

National Day for Truth and Reconciliation - Dr. Foster's Remarks

September 30, 2026

Have you ever learned something you wished weren't true? What do we do when that happens?

I've been thinking about that question as we approach National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, because in the name of this day, truth comes first. And the truth begins with children.

Think for a moment about the age you are right now. Think about the people who know you best: the ones who tell you to remember to eat breakfast and go to bed on time, who speak the language you learned as a child, who passed on to you your family's traditions and celebrations.

Now imagine being taken away from all of them, sometimes for months, sometimes for years. Imagine being forbidden to speak your own language, to celebrate your culture. Imagine being hungry, and lonely, and too far from home to be heard.

That is what happened to Indigenous children in residential schools. Some were your age. Some were much younger than anyone in this room. Many were neglected and hurt. Many children never made it home.

For generations, Indigenous people told the truth about what happened to them in residential schools. And for far too long, much of Canada did not listen. Some people did not believe what they heard. Many never heard it at all, because it was not taught in schools. And some who heard it chose, willfully, to deny it.

But that began to change when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission gave thousands of Survivors the chance to tell their stories, and gave the rest of Canada the chance to listen. It changed further when schools accepted responsibility to teach the history that could not be ignored, and more and more Canadians opened themselves up to learn.

Here's what's important to know about learning: Real learning, the kind that runs deep, doesn't always agree with what we already think or believe. Real learning doesn't always tell us what we want to hear. Sometimes it makes things complicated. Sometimes it makes us uncomfortable. Sometimes it leaves us with more questions than answers.

I'm here to tell you that's okay. That's what real learning feels like. And when it happens, it's important that we don't turn away, and equally important that we don't rush to judgment as a way to resolve the tension we feel. What we must do, if we truly want to learn, is listen with an open mind, ask questions from a place of respect, and sit with humility, remembering that all learning, all growth, takes place over time.

This year, that kind of learning has come closer to home. We learned more about Canon Henry John Cody, for whom Cody House was named in 1957. Dr. Cody served as President of the University of Toronto from 1932 to 1945. He was also, from 1922 to 1934, a member of the Executive Committee of the Anglican Church's Indian Residential School Commission, which was responsible for the planning and operation of the Church's 37 residential schools.

What do we make of this new learning? How can it inform our understanding of what our house names represent? How do we perhaps separate out what it means to acknowledge versus to honour?

Our plan is to bring together interested members of our community to learn more, and to provide opportunities for students, members of our Indigenous community, staff and alumni to share their thoughts so that we can make an informed decision about how to move forward. I'll provide more information in the days ahead.

For now, I want you to focus your learning on the voices of Survivors.

In a moment, when you hear their story, listen closely. Try to understand not only what happened, but what it meant for the survivor as a child. Reflect on why the experience of Survivors still matters today, and how opening ourselves to the truth might help us contribute to reconciliation.

After assembly, you'll have a chance to think about questions that grow out of everything we've talked about:

What were you thinking and feeling during the assembly?

What is one thing you learned or are thinking about differently?

In what ways could learning about H.J. Cody's involvement in the Residential School system deepen your understanding of its history and our current responsibilities towards Reconciliation and building Right Relationships with Indigenous peoples and nations?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and that's exactly the point. Truth is rarely simple, and it is rarely comfortable. But we don't get to reconciliation by skipping past the parts that are hard to hear.

So for today, hold onto what you learned about a child, taken from everything they knew. Hold onto the discomfort, if that's what you feel. Let it stay with you a little longer than usual. Because our responsibility doesn't end when this assembly does. It begins with being willing to hear the truth, and it continues in what we choose to do with it.