

Dear Friends, Good evening one and all ...

I am very honoured to be with you this evening. I thank the sponsors for hosting this very important function. It's good to see so many people here tonight.

It is very important and essential for all Canadians to engage in this type of discussion on the topic of the legacy of the Indian Residential Schools. It is, after all, our collective history.

“From the Darkness of Heart to the Heart of Forgiveness”... I hope I do justice to this topic, which captures a story of heaviness of the heart in the end yielding to a feeling of freedom.

Recently a friend asked me – is it possible to be healed from the legacy?

The best way to answer the question is to compare the wounds of the residential school to diabetes – an illness I live with.

Because diabetes can be a silent disease, often people who are diagnosed with it will be in denial – they will say, “No, I can't have diabetes.” However, when diabetes is acknowledged and properly managed, one can lead a fairly healthy life.

Such is living with the effects of the Indian Residential School legacy.

In 1991, an Elder told me the legacy of the Indian Residential School system will always be a part of your life. It will, however, get lighter and easier to live with as you deal with it in a good way.

Those words often encourage and guide me – especially in the darkest of hours – and believe me, there were many dark hours.

So, tonight, I wish to share a little bit about my journey from the darkness of heart to the heart of forgiveness...

I wish to talk mostly about my experiences after leaving the Indian Residential School system – about the ups and downs of a healing journey.

I will conclude my remarks by sharing with you my dreams of where we go from here as Canadians engaged in meaningful dialogue.

Before I go too far, I want to say something about this eagle feather I am holding.

I received this eagle feather from an Elder while we were in a very intense but good healing session. I hold this eagle feather with honour and in the highest regard.

The stalk or the middle of the feather represents the journey of life – from the beginning to the end.

The handle, or the bottom of the feather, symbolizes the beginning of life. As we move along the stalk, we come cross this section where we see the white fluffy part. The fluff is loose and points aimless in every direction.

Remember when we were young. Some of us lived in confusion. We had a whole life ahead of us. Some of us could not focus on what we wanted to do – should I go to college or should I find a job after high school – that kind of thing.

As a survivor of the Indian Residential School system, this confusion included feelings of anger, bitterness, loneliness, depression, loss of identity, loss of self-esteem, loss of belonging, and loss of a loving family. These are some of the many effects of the Indian Residential School system.

As we live life, we come across many challenges and experiences – some good and some not so good. These strands on the feather represent those times. Some of life's challenges divide us or separate us – like this on the feather.

But when we find the heart and strength, we can overcome many of life's difficult challenges and experiences.

You see how these strands on the eagle feather have come apart. You will see through careful nurturing of the eagle feather that we can restore this eagle feather to appear whole again.

In life, through the goodness of our hearts, we can heal and reconcile with one another, transcending the negative forces that divide us. With a vision to create a better society, and through the nurturing of good relations, it is possible to work toward reconciliation.

As you reach the end of the stalk of the eagle feather – if you look ever so closely – you should see tiny little white hairs. That represents aging with wisdom.

For me at this stage of my life, and thank goodness, I can't see any tiny little white hairs yet.

Along life's journey one is guided by seven teachings – much like the ten (10) commandments. These teachings are: honesty; humility; truth; wisdom; love; respect; and, bravery.

- One achieves honesty by being honest with oneself and with all others.
- One humbles him or herself. In other words, no matter how much you know, you know very little about the universe.
- One speaks the truth.
- One knows wisdom by knowing the difference between good and bad.
- One understands that love is given without condition.
- One respects him or herself and respects all others.
- One is brave to do something that is right.

That, my friends, is what the eagle feather symbolizes.

In my childhood – at the fluffy part of the feather – I was ripped away from my loving family. This caused a lot of painful confusion.

Once inside the Indian Residential School system, I was afraid. I was lost. I was so lonesome. I felt betrayed. I felt abandoned. I was abused: physically, culturally, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and yes, sexually.

After leaving the residential school, I became very angry. I was bitter. I was mad at myself. I was mad at my parents. I was mad at the government and at the churches. I was angry at my Creator. I was mad at the world.

At the time there was an unwritten code of silence. Nobody talked about their negative experiences and bad memories of the residential school.

One night I vaguely remember a drunken conversation at a dingy drinking establishment. A number of us were guzzling beers and talking about our abuser – masking our pain.

That night, I made a big mistake. After drinking so much, I rode off into the darkness of the night on a snowmobile. I got lost in a terrible snowstorm after my snowmobile had broken down.

I walked aimlessly in the dark over a huge frozen lake. I spent the night lost – no matches – no fire to keep me warm. The temperature had dipped to minus 40 degrees Celsius.

As I lay on the ice freezing to death, I was visited by a spirit – a woman spirit. In perfect Anishinaabe – in my language – she told me I was going to survive the ordeal. She then covered my cold body with a quilt made of rabbit skin. That vision was nothing short of a miracle.

In many ways, that experience was a considerable turning point in my life.

Many years later, in 1990, I was visiting Ottawa. Former national chief Phil Fontaine had just publicly disclosed his abuse at a residential school.

I honestly realized then just how much the residential school system had negatively impacted on my life.

By 1992, I sat face-to-face with the man who had abused me, a man who had caused so much misery in my life and in my community. I challenged him to own up to his actions.

The day of the meeting, I went to the site of the former residential school. I went there to pray – to seek guidance from the Creator. As I left the grounds, I was blessed at the sight of a majestic eagle soaring high above me.

That was a powerful message of hope from a force greater than I can imagine.

After the face-to-face meeting had ended in total denial, I felt so alone again.

I also experienced denial from some members of my family and community. There was silence from the government. The church didn't know how to respond to such an allegation. Sadly, there was silence from my own leaders. I know now that the issue was likely too overwhelming – too painful – for them to deal with.

In the fall of 1993, the Ontario Provincial Police had launched a full investigation into the allegations of abuse. In the end, twenty (20) charges of indecent assault were laid against the former dormitory supervisor. There were other victims who chose not to come forward.

The man continued to deny all charges. Initially, he pleaded 'not guilty' to all charges.

August 1993, the Anglican Church had issued its statement of apology. At the time, because I was so immersed in criminal proceedings, my reaction was – I'll wait to see how they will translate their words into action.

Between the police investigation and the legal wrangling, my life had turned for the worse. I was drinking a lot. My marriage was failing. I was angry. It seemed that life had become unbearable. I had dragged my family into a living hell.

On a snowy day in the fall of 1995, I had had enough. I was driving away from home to an unknown destination. I was running away from my family – leaving them behind.

As I was driving away, I came upon a horrendous car accident. There were a number of serious injuries and three fatalities.

One of the fatalities was my good friend Brian. He had been involved with the allegations against the dormitory supervisor.

It was Brian who counselled me – no matter what happens with our court battle, never leave your family.

As he lay there dead, I reflected upon his wise counsel – no matter what happens, never leave your family.

Brian remains an inspiration.

Brian never did see the results of his bravery.

In January 1996, our abuser was convicted. He was sentenced to four years in prison.

Renewed Hope

Throughout these difficult times, I remained hopeful for a better tomorrow.

Let me try and explain what I mean.

In 1997, a number of us organized a gathering of former residential school students in Sioux Lookout. Organizing such a gathering proved to be very challenging and yet so worthwhile.

After the gathering, I found myself driving west. I was in deep thought about the gathering... what I had heard... what I had witnessed... what I had learned. There was so much heaviness to the heart.

I had almost driven about half way across this vast country. I turned around at the Rocky Mountains and I came home.

In January 1998 – I will always remember the day – the Honourable Jane Stewart, then the Minister of Indian Affairs, issued the *Statement of Reconciliation*.

I was so overcome by emotion. I thought I would never see the day when I would hear words of acknowledgement – words of validation.

Later on that year, I found myself at the board room table of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. I am honoured to have been involved there for

thirteen (13) good years. My experience of learning and sharing with this organization is one that I truly cherish.

In the fall of 2001, I made overtures to church officials. I had one goal in mind – that was to meet my abuser to begin dialogue that would hopefully lead to the spirit of forgiveness.

I thought if nothing else, I wanted to shake his hand.

Such was not to be. I was told that he had passed away the year before.

The news hit hard. I felt sad. I asked myself – how do I forgive someone who has passed away?

So in the spring of 2002, at a healing gathering, I found the courage to speak to the spirit of my abuser. In front of my immediate family and other witnesses, I spoke words of forgiveness.

At that moment, I felt a heavy burden had been lifted. Somehow I felt my spirit was at ease.

It is in setting ourselves free from our burdens – whatever they may be – that we must engage in good conversation.

As citizens of this country, we must be engaged in meaningful dialogue. We can no longer be afraid to talk to each another. We shouldn't have to settle our differences in the courts. We can no longer speak to each other through the media.

For example – a small group of us in Sioux Lookout have started a process of dialogue at the community level.

The Sioux Lookout Community Coalition for Healing and Reconciliation consists of former students, clergy of churches that ran residential schools, and interested citizens.

It is our desire to create awareness of our collective past and to understand where we are at today. So if we are aware of our past and understand each other today, together we can move forward to a better future.

In short, we are about building bridges – creating awareness – promoting good relations – talking to each other.

While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission does its work, we at our coalition often challenge ourselves with the question – what we can do in the community to complement the work of the TRC?

Perhaps more important, we ask ourselves, what are going do after the mandate of the TRC expires?

The Sioux Lookout Community Coalition for Healing and Reconciliation has organized activities for our community and region. We have:

- held information sessions;
- shown videos;
- held sharing circles;
- invited and have been honoured with visits from key staff of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission including the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair;
- assisted both the TRC and the Legacy of Hope in taking statements from former students and others;
- conducted special ceremonies;
- participated in community marches;
- honoured and held commemoration ceremonies on the National Day of Healing and Reconciliation;
- maintained good media relations;
- held coffee houses with lots of local talent;
- attended speaking engagements;
- worked with the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in launching *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity*; and, of course, we've
- had our fair share of feasting and laughter.

More recently, we have been putting together a handbook on how communities can engage in reconciliation activities. This project is made possible with assistance from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. We hope to make this handbook available online early this summer.

We are grateful to organizations and groups who have supported and continue to support our endeavours. Some of you are here tonight:

- Aboriginal Healing Foundation;
- Legacy of Hope Foundation;
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission;
- National Day of Healing and Reconciliation;
- Canadian Institute of Conflict Resolution; and,
- Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

Friends, as you can see, this issue is not going to go away tomorrow. This issue is not just about money. It's not just about a 1.9 billion dollar settlement. Some people view it as a way of squeezing more money from the government.

And, as some people may think, it is not as simple as – get over it already.

I would like to think that the residential school system was based upon good intentions, but the reality is that something went so horribly wrong along the way.

It's about a system that pierced the souls of young Aboriginal children. It's about the intergenerational effects that are so much alive today.

The 2008 federal government's *Statement of Apology* marked a significant milestone in aboriginal and non-aboriginal relations in this country. Those powerful words will forever resonate in my heart – speaking to the desire to restore what this country has lost.

I listened in awe to the words of the *Apology* with my family beside me. I heard the following words:

QUOTE – The burden of this experience has been on your shoulders for far too long. The burden is properly ours as a Government, and as a country. There is no place in Canada for the attitudes that inspired the Indian Residential Schools system to ever prevail again. You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey. The Government of Canada sincerely apologizes and asks the forgiveness

of the Aboriginal peoples of this country for failing them so profoundly – we are sorry. END OF QUOTE

I acknowledge those words. I accept the Apology.

For the good of my beautiful grandchildren – and for the good of your beautiful grandchildren – and for the sake of all future generations, we must commit ourselves to bring about good social change.

It's about respect and understanding.

Some of you may have been at the first national event of the Truth and Commission in Winnipeg last summer.

A respected Elder got up to pray just shortly after the then Governor General Michaëlle Jean arrived where thousands were gathered in sacred ceremony. It was a gorgeous day.

We were blessed at the sight of an eagle soaring high above us.

Again, what a powerful symbol of hope!

Thank you for listening to my sharing.

I honour each of you.