

Notes for a speech delivered by Michael DeGagné
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Moving Forward: Reparations for the Stolen Generations Conference

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I'm grateful for the opportunity today to represent the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, an Aboriginal-run organisation created to address the legacy of Canada's Residential School System. I wish first to acknowledge Aboriginal people in the audience who are part of the stolen generation, elders, and those who've worked to assemble this forum for discussion and sharing.

I'd like to tell you about the Aboriginal Healing Foundation – its work, how it came to exist, and its progress as a form of reparation for Aboriginal people forced to attend residential school. These former students are called “survivors.”

In Canada, as elsewhere, Aboriginal people have many, diverse cultures and languages. The Aboriginal people of Canada are divided into three broad groups: First Nations (often referred to as “Indians”), Inuit (northern people formerly referred to as “eskimoes”), and Métis (people of mixed French and Indian blood who originally settled in western Canada). The Aboriginal Healing Foundation addresses the needs of all three.

The Residential School System

Let's turn to a brief history of residential schools. (My colleague from the Reform Commission will present a history that is more detailed.)

The system of forced, assimilative schooling for Aboriginal children was government policy in Canada for nearly one hundred years. A Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott, once said that he wanted to continue the process of assimilation until “there was not one single Indian in the body politic.” In the mid-1800s, State and Church first collaborated in an effort to turn Aboriginal people into Europeans –this of course was before there was a country called Canada. Formalised in 1892 by a government Order-in-Council, this collaboration took many forms which include residential schools, boarding schools, day schools, hostels, and community relocation schemes. Only in 1969 did the government end its official policy of residential schooling for Aboriginal children. Today, an estimated 95, 000 former residential school students are living.

The policy of forced assimilation has devastated Aboriginal people. Its legacy is loss of language and destruction of culture, chronic addictions, community violence, suicide, broken families, mistrust of leadership and authority, and shame. In the past decade, many residential school survivors have also come forward with stories of physical and sexual abuse suffered while attending residential school.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

In November 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) released its 3,200-page Final Report. RCAP, I should mention, functioned in a manner comparable to a truth and reconciliation commission. Now, different people have differing notions of a truth



and reconciliation commission. By this I mean that its mandate included, among other things, the recording of public testimonies and the making of recommendations to government. As you know, a Royal Commission is Canada's highest form of inquiry. In fulfilment of its mandate, RCAP visited 96 communities, heard 1,400 witnesses and commissioned 142 intervener studies. The result of this report was 440 recommendations to government. Such, in brief, was the character of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

RCAP was organised to analyse the relationship between Aboriginal Peoples and the rest of the country. In the early 1990s that relationship had become uneasy, to put it mildly, and the government of the day was under political pressure to respond.

The Commissioners heard many testimonies of the residential school's legacy. An entire chapter of their report is dedicated to residential schools. The truth regarding this system is available to all who are interested. Concerning reconciliation and healing, RCAP recommended apologies by those responsible, compensation of communities (to assist them in designing and administering programs that promote healing and the rebuilding of communities), and funding for treatment of affected individuals and their families. These recommendations were among many others addressing all facets of Aboriginal life.

The Government Response

On January 7, 1998, the federal government responded to RCAP by issuing a "Statement of Reconciliation." This statement was contained within a document entitled *Gathering Strength—Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan* and reads as follows:

The ancestors of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples lived on this continent long before explorers from other continents first came to North America. For thousands of years before this country was founded, they enjoyed their own forms of government. Diverse, vibrant Aboriginal nations had ways of life rooted in fundamental values concerning their relationships to the Creator, the environment, and each other, in the role of Elders as the living memory of their ancestors, and in their responsibilities as custodians of the lands, waters and resources of their homelands.

Sadly, our history with respect to the treatment of Aboriginal people is not something in which we can take pride. Attitudes of racial and cultural superiority led to a suppression of Aboriginal culture and values. As a country, we are burdened by past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of Aboriginal peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices. We must recognize the impact of these actions on the once self-sustaining nations that were disaggregated, disrupted, limited or even destroyed by the dispossession of traditional territory, by the



relocation of Aboriginal people, and by some provisions of the Indian Act. We must acknowledge that the result of these actions was the erosion of the political, economic and social systems of Aboriginal people and nations.

One aspect of our relationship with Aboriginal people over this period that requires particular attention is the Residential School system. This system separated many children from their families and communities and prevented them from speaking their own languages and from learning about their heritage and cultures. In the worst cases, it left legacies of personal pain and distress that continue to reverberate in Aboriginal communities to this day. Tragically, some children were the victims of physical and sexual abuse.

The Government of Canada acknowledges the role it played in the development and administration of these schools. Particularly to those individuals who experienced the tragedy of sexual and physical abuse at residential schools, and who have carried this burden believing that in some way they must be responsible, we wish to emphasize that what you experienced was not your fault and should never have happened. To those of you who suffered this tragedy at residential schools, we are deeply sorry.

A strategy to begin the process of reconciliation, *Gathering Strength* also featured the announcement of a \$350-million healing fund. On March 31, 1998, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation was created to manage this fund. It was given one year to organise, four years to spend or commit the \$350-million fund (plus interest generated) and five years to monitor projects and write a report – a total of 10 years.

Public reaction to the Statement of Reconciliation varied. Some considered it proof of the government's commitment to a new relationship with Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. Others saw in the Statement language deployed with care to prevent lawsuits, or at the least to minimise potential court damages. The former felt that an apology was the groundwork for a new, government-to-government, nation-to-nation relationship. The latter noted that neither “apology” nor “apologise” were used in the Government's 812-word reconciliation statement. The government's gesture was therefore interpreted by some as stopping short of a full admission of responsibility. Despite these differing opinions, the Statement of Reconciliation was widely reported and widely interpreted as an apology.

The Church Responses

The Government demonstrated in its Statement of Reconciliation an awareness that (as RCAP puts it) “a great cleansing of the wounds of the past must take place.” The churches, who operated the schools, have eloquently acknowledged this too. The United Church of Canada issued a concise “Apology to First Nations” in August 1986, which concludes, “We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the spirit of Christ so that our peoples



may be blessed and God's creation healed." The Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate apologised in 1991, acknowledging that "healing cannot however happen until some very complex, long-standing and deep historical issues have been addressed." The "Anglican Church of Canada's Apology to Native People," delivered by Archbishop Michael Peers in 1993, and the Presbyterian Church's 1994 Confession, also recognised the need for healing. The Archbishop put the matter as follows:

I also know that I am in need of healing, and my own people are in need of healing, and our church is in need of healing. Without that healing, we will continue the same attitudes that have done such damage in the past.

This quotation discloses what is at the heart of reconciliation, a change in the attitudes of the past. A change of ways in Canada must be demonstrated before reconciliation can occur. A "reconciliation agenda" has been set by the churches and the government, but not all Aboriginal people are prepared to follow along. It seems likely that reconciliation can be the result only of a lengthy, often painful process in which Aboriginal people have a meaningful role in setting the agenda.

The Healing Foundation

The Foundation was established on March 31, 1998 with no infrastructure or employees in place and with the high expectations of Aboriginal communities. Applications for funding began to arrive within days of the organisation's establishment, long before any capacity to accept them was in place. The organisation is unique because the entire grant was given in a lump sum to an Aboriginal Board of Directors, and its activities were described in an agreement signed by the Board and the federal government. This level of autonomy is not generally given to such an entity.

The Board of Directors have elected and appointed members. Some members are appointed by national Aboriginal organisations, and others are elected from the Aboriginal community at large. The government of Canada retains two seats on the 17-member Board, although both government appointees must also be Aboriginal people.

The agreement to operate the Foundation outlines what the Foundation can and cannot do. Funding is strictly directed to activities which address the legacy of physical and sexual abuse arising from the residential school system, and the intergenerational legacy of this abuse. These restrictions exclude funding of

- capital infrastructure (buildings)
- advocacy on behalf of survivors
- litigation-related activities
- compensation



- language and culture programs

These limitations have created problems. Survivors look to the Foundation to be a voice which explains the impact of residential schools to the non-Aboriginal public. Somehow, we must perform this role without becoming an “advocate.” Many survivors have seen, and still see, the Foundation as a source of compensation or litigation support. They are angered by our inability to give them what they seek. Most difficult of all are the matters of language and culture loss – losses referred to by many survivors as cultural genocide. These are seen as the biggest impact of the residential school legacy, and therefore the Foundation must continually find creative ways of channelling funding to projects which are supportive of language and cultural renewal.

What We Do

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation has committed over \$135 million in project funding since it began giving out funds in May, 1999. Over 500 projects have so far received support. Now in its third year of existence, the Foundation supports a variety of healing initiatives. Some examples are:

- Healing Services (e.g. healing circles, day treatment services, sex offender programs)
- Community Services and life skills (e.g. support networks, leadership training for healers)
- Prevention and awareness (e.g. education and training materials, sexual abuse awareness)
- Traditional activities (e.g. wilderness retreats, on the land programs, Elder Support Networks)
- Training and education

For those interested in more detail, specific projects are described on our website (www.ahf.ca). You may also contact the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Principles of Our Mandate

The Foundation can, in hindsight, identify the principles of its mandate which have best helped Aboriginal people address survivor needs. These include

- 1) **An independent, Aboriginal governance and operating structure.** The Foundation has a Board and a staff composed mostly of Aboriginal people. Although this has created high expectations for survivors, there is a resulting trust among Aboriginal communities that the Foundation is addressing their concerns.



- 2) **Mandatory and meaningful participation of survivors in all aspects of healing projects.** All projects are required to have the support of survivors in the community. Projects must have survivors as part of the oversight of the project, and projects must have accountability mechanisms to the community.
- 3) **Community control over who receives support and how healing is defined.** The recipient of Foundation funding defines the healing needs of the community and determines who should receive services. The needs of the community are not prescribed by the Foundation.
- 4) **Funding decisions based on the ability of applicants to manage project funds and to deliver service to survivors.**
- 5) **A focus on residential school and the intergenerational legacy of the school system.** The need for funding in Aboriginal communities is acute for all kinds of social services, from housing to addictions to recreation. As an independent Foundation, we can focus funding on healing the Legacy of residential schools.
- 6) **Accountability both to government funders and Aboriginal people.** The Foundation Board seeks opportunities to make public presentations and to consult with Aboriginal people on the organisation and delivery of funding and other services.

These principles have guided, and will continue to guide, our work. They may be further generalised into the following guideline, that the principles and substance of the healing and reconciliation processes must be guided by Aboriginal people.

Conclusion

It has been an honour to speak to you of the Foundation's history and work. I've mentioned a number of developments that have come out of the need to address the residential school legacy. There is one more, the exchanges and relationships occurring around the world in relation to the matters we are discussing today.

Not long ago, in Canada, speaking of residential school abuse was a universal taboo. Aboriginal people suffered their unmentionable wounds. It was as if a kind of sleep had swallowed a generation. Then one day, a man woke up. Somewhere, a woman told her story. Soon after, three survivors had gathered in a room. That which had once been beyond challenge was torn from history's dark places and thrown into light.

This is how we move forward – this messy, awful business of making things better one day, one person, one community at a time.

I hope that some of what I have said will be of help, and I wish you well.

- 1,722 words



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