

***Truth and Healing – Indian Residential Schools  
with Bill and Grace Anna Wiser of the Danthonia Bruderhof  
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Randy Kritkauskay: Bozho, dear listeners. I greet you in the language of my Pottawatomie ancestors and my tribe today. I'm Randy Kritkauskay, host of the show along with Carolyn Schmidt. I'm an enrolled tribal member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.

This episode of Indigenous Perspectives originates, not from my tribal homelands, but from N'dakinna, the unceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people, who for thousands of years were - and continue to be - stewards of the lands to be found in the state of Vermont in the Northeastern United States and across the Canadian border in Southern Québec province.

I begin by acknowledging where we come from, as this program focuses on understanding our roots in Mother Earth and our connections with our ancestors.

Today, we are exploring how to come to terms with and heal the wounds caused by the legacy of Indian residential schools, where young indigenous children in the U. S. and Canada experienced forced assimilation for nearly a century.

For those listeners who are unfamiliar with this chapter of the continent's colonial legacy, here's a quick overview. By the end of the 19th century, education was seen as a tool to strip away the last vestiges of indigenous cultures. Parents were forced to give up very young children and send them away to distant boarding schools, operated primarily by government agents in the United States and primarily by religious groups in Canada. More than 100,000 First Nation kids in Canada were exposed to these schools, which operated until 1996. In the United States, hundreds of thousands of American

children - Native American children - were affected, with 60,000 Indian kids enrolled in boarding schools as recently as 1973.

Upon arriving at the schools, long hair was cut. Kids were given military style uniforms. They were given English language names. They were forbidden to speak their native language under penalty of corporal punishment, and sometimes severe food deprivation. Crowding, malnourishment, and mistreatment resulted in frequent runaways, deaths by disease, and an unknown number of unexplained deaths. Many victims were buried in unmarked graves, which are now being discovered and making news.

I hope that this has not been a trigger for some of our listeners whose ancestors were involved, but this *[is]* critical background for understanding the need for, and challenges associated with, what we hope will become a positive message about our healing and forgiveness.

As today's show unfolds with that in mind, we turn to our guests, Bill and Grace Anna Wiser. The Wisers belong to an intentional Christian community, the Bruderhof, which has multiple communities here in the United States and one in Australia, which is where Bill and Grace Anna are today. So, Bozho – greetings. Bill and Grace Anna! Can you give us a brief overview of the Bruderhof, and explain how coming to terms with its history and arriving at an appreciation of the act of forgiving came to you and your community?

Bill Wiser: Well, thank you. It's a pleasure to be on. My name is Bill Wiser, and we are located in Gamilaraay country in northern New South Wales, Australia. And it's certainly a privilege to be on today.

Just a thumbnail sketch of our history as a church, which goes back some hundred years: we are spiritually connected to the same roots as the horse and buggy Amish people, which will be familiar to some of our listeners in the U. S. especially, and in Canada. And that root goes back to the 1500s. More recently, we stem from post-World War One ferment, beginning in Germany, and then with the increasingly oppressive rise of the Nazis, a number of measures were taken that eventually led to our expulsion from Germany and, through persecution and hardship, sojourn in England,

Paraguay, and then to the U S in the middle 1950s. So we're not unfamiliar with journeys that have to deal with traumatic past. And we definitely have all of you on our hearts and prayers who were impacted. And since Randy didn't mention it, I'll mention it myself, his own grandfather went through the *[Indian residential]* schools.

Grace Anna Wiser: Hi, I'm Grace Anna. And it is a pleasure to be on this program today. And I would only just add that all of us in whatever way are on a journey, and so we simply want to journey along with you in mutual understanding and seeking for a way through and out.

Randy: Thanks, thank you for a really nice and very brief and succinct introduction. The parallels, you know, really are uncanny. The network that we're on - those of you who've listened to the show will perhaps recall hearing Jay state at some point during our public service ads, "Stay positive and take a break from the dark side." He has a wonderful, deep voice I can't quite imitate.

For some, this might be interpreted as an invitation to detach from the troubles of daily life and encouragement to find a place or state of consciousness that insulates one from pain. But we know from having the wonderful experience of meeting you two, that the Bruderhof is profoundly connected to practical work. And in particular, to reaching out to, and often living amongst, those who are afflicted by current and/or historical circumstances.

For some religious and spiritual organizations I've encountered, members seem to be drawn into the suffering. You seem to be able to uncover, tease out and affirm the strength of your partners. How do you resist, avoid, being drawn into the dark side and losing yourselves? Our media is full of stories, whereas they say, if it bleeds, it leads. And it's very hard for me personally, to not be overwhelmed. How do you manage this? How, how do you bring out such goodness in people?

Bill: I think I would go to the root of the word, compassion. Compassion, if

you break it down, means to suffer with, to suffer alongside. And when we do that, it's no longer us and them; all - all barriers break down and we simply see the humanity in each other.

The two of us are rapid response team chaplains here in Australia. And that simply means going into fire zones, shortly after the first responders have left. And there's a great deal of trauma involved in a house that has burned down, a property that's been destroyed, all the memories associated with that, and the same is true with, with flooding victims.

And so we, we do go right into those situations willingly, simply because we know for ourselves, there is nothing more comforting than someone simply showing up. We don't do much speaking. We do a great deal of listening. And I think that is one of the keys. If we would listen to one another right across every divide that is so dividing our world today, we would discover the humanity in each other. And that's like discovering gold when you're on an exploration. And, every encounter is like the excitement of discovering something new. And so as you go alongside, actually, it's all about finding the gold that may be hidden, may be hidden under trauma, may be hidden in many different ways.

Grace Anna: And we always find that in these encounters, we come away, having gained so much personally, just simply by being alongside and listening and suffering with. So it's always a life-changing experience for us as well.

Bill: And perhaps another example of that would be the prison ministry that we've been involved in over many decades now. And again, that's a voluntary step to go through the sometimes confronting experience of going inside, to all the gates, the security with all the razor wire and everything else. And inside, what, what do we find? I say, we find gold. In lives that have been shattered and in the lives that are at the present moment, completely out of control of anything in their lives, except for one thing. And that is the choice that we can all make. Given untold trauma in our lives, we still have the choice to track a different future, to look to the chapter that's coming next, to grab onto that

rope of hope when there is nothing else to grab onto. And that's our essential message, that that rope exists. We're here alongside. Let's explore the way to add a new chapter. And I think that's what we need to do around our globe right now. There's so much divisiveness, so many movements that are tearing down and destroying. And while we completely understand the immense frustration over hundreds of years of trauma that hasn't really ended, we need to together collectively find our way to a new chapter. Ultimately, we have to find the way to live well together on this planet. That's the question that we should be exploring.

Randy: You introduced us to a book, which we have begun to read. And we have to read it in small bits and pieces because it's so rich. The book is called "Why Forgive?" Can you introduce this notion of forgiveness into the process and equation and journey that you're discussing?

Bill: Yes, we will. And the book itself was a product of a journey. The author was confronted by a horrific act in his locality that involved the kidnap, rape, and death of a small girl. And just massive trauma collectively in the community, and, this was in a nearby town. And so the author grapples with all the complexities and nuances and impossibility of forgiveness. And then rather than theologizing or pontificating, he simply leads the reader through stories of ordinary people who have chosen to forgive.

And what I love about the book is it covers a complete range from kitchen sink arguments of a couple, right through kidnap, rape, and murder, and helps the reader understand that every single one of us is victimized in life. To obviously greater or lesser degrees, but I don't know anyone that I know who hasn't been victimized either by a person, a circumstance, something in life. And I would say that that is life. The question is, what do we do with that victimization? We have the choice. We can either embrace victimhood, or we can look for another path. And the journey on that path is what the book describes in very specific instances of people who have chosen to forgive.

Grace Anna: And by telling these stories, the author relates the tale, and then

he very gently leads the reader into the way through and out. And one can find some personal connection to one story or another, as you go through the book. And it's been a tremendous help to us personally, and to anyone that we have given the book to.

Bill: Let me give you one specific example of using the book as a book study inside prison. So this was a minimum security prison north of New York City. I was doing a book study with a couple other volunteers, and around the table were about a dozen men who were in for murder. Their sentences were, each of them was, 25 years to life. So after 25 years of incarceration eligible for parole. We were partway through the book. An inmate came in, who had just been before the parole board. We all asked him the question that we all wanted to know, will you be released? He said, no, they knocked me back for another year, but there's nothing they can do to me. I'm a free man.

Now let's think about the setting. So - bundles of razor wire, guard towers, everything else, locked doors. Absolutely no freedom whatsoever in the usual sense of the word, but this man right in the midst of all of that could say, I'm a free man. And that's because he'd made the choice against bitterness, anger, resentment to this parole board that has told him, he has to stay another year in that setting. He's a free man, because he has made the choice not to let the victimization control him and define him. He did not embrace victimhood. Instead, he made the choice to forgive, and that gives a resilience that is unequalled in our experience.

Randy: This is a really powerful message. And I'm hoping that some of my kin and others in the indigenous community across North America are listening and able to open up their minds and hearts to the possibility of healing through forgiveness. It's a particularly difficult moment right now because the revelations by the day are sometimes, you know, more gruesome and more numerous. And I know the question on the tip of the tongue of many who would be listening from that community is, "Why should I forgive? They haven't apologized." How do you deal with that? I'm sure you've had that question tossed back at you many times.

Grace Anna: Well, we have found that the act of forgiving is not so much for the perpetrator as for the individual themselves. So, and there may be some times as, as now in the current situation where you are not able to forgive the perpetrators, but by finding forgiveness, it frees your self, regardless.

Randy: And so putting that in the reverse, let's now take the position that, that I won't forgive now. Nelson Mandela - who certainly was victimized, who made the choice to forgive - he put it this way: "Maintaining resentment and anger is like taking a poison pill and hoping that it kills your enemy." So we are talking about internal healing that happens when we forgive. It heals the victim, regardless of what happens to the perpetrator.

Randy: When I read those words a week or two ago, I was knocked back to think that a man who spent 23 years in prison, much of it in solitary, could transcend his own circumstances. But there's a - there's a really profoundly hopeful message there. And we'll come back to it and explore it some more after a brief break.

## **Segment Two**

Carolyn Schmidt: Welcome back to the second segment of Indigenous Perspectives. Today's show focuses on ways that victims of trauma associated with Indian residential schools can work on healing themselves, through forgiveness and letting go of bitterness. We're speaking with Bill Wiser and Grace Anna Wiser of the Danthonia Bruderhof in Australia.

In a future show, we'll discuss restorative justice for these indigenous communities: actions that the larger society can take to make amends, respond to indigenous needs in today's world and work toward a better future. But for now we are exploring paths to, and specific examples of, healing actions that are within the immediate grasp of indigenous peoples.

And I can start by one example. People from one First Nations community in Saskatchewan in Canada, have torn down the residential school building where generations of their children had suffered. And they literally buried the

pieces of the building and its furniture - buried them in the ground, covered them over - now, have a peaceful, peaceful, natural space there. And I personally liked this action because to me it means the community is choosing to put that sad chapter of their history behind them. Not to forget obviously, but not to have it in their faces like an open wound anymore. They've taken control of their space. So, Bill or Grace Anna, can you give us some other examples of healing actions that you know of, or have experienced, with indigenous peoples in Australia?

Grace Anna: Yes, we'd certainly be happy to. We've had opportunity to spend time with some of the indigenous Aboriginal people in our neighborhood and one particular event, which meant a great deal to us, was when we were touring what had been a settlement of Aboriginal families in - close to a nearby town, that had been destroyed by the white Australians and used as a dump. And then, years later, other white Australians decided to clean it up. And when all the trash and junk was taken out, they toured the place with people who had actually grown up there and lived there, and for whom that was sacred ground and home.

And we were along on that morning, going around the settlement and the people were telling what had happened in the different places. And what struck us so much was their manner, their demeanor. They had personally been through so much trauma and they had had to run and hide when they heard the engines of the trucks coming to take them away from their families, but all through, they would say, you know, this was terrible, but we aren't angry. We forgave. And at the end we asked them, how can you say that? Why do you forgive? And they said, we don't want our children, our children's lives, to be destroyed by bitterness and hatred. We have to forgive.

Bill: So again, as we spoke of earlier, forgiveness is for the victim and enables the victim to begin a process of healing. Forgiving is a journey. It's not a single act, and there are triggers that will happen, sometimes on a daily basis, that will, or may, cause the person to have to go back to that decision. But we can say from personal experience in our own lives and the things that we've been

through, and particularly alongside those who have been even more deeply traumatized than we ever have been, we can witness to the healing power. Forgiveness has a power. It's not a passive [action].

And I think one of the most confronting examples of this was when the two of us, attended a memorial- annual memorial service - at the Myall Creek Massacre site, which is only a 40 minute drive from here. So the Myall Creek massacre was when 28 Aboriginal men, women and children were hunted down and murdered by a group of stockmen. And unfortunately, those things happened all over Australia. What makes Myall Creek unique is it was the first time - this was 1838 - when the perpetrators were brought to justice.

So some years ago, Aboriginal and white got together and worked on a Memorial, which stands today. And I think the most significant part of the annual memorial ceremony is when we're immediately under the big rock that now is placed there as a Memorial, a descendant of a perpetrator and a descendant of a survivor come together under that rock and embrace. So this whole idea of the future [*is that*] we can't change the past, but we can change the future. That's the genius of that Memorial. And Auntie Sue Blackrock, an Aboriginal elder that we know here locally, traces her history back to the survivors of the massacre. She put it this way: "We won't forget, but we will forgive, and walk down the path together." And I say that that hits the absolute essence of what we're talking about. We're here today. We can't change the past, but we can walk together toward a better future.

Carolyn: I've been thinking also, and seeing how in many countries and localities education is an important part of the whole idea of reconciliation. Can you expand on what you've seen works best for as far as education about these issues?

Bill: Well, when I came back from that ceremony - and here we have a homeschooling situation up to year 12, it's essentially a homegrown high school situation - I came back from that and I said, every single graduate of our up to year 12 [*school*] needs to go to that Memorial service at least once,

because you have to see to believe the power of reconciliation, you have to experience it. And once you do, it changes your life. It changes everything,

Randy: What I'm finding as a theme, and I'm hearing it for the first time – and it's obvious for me to say it now, but it hasn't been until this moment - is the degree to which you are personally involved with your partners and people who have lived this experience. It's not something you're reading in black and white in a newspaper or seeing, you know, in distant places in the media. And I think we might want to come back and talk about that later in the program, because it's the essence of who you are and what you do. Thank you so much.

We'll take a break and be back in a moment.

### **Segment Three**

Randy: We're discussing forgiveness with our guests today, Bill and Grace Anna Wiser, and I want to pick up on the theme of personally engaging face to face the people that we hope to help along the pathway on this journey of forgiveness. Because most of us listening to the show, if we have in [our] minds - the current news, are experiencing it at a great distance, kind of as an abstraction, you have fleeting news story or a few words on a printed page. You have a remarkable history of getting right down on the ground and connecting with people. Why don't you explain how that has unfolded at Danthonia in Australia?

Bill: Well, of course it was really exciting to come to a continent, an island that we had never been to. Originally in 1999, the first Bruderhof people to come, right away connected to the Aboriginal community locally and invited them back to their land. And, in this state - to the consternation of neighboring property owners who saw the vehicles coming up the drive - some of them were quite incensed about what was going on. But that was really important for us to, to find that community and fellowship with the descendants of the people who had lived on the land that we ourselves were now custodians of. And that whole idea of custodial ownership, you hold something in trust for the future, has impacted the way we have lived on our land. And so we have a

very strong, sustainable regenerative agricultural program, replanting trees. The land has just completely blossomed under that care and our Aboriginal brothers and sisters coming on the property feel absolutely at home. And in fact, I'll never forget one ceremony we were at. I asked one of the Aboriginal elders, one of my friends, to do the Welcome to Country, which is a traditional beginning of many Australian events and ceremonies. He said, I'll do it on only one condition. You people are part of our mob, so I'm not welcoming you as strangers to this land. You are our mob; I'll welcome us all to our land. That was an unforgettable moment of - of connection.

Randy: There is no greater honor they could offer than to put you on that basis. But once again, you had extended the welcoming embracing hand, and you had honored their heritage by beginning to restore their land to the status it had been. And when my colleagues who've been calling me on the phone or sending me emails, looking at recent news, you know, ask me the question. What can we do? What can we do to help?

This is exactly the kind of answer I want to be able to give on a future program: say, honor the land, the way the original inhabitants would be, that is respecting them and their culture. But I can say very deeply and personally with total conviction, that it's also honoring the ancestral spirits, that for not just Aboriginal people, but all indigenous people, the ancestral spirits who are still there. As you know, from reading my book, when I saw the play in Canada, "Children of God", about the residential schools, I had the most remarkable experience of feeling my grandfather's presence, basically saying, "Randy, this is the story I could never tell you. Thank you. You know, thank the players for letting us share this moment." And that kind of connection, that kind of healing, deep healing connection, not just with the land, but with our ancestors is the most remarkable experience one can have as a - as a human being.

Bill: Let me just relate a couple of thoughts from this elder Billy Williams, with whom we're still very closely in touch. He says some really profound things around healing and restoration using the words of his own people. And

there's - there's a word that has three different layers: to heal, to restore and to make whole, and it has to do with connectedness to country, which is what you're saying. Connectedness to the stranger.

Hospitality is so important. And he says that's why we've been really blessed by and from Danthonia. From our traditional sense, being a custodian, one of the key roles is to look after your visitors. And then he talks about two words, one meaning to listen. And the other again has deep layers. It means to think, to understand, to remember, to know and ultimately to love. And when we do that, that opens us up to listening. And listening to one another is the initial key point that we have to do together.

And as, as descendants of white settlers, we need to, first of all, just sit down and listen, be willing to listen to the stories of pain and trauma and simply to - again, going back to that word "compassion" - to suffer with. And so, Billy himself has struggled to find forgiveness, and he's on that journey and he has chosen to forgive. And he says this : "in the midst of the complexity of me trying to forgive, I do ultimately believe that my healing will come through my forgiveness, in compassion, that sharing of wounds. We see the hurts in another, and we know the hurts in ourselves, but we come back to that opportunity, that space for love. So forgiveness opens up a space for love. And when we find that in one another, that gold that I was speaking about earlier, then amazing things can happen because a power is unleashed that provides resilience. And it shows us the way to chapter number two.

Randy: Well, I am struck because my concern in recent weeks has been about the discussion of intergenerational trauma. And it is a reality. And I think perhaps for indigenous people, it is a little unique because we do have these connections to our ancestors. That for me, I have to say, you know, late in life, it's almost inexplicable, but it's very real. That said, another dimension of intergenerational trauma is bringing up the stories and the wounds and retelling them in a spirit of anger. And it inflicts the damage on the next generation. And I'm not blaming the victims here, but I am raising the question about whether we want to be co-conspirators and collaborators in

reinlicting that harm, which I think is what Nelson Mandela meant in that quote that you gave. I thank you for sharing this.

We're going to take another break and be back in just a moment.

#### **Segment Four**

Randy: We're back on our Indigenous Perspectives show with our guests, Bill and Grace Anna Wiser from Danthonia, Australia. In the last segment, we were talking about forgiveness and self healing and healing as a group, as a journey. And I know that some of your colleagues describe it in those terms. Can you pick up on that theme and give a hand to our listeners?

Bill: One incident we'll never forget. We were celebrating 20 years in Australia. We invited many people, including Aboriginal elder, Billy Williams, whom I referred to earlier, and he got up and he said, you make the path by walking. You make the path by walking. A simple phrase with deep, deep meaning. And so it is along the journey of forgiveness. You make the path by walking.

The first step is simply to face the reality of the trauma, to go in and through. And that is a very, very difficult phase because there's all kinds of complexities. And initially a very difficult step is simply to forgive ourselves for decisions we wish we'd never made that have perhaps unintended, but very real detrimental consequences.

And instead of tormenting ourselves with the WHY question, we need to work towards and journey towards transforming that into the WHAT question: so what can I do with this trauma? How can I help it transform into a resilience that will both heal myself, but *[also]* heal everyone I meet?

Perhaps one of the most confronting examples of that, that I can think of, is in a book called "The Choice" by Edith Eger. She is a Holocaust survivor, a trained clinical psychologist. She journeyed to forgiveness, and she says, we have a choice. We can choose to be our own jailers, or we can choose to be free. And that choice has to be made sometimes daily, but once it's made, then the path begins, and we make the path by walking. We walk in and through and out.

And anyone who sees us who knows our trauma, and mostly people can see our wounds. They will say, oh, maybe there is chapter number two. And you mentioned earlier the book “Why Forgive?”, and the author ends with a very important question. And I love a book that ends with a question, because that sets us on a journey. He writes, “I’m sure that there are more stories of love and forgiveness in the world than there are stories of hatred and revenge. How long will you wait to let yours be heard? When are you going to throw your pebble in the pond and start making ripples?”

What we’re talking about here is something that heals our soul, mind, body, and spirit - we’re all one piece. But because of that, there is a transformation; it’s like a catalytic, a chemical explosion, and the forgiveness is the catalyst and all kinds of amazing things happen that you wouldn’t dream of. Once you start on that path, that Billy is telling us about,

Grace Anna: I would only say that while it is for every one of us, a personal journey, you do not have to travel it alone. You can reach out and find others, share your pain, share your story, start a discussion. And you will be amazed at where the path will go.

Randy: That is what Carolyn and I hope this program signals. It’s the beginning of a journey for indigenous people on this continent at this time. And I can barely express the degree to which I am grateful that you are not laying this on as a moral imperative that “thou must forgive”. This is a message about the healing power of forgiveness for the person who forgives. And it brings us to a spiritual place that is morally enriching, but that’s not the purpose. That’s not the motivation. The motivation is to begin the self-healing process. And when you say you’re not theologizing it, and you refer to people from the Jewish religion and from indigenous belief systems in Australia, it becomes clear that this is something that has a deep universal appeal and resonance. And I - I desperately hope that it will resonate with our listeners today.

So we usually end this program by saying that we put up transcripts - printed transcripts - after the program is broadcast, with supplementary materials.

I want to expand that a bit today, because I think you present us with a most unusual opportunity. You've referred to several books that are absolute treasures on this topic, and we will put them in our reference materials, we'll work with you to prepare other supplementary materials, and other ideas that occur to us after this program ends. And again, I hope that this is the first step on the journey toward healing for indigenous people on this continent. Do you want to add a few words?

Bill: If I might just add, to the listeners our profound love and respect for you all. And, we just want to say our, our prayers are with you as you begin this journey.

Grace Anna: It's a journey for everyone and we're on it together.

Randy: Migwetch. Thank you both so much. And to our listeners, migwetch for your listening.

I hope that the broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots in Mother Earth, and with your ancestral roots and with your neighbors. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, I encourage you to take a few minutes to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna. And perhaps even that of ancestors. Allow yourself to touch their presence, capture that moment and hold onto it. And if you might, write to me and let me know about your experience, let me know about your thoughts on this program. I would love to pass the comments along to Bill and Grace Anna. I can be reached at [randykritkausky@hushmail.com](mailto:randykritkausky@hushmail.com), or through my website, [randykritkausky.com](http://randykritkausky.com). Thank you. Goodbye.

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