

A Speech
Prepared for Georges Erasmus
President, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation

University of Western Ontario
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[Salutations and Greetings] Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Distinguished Guests, Faculty, Graduating Class of 2006, Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Morning.

Thank-you for the kind introduction and for the honour of addressing you.

It is a convention of the Convocation Speech to look forward in hope, and to evoke as one's momentary style the wisdom of experience, in the presumed service of youth's potential.

If however you've been well-served by your education, you might well look on the endeavour with scepticism.

Therefore the only thing I'll assure you in perfect confidence is that you will grow older. And, given adequate time, you will one day have a fuller past upon which to reflect.

From this imagined place I ask you to look, not forward, but backward – and to consider the sort of history that you will have made of your days.

If you had the choice, and you do, what sort of past would you wish for yourself?

Seven years ago I was asked to be President of a national, not-for-profit organisation called the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

This appointment followed some years I'd worked as President of the Dene Nation, as National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, and more recent as Co-Chair of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

Looking back over these years I discern a narrative that was not then apparent.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation was established on March 31, 1998 and given \$350 million by the Canadian government to fund community-based healing work.

This work addresses the intergenerational legacy of physical and sexual abuse suffered by Inuit, Métis, and First Nations children who were taken from their families and placed in church-run institutions to be assimilated into Canadian society.

A chapter of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples's Final Report – released November 21, 1996 – considered in detail the historic character and effects of the residential school system and made several recommendations, one response to which was the Canadian government's creation of a healing fund.

And of course the Royal Commission itself was one consequence of an earlier national crisis which began July 11, 1990 at Oka, Quebec and involved the Canadian army and a Mohawk community in what appeared on the surface to be a land dispute. At the time I happened to be the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

Now it may appear that I am taking some sort of credit for the course of history, if credit is even an appropriate word for something so burdened at times by mere nastiness as human history.

But the point I wish to make is that this work has led me to a conclusion about the core issue which links these three events and others both before and after.

I've come to believe an essential and enduring challenge of the future – of *your* future as Canadian citizens – is to walk along the path of healing and reconciliation.

The wounds of history have not been meaningfully addressed in this country, but must be if we are to build a better relationship between Aboriginal people and Canada.

Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the challenge of the future is to restore the relationship of mutual respect that once existed in the past and which stands in historic agreements as a model for approaching generations.

Now, you are not responsible for the history of your nation beyond the obligation to study it. It is an inheritance. But you are responsible for what happens in your time, under your watch.

You are not spectators or consumers. In all public matters you are citizens. You have a hand in the making of this country, and from this fact you derive a certain pride, as you indeed should.

It is as citizens that I speak to you. As your student life ends, and you embark upon the journey of the rest of your life, may you leave this institution taking with you the intellectual curiosity of which the University historically is custodian.

May you have the courage to face the difficult questions for which there are only creative solutions.

If you do, and your mind is open, you will live the life of a citizen. And as you do so, remember to take the time now and then to ask yourself what you are leaving behind as your personal legacy.

Masi.