

Ivan Coyote: Families, stories & libraries

By Meghan Whyte.

Three main themes that came through Ivan Coyote's keynote speech at the 2014 BC Library Conference were: family, the power of storytelling to build and foster compassion, and the value of libraries. As to be expected for any fan of Ivan's work, there were plenty of laughs and a few tears along the way.

Ivan began the keynote by self-locating within a family tradition of storytelling; much of the history of Coyote's family lives on through the stories Ivan tells in print and in speech. For Ivan, as for many of us, family is both our past and our future, representing the needs of communities and nations on a smaller but important scale. Ivan took care to situate the keynote from the position of a member of one particular family within many in Canada. Family anecdotes would help illustrate many of Ivan's points throughout the talk.

The power of storytelling as a way to help heal the hurts of a divided people is especially pertinent as we continue our own processes of Truth and Reconciliation. Ivan's tale of two elderly women who grew up on the opposite side of WWII was timely. Despite initial discomfort, the two grew to greater compassion through sharing their childhood stories of hardship and deprivation during a course on memoir writing. Ivan pointed out that the ability to hear each other's stories is one way of providing the motivation to care about each other, of moving past our apathy, and engaging our compassion. Where libraries continue to be a space where stories can be told, written, read, and exchanged means more opportunities to extend our hearts and hands to the myriad stories that exist within, around and outside of our communities and families.

Lastly, Ivan spoke directly to the power of libraries as a place of learning, and accessing information and resources with privacy upheld. Ivan described a background as a troublesome but widely read child whose world was expanded because of the arrangement between an elementary school principle and the Whitehorse public library. For many, some of whom have continued on to be writers, storytellers, and/or librarians, this is familiar ground. Ivan recounted a key moment where the local librarian explained the library's value of privacy in terms of any patron's reading material, including that of a young student.

Also recounted was some of the history of Ivan's wife, Xena, who relied on libraries much like many Canadians who cannot afford other options for information or education. The doors of the library, Ivan implied, should always be open to all who need it. Describing an experience as a writer-in-residence at Vancouver Public Library, Ivan bore witness to the range of necessary services librarians may triage in the face of public need.

Libraries, noted Ivan, are magical places, places where books can help anyone escape the grind of work, the grind of poverty, or the trials of everyday living through a well-placed, and well-spoken story. Maybe one placed in the hands of a needful patron by a librarian. Just as the needful youth who write to Ivan about the books that have been placed in their hands at just the right time.

Meghan Whyte is a MAS/MLIS candidate at UBC with an expected graduation date of Dec 2014.