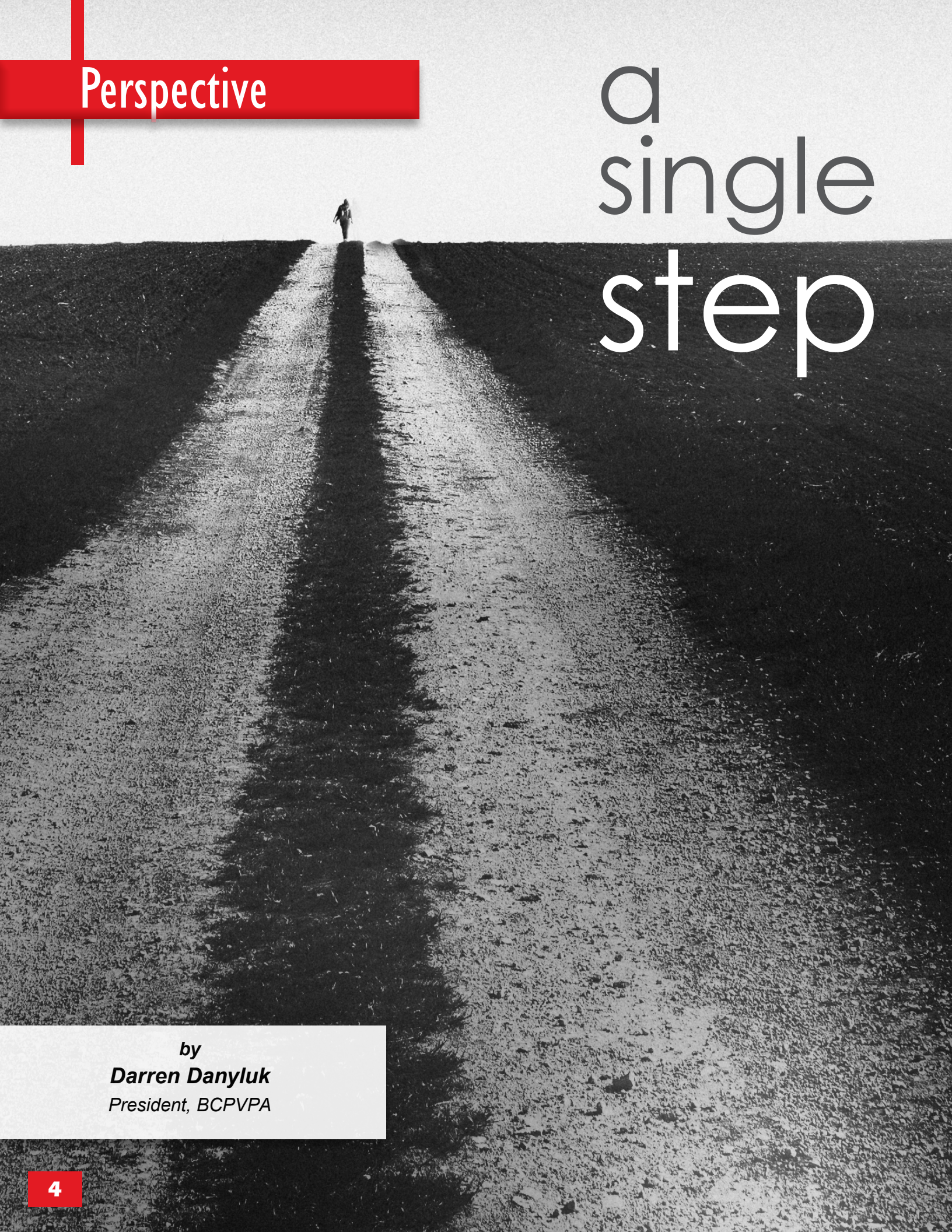
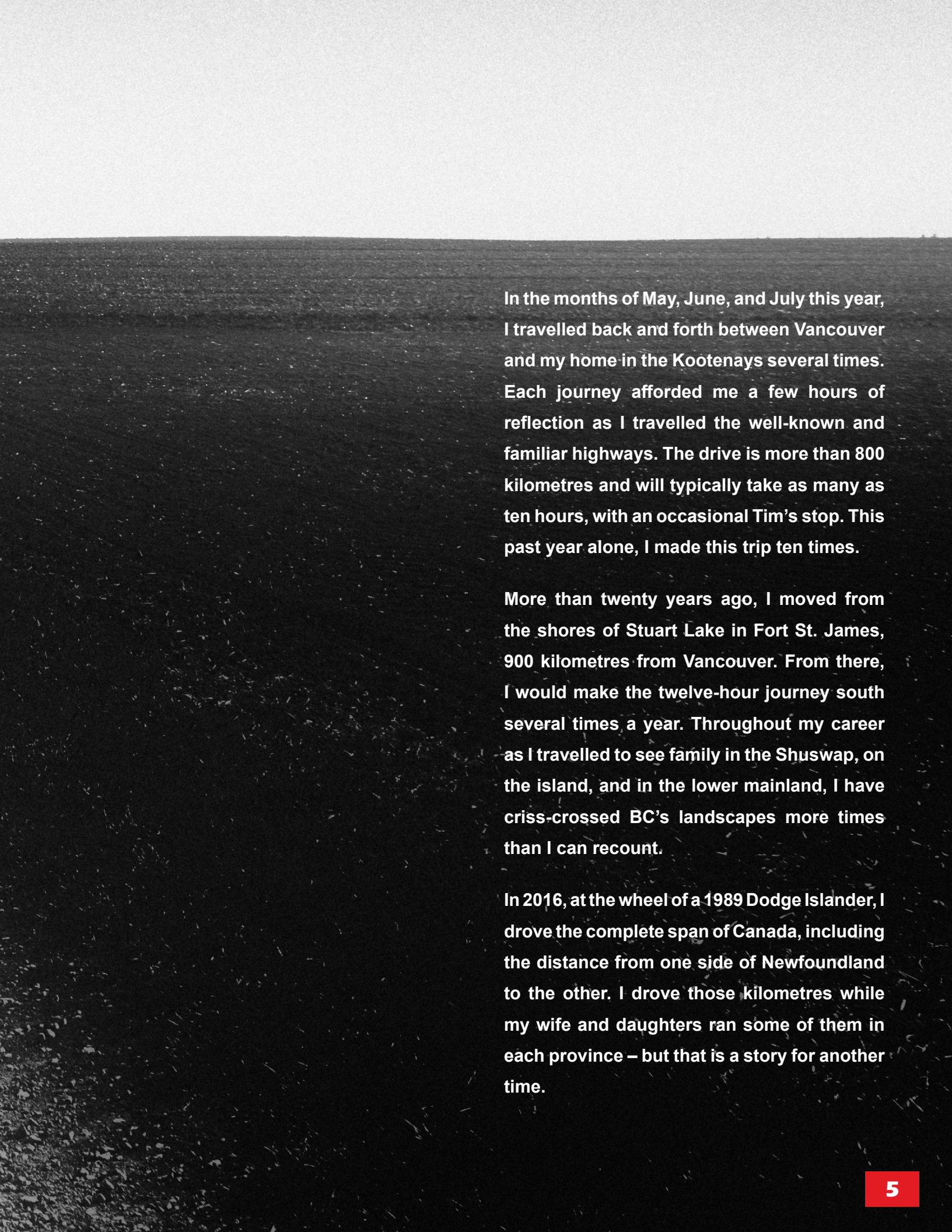




Perspective

a single step

by
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In the months of May, June, and July this year, I travelled back and forth between Vancouver and my home in the Kootenays several times. Each journey afforded me a few hours of reflection as I travelled the well-known and familiar highways. The drive is more than 800 kilometres and will typically take as many as ten hours, with an occasional Tim's stop. This past year alone, I made this trip ten times.

More than twenty years ago, I moved from the shores of Stuart Lake in Fort St. James, 900 kilometres from Vancouver. From there, I would make the twelve-hour journey south several times a year. Throughout my career as I travelled to see family in the Shuswap, on the island, and in the lower mainland, I have criss-crossed BC's landscapes more times than I can recount.

In 2016, at the wheel of a 1989 Dodge Islander, I drove the complete span of Canada, including the distance from one side of Newfoundland to the other. I drove those kilometres while my wife and daughters ran some of them in each province – but that is a story for another time.

I am well-travelled, and it is fair to say that I welcome the road. As the odometer rolls forward, logging each journey's progress, my mind can also travel forward, planning and imagining a future. Just as often, my mind can wander backward, recalling moments which evoke both joy and pain. Regret, as well as gratitude, percolate as the signposts streak past my vision; I know many of the road signs and their kilometre counts by now.

The trips I made to my home in the days following May 28th gave me these hours to reflect upon Kamloops, Brandon, Marieval, Cranbrook, and Kuper & Penelakut Islands. Like the kilometres ticking upward on my odometer, the confirmed number of children whose lives ended in unmarked graves at a residential school in Canada increased each week, rising into the thousands. As reported in Scientific American¹ this summer, "Given that more than 1,300 graves have been identified using ground-penetrating radar at only four of the 139 federally run residential schools, the current official number of 4,120 students known to have died in the schools will end up being only a fraction of the actual total." The reflections of one journey will inevitably lead to undertaking another.

This image of a rolling odometer – its numbers inexorably climbing – along with my chance encounter with a young Secwepemc woman, set me to reflect upon reconciliation and the journeys which lay before me and all Canadians. Some journeys, such as this young woman's, combine the metaphoric with the literal, inspiring with each kilometre that passes.

The woman's name is Sasha, and I first met her when she started grade eight, one September many years ago. Families live with challenges, and Sasha's family experienced more than its fair share, living with the effects of intergenerational trauma, rooted in the residential school experience of family elders. I was her teacher briefly in her grade 12 year but, long before then, I knew through her teachers that Sasha was strong-willed, independent, and fiercely loyal to her family and especially her young brothers. I would

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come to know these boys better than I knew their sister. In growing to know her brothers, I learned the selfless depths of Sasha's dedication to family. It was a pleasant surprise to see that it was Sasha stepping from the car which pulled up to the curb in front of my home one afternoon this July.

My trip home to the Kootenays in July was short, only four days. Most of those days were spent packing, purging, and storing as we downsized. One of the many items we parted with was a caged fire pit. With temperatures in the 40s, wildfires raging, and a ban on open fires, I did not expect any interest in the firepit when I posted it on the local marketplace. However, it was this item which drew Sasha to our home that day. It had been a Father's Day gift, and I was happy it would now be Sasha's to enjoy with her family on a cool autumn evening or a brilliant and cold winter day. We chatted for a few minutes there on the sidewalk, and it was in this short exchange that Sasha told me of the journey she'd just completed, and the one she was about to take.

Sasha told me she was 'walking the children home'.²

Her words struck me immediately, because I was moved by the same sentiment while reading Dr. Robyne Hanley-Dafoe's book *Calm Within the Storm* in the spring. Dr. Hanley-Dafoe was quoting American spiritual teacher, psychologist, and author Ram Dass when she wrote, "When all is said and done, we're all just walking each other home." For me, at the core

1 Scientific American "Canada's Residential Schools Were a Horror", Ian Mosby, Erin Millions, August 2021

2 The Toronto Star, "Sasha Eugene to walk from Kamloops to Shuswap admin building", James Rose for the Columbia Valley Pioneer, August 19, 2021

of this statement is the belief that we do not travel through this world alone, but rather in the company of all those around us. We care for and keep company with all humanity as we walk alongside each other on the journey to our ultimate home, whatever we believe that destination to be. As I drove the highways of BC this summer, Sasha spent many days walking them, beginning with the 120 kilometres of highway that stretches from the former residential school at St. Eugene Mission in Cranbrook to the traditional lands of the Secwepemc people in the Windermere valley. Sasha's own words are best to express her vision and inspiration: "Our ancestors will finally be able to come to peace in the homeland that they were stolen from. These lost innocent children's souls discovered and undiscovered may finally start their journey to the sky world and be released back to the creator and those waiting for them up above."

On August 20th, at sunrise, Sasha began her second medicine walk to bring home her ancestors from the former Kamloops residential school, a journey of nearly 500 kilometres. At the conclusion of her ten-day journey, Sasha posted that it had "been an honor and a blessing to be able to go on this journey and bring healing, education and love into the community." Sasha credits her ancestors, saying they are why she is here and "proud to be Indigenous today."

Across BC and throughout Canada, similar journeys took place this summer, such as the journeys of Jamie Henry³ and Shayna Taypotat.⁴ These walkers have covered literally thousands of kilometres to bring forth honour, education, and healing. Sasha speaks of the healing witnessed during her walks and how this experience has changed her perspectives on many things. We are moved well beyond metaphor when equating the concrete distance traveled by these walkers as a measure of the distance we must travel towards reconciliation. We witness and feel the demonstration of personal sacrifice and effort this journey will require. And, as with every journey,

3 Yukon News, "Warrior Walkers arrive in Kamloops after six-week journey from Whitehorse", Canadian Press, August 10, 2021

4 Summerland Review, "From Saskatchewan to Shuswap, walker speaks of wish for healing for all people", Martha Wickett, August 20, 2021

the first step may be the most difficult, for it must be taken deliberately and with conviction to face the road ahead.

As an initial step, readers might start with the numbers, in an effort to learn and understand. Behind the numbers that spiral upwards are the names of children. These children had mothers and fathers; they were brothers and sisters. The official number of 4,120 references the Memorial Register found on the website of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (nctr.ca). The National Student Memorial Register on this site was created to recognize the children who never returned home, and it "represents another starting place on the collective journey of honouring and remembering the children lost to the residential schools." This site is not static, and it notes that there are additional "names of children waiting to be found that are not included within this register." In only a few minutes on the site, I was able to read the names of children who did not return to their homes from the St. Eugene Residential School in Cranbrook, BC. Among the nineteen names remembered, I recognized two family names. Immediately, I could picture the faces of their relations I have known, and taught. No longer are these lost ancestors only numbers.

For many years, I've known that in my own heritage there lies a connection to this nation's First Peoples. In vague and often racist terms that included references to high cheekbones, and to skin that easily tans, both branches of my family acknowledged that possibility, yet without understanding or an evident desire for any true meaning of that history. I bear responsibility for my own ignorance, for I began my own journey to

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understand this connection only as my fifth decade nears its end.

In the genealogy researched and recorded by a member of my family, the reference is brief and unembellished. It simply makes note of a Cree woman, baptized Marguerite: my great, great grandmother's grandmother. Other than the names of her husband and her children, I know nothing of this woman nor of the Cree people, and I have been uncertain about the next steps I must take.

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I share this because I believe that for many, the journey for Truth and Reconciliation is two journeys: one as a part of the whole, seeking national truth, accountability, and healing on a national scale; and one as an individual, seeking personal truth, understanding, and acceptance. The steps we each take on both paths may at first be small and unsure, we may feel daunted by the great distance ahead, and the difficult terrain. Nonetheless, it is well past time to start our journeys, and begin walking this path with that single step.

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