

“Just Get Over It” Workshop: An Unforgettable Experience

On April 12, I participated in a “Just Get Over It” zoom workshop about the [historic relationship between Indigenous Peoples and settlers](#). I was curious about this workshop, organized by our Truth and Reconciliation Action Group, because it was designed and led by the First Peoples House of Learning (FPHL) at Trent University, under the leadership of Dr. Dawn Harvard. I knew Dawn was a dynamic educator, activist and speaker, a Past President of the Ontario Native Women’s Association, and a board member of our affordable housing partner, Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services.

I ended up having a head, heart and gut-impacting experience which I will not forget – *and which I hope many more congregants and campus partners will also have.*

Our 33 registrants came from First U Ottawa, the UU fellowships of Ottawa and Peterborough, Or’ Hanesamah, and Unitarian House. From the outset, Dawn and her two FPLC co-facilitators demonstrated that they were not there to shame and blame us but to help us understand the true history, which neither we nor they were taught, of the traumatic damage colonialism did to Indigenous Peoples. Their goal was that we might let go of common misconceptions, stereotypes, and biases that many of us hold and become informed partners with Indigenous people for new ways forward.

Our facilitators immediately creating a relaxed, interactive format. They put us into 10 breakout groups to help unfold the historic efforts by colonists to gain control of land and to “take the Indian out of the Indian”. Each group was given a different fact-based scenario from the first landing of the European explorers to today. For each scenario we asked ourselves “How would I feel if this were happening to me?”.

The plenary that followed was an engaging interplay between facilitators and participants. The facilitators connected and added to the scenarios by sharing additional narratives and some of their own experiences; breakout groups read aloud the scenarios and their feelings about them. None of the feelings were good or even indifferent: for example, my group, which had a

scenario about Indian Act regulations for reserve residents, said we would feel: “like we were in jail”, “without hope”, “helpless”, “angry”, “worthless”, “unable to understand”, “betrayed”, and “treated inhumanely”.

At the end of the workshop, we were asked to name “ah has” we had had. One of mine was that it took 50 years of judicial activism - led by Dawn Harvard’s mother – for Indigenous women who had lost their status by marrying non-Indigenous men to get it reinstated. However, my biggest “ah has” were not the result of learning facts. Instead, they emerged from the format of the workshop: as we put ourselves into historic scenario after scenario, I felt a visceral sense not only of the pain caused by a given abusive event but by the chronic trauma resulting from the relentless accumulation of these genocidal abuses over centuries. My whole being, not just my mind, grasped two things. First, why Indigenous Peoples cannot “just forget it”. Second, as amazing as it is, not only were they never actually conquered but they are survivors and, more and more, leaders of change.

I recommend this workshop to all who want to be respectful partners with them!