

## **Truth and reconciliation**

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It took some political courage for Gov. Paul LePage and his counterparts from the six tribal governments in Maine to sign a declaration of intent last week committing themselves to a “truth and reconciliation” process examining Wabanaki experiences with the state’s child welfare system.

LePage easily could have said “I’m too busy” and declined to accept the Wabanaki tribes’ invitation to undertake this first-in-the-nation commitment “to uncover the truth” about Native children who in past decades had been pulled out of their homes and tribal communities and placed in foster homes or were adopted by non-Native families.

His reasons could have been framed along the lines of “whatever abuses might have happened, they didn’t happen on my watch. Why not let bygones be bygones? That was then, this is now.”

The courage part for LePage rests in the fact that he went to the signing ceremony on Indian Island clearly as an equal partner with the leaders of the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Micmac and Maliseet tribes — not as head of a state in which those Wabanaki tribes were seen as occasionally troublesome “wards.” Instead, there was mutual respect as equals.

It’s hard to imagine a better starting point for what is expected to be a multi-year process that’s likely to uncover unpleasant truths about our state’s past practices involving Native children.

For the tribal leaders, the courage part starts with having enough trust to even begin the process with the state of opening old wounds that go deep.

As Molly Newell, director of the human services department for the Pleasant Point Passamaquoddy tribe, conveyed to Bangor Daily News reporter Meg Haskell, “We’ve been burned by the state so many times.”

But the deepest bravery is that already shown by Wabanaki women who’ve been working since 2008 to launch a truth commission to document the ways in which Maine’s child welfare services had harmed Native children prior to the federal Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978.

Some of them were taken from their families as children and placed in foster homes in which they had no connection to their family, community or tribe. A loss of cultural identity, at the very least, became one of the consequences those Native children had to confront and reconcile within themselves when they became adults.

For too many others, such as Denise Yarmal Altvater of Pleasant Point, who signed the declaration as the representative of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission, the harms went far deeper.

Taken from her parents' home along with five of her six sisters, Altvater ended up in an abusive home where she was sexually assaulted and "punished" by being locked in the dark unheated cellar of her foster home for entire nights.

"We tried to tell the state what was happening to us, but no one believed us," Altvater told Associated Press reporter David Sharp.

For Altvater, telling those stories — as horrific as they might prove to be — is an essential step toward healing. Truth, then, creates a space in which reconciliation can take root, grow and unfold into healthier relations — for individuals, the tribes, our state.

All parties at last week's signing ceremony on Indian Island expressed hope that the 18-member Truth and Reconciliation Commission — which will include both state and tribal members — will promote healing and lead to improved child welfare policies and practices.

"We will not be struggling in isolation but as members of a community who depend on each other, who benefit from each others' help in finding our way out of the darkness of the past," Altvater told Edward French of The Quoddy Tides biweekly newspaper. "From that, everything begins — equality, freedom and justice, but most important, a safe place."

No less important, we believe, is the potential for this process to be a catalyst for improving the state's sometimes troubled relations with the four Wabanaki tribes.

In fact, a good case can be made that forming this commission already represents — as Gov. LePage has expressed — "another step in strengthening state-tribal relations."

May it be so.

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