

Jason Burnstick is a member of the Plains Cree Nation who has worked as a Family Wellness Mentor, Restorative Justice Worker, and Youth Facilitator, and currently as a Rehabilitation Counselor at the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba. Jason is a Leo Award Winner, a Canadian Folk Music Award Winner, and a two-time Juno Nominee.

With many schools both considering and implementing alternative resolutions for conflict, we asked Jason to share his thoughts on his own journey to discovering and embracing Restorative Justice.

My exploration and understanding of the philosophy of Restorative Justice began through challenging my own values, and reprogramming my own 'hard drive', a process that shaped the man I am today. I will give warning: as I speak, I will address some of the difficulties I faced as a child. So, here it goes.

As a father, a husband, a son, a brother, a cancer survivor, an Indigenous man, and a child of the 60s Scoop, I am more than proud of my perseverance and accomplishments. I'm not one of the good ones, I believe **we are all good**. Some of us were lucky enough to have the right people around at the right time – others, not so much. To say that I came out unscathed is far from the truth. I carry a tremendous amount of anger that – at times – I navigate daily. I am angry for the time and love that was stolen from me and my mother, and for my family that could never be replaced. I am angry for years that are forever unattainable. I am angry as I cannot comprehend how some adults I faced as a child were so unbelievably

cruel and inhumane. There is so much anger born from my scars, and then to hear someone say, "get over it", or look to minimize my experiences... it's almost humorous, as that is an impossible task for anyone. I no longer wonder about their intent. I know now what it is: they don't care. Perhaps I have become jaded, or maybe more enlightened with age, because I feel now that if I give into the anger, I am no better than the ones that harmed me. When I look at my son, I see how beautiful, happy, and incredibly loved he is. I know in my heart of hearts that I would go through it all again for him.

My love for music and Justice have always been present in my life. My brothers taught me music, and the world taught me about systemic racism (insert laugh here). As a youth, and even as an adult, I wondered why my friends and I were continually stopped and searched by the police. This went on well into my thirties. I often found refuge in music when I needed the escape, yet when it came to trying to understand why the relationship was strained between Indigenous populations and the Justice System, I didn't have any answers. I just knew it felt degrading, and that we were racially profiled. I've had many successes in my life; on top of being a two-time Juno nominee, I also received a scholarship to a Criminology program. It was there that I found the answers I was looking for. I was right to feel that my rights were being infringed upon, because they were. I came to learn about the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and discovered that the searches I endured were in fact a direct violation of my Section 8 Rights. *Everyone has the right to be secure against an unreasonable search or seizure.* Look into Section 24.2 as well.... blah blah blah *brings the administration of justice into disrepute* – it is fascinating stuff. Anyway, I think the thing I found most interesting was asking this question: how can I utilize my struggles as something positive to propel myself forward? I heard of Restorative Justice throughout my youth, and my initial understanding was that it is an Indigenous practice, so I was more than thrilled years later to become a Youth Justice Coordinator

WHERE THE HEALING BEGINS

by

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with the Vancouver Aboriginal Transformative Justice Services. It was there that I got my feet wet, and began the journey.

When we look at the philosophy of Restorative Justice, it includes a wide spectrum of social-economic areas. It's not only about Justice or mediation; Restorative Justice, in part, is a mindset. For me personally, it has meant addressing the challenges that came into my life, and embracing the power of choice. It doesn't mean that everything is perfect and all better. However, it does mean that I made a choice to take responsibility for myself, and to be mindful of what I bring to the world moving forward.

We must take responsibility for ourselves daily: so, what does that mean? An Elder once broke it down for me. He said, take responsibility for how we touch someone: what is our intention, is it to show love, or harm? Take responsibility for how we look at someone: there is so much in our eyes that speak to how we feel. We could say a lot without saying anything. Take responsibility for the words we speak: words are very powerful, we all know this. Of equal importance, take responsibility for the energy we bring into the room. From the best days to the worst, from absolute love to absolute hate. From those closest to us, to the stranger passing in the street, we make a choice about what kind of energy we want to bring into the world.

“We all have bad days; it doesn’t mean we have a license to ‘shit on the room’.”

We all come from different experiences and unique backgrounds, and it's a beautiful thing when we can acknowledge that and celebrate it together. I see more non-Indigenous people standing in solidarity with Indigenous people at a national level. The sea of orange has been overwhelming, and it instills hope: I never thought I would see such a day. We all have a lot of healing to do, and a lot more to learn from each other. Restorative Justice is also about repairing the harm.

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