argued so strongly against.

Many voices that evening pleaded that "we're all the same" and asked "why can't we just move forward?"

But the truth is, we're not all the same. And honestly, we're asking the wrong question.

My differences, in colour, language, worldview, creed, and culture, make me who I am, and so do yours. By refusing to acknowledge this, you are perpetuating one of the most insidious forms of racism. Our differences do not necessarily lead to division, but in order to safeguard against that, they must be respected.

I choose to act on this every day. Do you?

Melanie Harding: The only guaranteed outcome of these dialogues was the personal insight that comes from listening deeply to others. The point was to find a grain of truth that would deepen our own perspectives.

The acknowledgment of our difference strongly resonated with me. Not because I don't believe in our

shared humanity, but because our shared humanity depends on our ability to protect and honour our differences. So many expressed that (false) unity erases the stories of those who experience oppression. In our 150th year, it is time to acknowledge our different experiences in the country we call home.

The white woman who trembled while admitting her struggle with racism impacted me viscerally. She gave me hope that as white people, we can be critical and also humble enough to question and unlearn our racism that enables these oppressive structures. We have so much work to do within ourselves before anywhere else.

Sarah Nelson: The elder shared some words at the end of both sessions that grounded us in a truth. She reminded us that the reason we could gather here was because our ancestors signed treaty to allow for us to live a peaceful co-existence on this land.

She shared that the colonial project failed because she still has her language, ceremonies and traditions.

Now my question is: how can I support the next generation to find that empowerment despite the onslaught of colonialism?

My answer is that I do not do it by engaging in spaces where settlers have not done the work to understand their own history and their place in ongoing colonialism. I work by uplifting and empowering the youth so they can choose to be in or outside these spaces. If they do engage in such conversation they speak as powerfully as our elders on the topics, with their full selves preserved.

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