

## **Ronald Klassen**

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**elders – housing – Indigenous worker committee – Métis - pipe ceremony - reserve schools – two spirited – UFCW 401 – White Buffalo Woman**

RK: I'm going to say to everybody, *tansi*, which is welcome in Cree. My name is Ronald Klassen. My spiritual name is Waboos, which means 'rabbit.'

Q: Tell us about your background.

RK: As I say, I'm Ron or Waboos, whichever you want to call me by. I was originally born in Vancouver, British Columbia, to two loving parents. For the longest time, I didn't know my Indigenous heritage. I didn't learn that until a later age.

When I was 21, I was working up in Fort St. John, B.C., and I was approached by two brothers inviting me over to their grandma's place for dinner. So, I said, okay, sure. They said, come over and bring some tea for grandma. She wanted the bundle of - you can get a package of I think 500 grams or a bundle of Red Rose tea, loose tea in silver wrapping. So I brought that over and I think we had moose stew or something like that with bannock. It was really good. But the thing that scared me was she didn't say nothing to me; she just stared at me all night. I thanked her for the lovely dinner and what-not.

About a month later a brother came up again and said, grandma would like you back for supper. She's got something for you, but you have to bring tea again as an offering to an elder, which we do in tradition. You always give an elder a gift, kind of thing. So I went back there and I can't remember what we had. She said what we had and I can't remember; I think it was duck soup or something like that. By this time, we had more elders around the table. There was like three other elders and her and myself, and my two buddies. They all knew what was going to go on. So we ate dinner and then my buddy said, "Well, we need to go out beside the fire, the campfire." I go, okay, we'll go out to the campfire and probably chat around that area.

So we started chatting and grandma steps up and says, Ron, the reason why we're here, the gift I'm giving you is your name. So that was my naming ceremony. But, she said, it wouldn't be recognized by the Creator until you've smoked four pipes. I was lucky enough, and she also indicated I would be given a gift after that. In 2019, I was in Toronto on our Indigenous conference - UFCW has an Indigenous conference every year, and I'm a cofounder of it. I was lucky enough to be given to smoke in my pork pipe. So my new name was recognized, and also to be presented with my eagle feather, both at the same time. I feel that I was given two gifts instead of one. I was finally given my name and I was given an eagle feather, which is like having a medal of honour. It's got to be earned. Someone doesn't just come up and say, here, I'm going to give you this. You had to have earned it somehow. So that's some background.

The reason why I'm a union member is because I feel that we have the same core values as our Indigenous people: hardworking, fairness, equality. We share the same struggles with the government as the union has. If it's not exactly the same, it's within the same. In the words of truth and reconciliation, which is the best thing we can go for.

I'm asking each and every one of you to be an ally. I believe it's very important that we have such a thing. It's finally come to a head that we need this. We've been fighting for it. It's pretty sad when you've got reserves that don't even have clean drinking water, where if you wash yourself at the water, you break out in rashes. The water comes out red; you have to boil it all the time. It's pretty sad. The government says, well, we'll give you the water. Sure, they might build a water treatment plant and put everything in, but they never trained anybody to run it or even fix it. If it breaks down it's like, oh well, so be it, we did our part.

It's the same as housing. They dropped off the lumber, but where are the carpenters and plumbers and electricians and cement finishers? They should have somebody in there teaching these things so the men and women on the reserve can learn these and learn a skill at the same time. Things like this. Schooling is another thing too. In comparing to schools on the reserve and city schools, there's a \$200 difference between each student. On reserve, the student there will get \$200 less than a city child. At the end of the day, the school ends up with less money. A lot of the schools are basically in poor condition. Some of them have black mould. Some of them the roof leaks. They don't have as many computers, like they might have two or three for the entire school; in a city school you'd have two or three hundred, pretty much a laptop for every child. In some of the schools there's safety hazards. Some of the northern schools are in remote trailers with doors freezing shut in the wintertime. It's a fire hazard. How are the children getting out? They don't have any running water, they have to go use the outhouse facilities. In Canada being a G7 nation, you figure we'd at least be able to have all that.

Also, getting enough teachers to come out there. A teacher gets out there; a teacher's got to play several different roles: it's got to be mother, it's got to be father, it's got to be social worker, it's got to be parent, it's got to be grandparent, it's got to be policeman, whatever is required of them. They're not getting paid that much, because they only get paid whatever the reserve can agree to.

Medical-wise, a lot of times they only have a degree nurse on your medical. Then they have to fly their people to a hospital. Going back to education again, a lot of the education there, they're at least two or three years behind the city schools. A lot of times teachers are begging city schools to send anything they can, any used books. It's something we really need to look at. I'm looking to the future or I hope before I die I'd like to see an Indigenous person on the Supreme Court of this country. We've never had, in 200 years we've never had an Aboriginal justice on the Supreme Court or even an Aboriginal person in a high level of government, like Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister or Minister of Northern Affairs. It's pretty sad when we can't even conduct our own being.

At the end, I think I'm prematurely asking, I sure hope that you'll stand with me and stand with my brothers and sisters in the union movement and stand with all our Indigenous brothers and sisters and be an ally. I just want to say also, remember the murdered and missing women. It could be your friend, it could be your sister, it could be your aunt, it could be your mother, it could be your daughter. I just want to put that out there as well. That's very important. It's one of the bigger issues. There's well over a thousand women in the country that are either murdered or missing, and nothing seems to be done about it. You go report it and they seem to kind of, oh

well, that's just another Aboriginal woman gone out for a walk. I just want to say in closing, I just want to say goodbye all my brothers and sisters and may the Creator be with you.

Q: What is the significance of the eagle feather?

RK: An eagle feather is because, in life, it's the eagle that flies closest to the Creator. So it always takes a message. When I pray, this is my lifeline and this will always be with me. When I die, it goes with me. If I'm buried, it's laid on my chest. If I'm cremated, I'll be cremated and my feather will be with me. This is mine for life. I can never donate it to my son or my daughters or to friends. It's me; this is my soul. As I say, it's significant because the eagle was the one. I'm not going to go into the story, because it's such a long one. But anyhow, the eagle takes all our prayers to the Creator. To me, this means everything. This is me; this is my lifeline. I speak the truth. I always speak from my heart. That's the best way to speak – when you speak to anybody about anything, always speak from your heart.

Q: You didn't learn much about your Native heritage until later in life. Why did it take that long?

RK: Just to let you know, I am Métis, which is a mixture of white and indigenous. You could say that I'm two-spirited in the sense that I have the privilege of walking in both the white world and the Indigenous world. Yes, but I think it was meant to be. I think it made me stronger and more aware. It gave me a chance to grow up in a white world to see what went on there, and now I'm on the other side. I have that fortune that I can walk down that middle. I can say, today am I going to walk the red road, or am I going to walk the white road? Or am I on both? Can we exist as equal and walk down one road together? I think that's how come it took so long. It's not for us to judge what the Creator does. This is already predestined for us; this is already on our journey. So that was part of our journey, why it took so late. I may have been on my journey right from birth, but not realized until later on in life what my journey really was.

Q: Tell us about some of the activities you're involved in.

RK: As I said, with my union, which is UFCW, I am also the co-founder of the UFCW National Indigenous Subcommittee for UFCW. Every year for the past four years we've held a conference in one city. It might be Winnipeg, it might be Calgary, or Montreal, or Toronto; we haven't done Montreal yet. We usually have a traditional dinner; we bring in guest speakers. We bring in some entertainment, like a drummer or dancers or something like that. We also do different projects. We've written letters to the College of Bishops asking for an apology from the Pope. We've aligned ourselves with Cindy Blackstock. I can't remember the organization she's with, but I think she's with Childfind, child welfare. We have done things like that. We've done lobby groups in Ottawa talking to the politicians about different Indigenous issues like water, murdered and missing women, housing, education. Job creation is one of the big ones as well.

But I think it's falling upon, as usual, they listen but they don't hear us. I think it's time now that they hear us. We also came up with a pin. I don't know if you can see it: UFCW, with the healing circle with four colours in it. It was easy and simple. You don't want to go too fancy and it's just harder; you delete the pictures in them. But anyway, we endorse that. I've gotten full support not only just from my National Office, but my local as well. On my local we have three Indigenous members on our executive board. We're big on Indigenous issues. It's Local 401. I'm based out

of Calgary but we're province-wide. We've got offices in Edmonton, Lethbridge, Fort McMurray, Red Deer.

I feel that my local is my Indigenous family. I'm them; they're me. If I speak, I speak with them and they speak with me. They're also walking with me on this red road. I'm very proud of being a union member and being an Indigenous person and being allowed to say this without hesitation, without being ridiculed by any of my brothers or sisters in the union. They'll always be my brothers and sisters right from now until the day I die and even beyond. They're always in my thoughts and in my prayers. When we have a member pass away, I'll always, if I know them well enough or if they're in Calgary, I try to attend their funeral just out of a time of respect for them. I think it's only right; it's the right thing to do.

About the finding of the children, of the 215 children that were found in B.C., that was a really trying time. I struggled with that. When that came up I had to go have a smudge, and that was a hard week. That was a hard week for all of us. Our last project that we did with our national office is we had what they call a tree ceremony, where we planted a tree back in our parking lot of our national office, a red maple. We had a pipe ceremony – myself, the national president, and we have a resident elder that's with UFCW; he's just our elder. I believe this is a place now for the spirits of the kids from the residential schools and our murdered and missing women to grow. As this tree grows, they grow. As the leaves drop, they give us medicine. This medicine is for everyone – for my white brothers and sisters to my Indigenous brothers and sisters, to the four-legged to the flying to the crawling.

Whoever can use the medicine, it's there for the taking. You do not charge for this medicine, but it's there in the spirit of goodness. I hope now and I do pray that our brothers and sisters that went before us now have a home or at least someplace to rest. They may be not officially home, officially buried, but now their spirit can be at ease because now they have a place to go and something to give back. They're giving us back medicine, teaching us different things. I always believe that when I'm down, what I'll usually do is I'll sit out on my patio deck and just watch the animals and just listen to the wind. In the wind you'll hear the voices of our brothers and sisters; they are giving us messages. One last thing before I go. I'd like to say I was given a story of the White Buffalo Woman. I'm not going to go into the full story of it, but it stated that when the White Buffalo Woman returns she will have a message for the Indigenous people. The message will be, it's your time. We're still half way for White Buffalo to be born and grow up to be an adult buffalo before we have White Buffalo Woman, but I truly believe it's coming. We need your help as allies-- I just want to say again.

[ END ]