

A Speech
Prepared for AHF President Georges Erasmus

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Thank-you for the invitation to speak to you today on Mi'kmaq traditional territory.

This will be the last time that I'll address an AFN assembly as President of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Over the years, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation worked with a number of AFN leaders—Matthew Coon Come, Ovide Mercredi, Phil Fontaine, and Shawn Atleo.

All were consistently supportive, as have been all the national aboriginal organizations and their leaders.

On behalf of the staff and board of the AHF, I thank you, and I thank the aboriginal political organizations for their unwavering commitment to the work of healing.

Although I'm here to make some final remarks, there's no question that the work of healing is incomplete.

We were clear all along that the resources and time given to the AHF would be enough only to begin our work.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation was established on March 31, 1998.

We had a fund of \$350 million and a mandate to encourage and support community-based healing initiatives that address the legacy of Indian residential schools, including intergenerational impacts.

In 2005, we received another \$40 million, and in 2007 \$125 million—a total of \$515 million from 1998 to 2007.

In the end, we gave more to communities than we received from government, as a result of the interest generated by investments.

We received \$15 million from the Catholic Entities, through the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, and this money went to healing centres across the country.

So what else did we do with these funds?

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation funded community designed and community delivered programs.

The activities we funded were diverse, and very creative.

They include:

- healing activities out on the land
- gatherings and commemorations of survivors and their families
- individual and family counseling
- parenting skills workshops
- addictions treatment
- prevention of violence programs
- awareness and prevention of abuse activities
- training of healers
- healing circles
- programs targeting youth and Elders

In the early years we also provided funding for books, videos and artistic works.

But the limitation of our funds convinced us, in 2003, that we had to focus on direct healing activities.

To give you an idea of how limited our funds were: we received over \$1 billion in eligible requests in the first year of the Foundation alone.

So we had to really focus what we did.

The projects we funded offered traditional, culturally based healing.

Many projects also offered Western therapeutic programs, such as counseling based on psychology.

This gave survivors a wide range of options, and left the communities free to decide their own path.

We found—and there's no surprise here—that healing based in the language and culture of the community was highly valued.

In 2004 we released a three-volume report—our Final Report—going into great detail about the programs developed with funds from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

I believe it's still available from the office over the next month or so, but you'll have to act quickly.

It's also on the website, as is all of our research, and will remain there for the next couple of years, after we've closed.

Speaking of reports and books, we have some new books here, available from our booth.

One is quite new indeed: it's being released at this Assembly.

It's called *Full Circle*, and I encourage you to pick it up.

This book tells the whole story of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, from its beginnings in 1998 to its eventual closure, which is now upon us.

The author of the book, Wayne Spear, is also at this Assembly, and he'll be doing a reading later.

As of 2014, the AHF has contributed over \$536 million to 1,345 grants.

Most of the people who participated in AHF-funded programs—healing circles, ceremonies, commemoration—had never participated in a healing activity before.

When we came along, there were still many communities and individuals not yet ready to talk about the painful impacts of the residential school.

We argued, unsuccessfully as it turned out, for a longer mandate.

We said to government, let us have a true foundation, where the money is invested for the long term and we can support this healing for thirty years and more.

And if it isn't going to be the AHF, then by all means have someone else do it: as long as there is support for Survivors—because ten years is not enough.

Twenty years is not enough. Not for the healing of the wounds suffered by generations of our people, for well over a century now.

So what needs to be done? What's left unfinished?

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation never had the funds to go into every community across this land, or to fund every worthy proposal.

As I said, way back in 1999 we already had over \$1 billion in eligible applications.

So getting the money to communities was not going to be a problem. They were many already there, eager to take up the work.

The community need was extraordinary and immediate.

And years later, as we knew we would, we are still living with the legacy of the residential school.

It's still in the news, and it's still in our communities.

We've had an Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement and an apology from the Prime Minister.

These were supposed to mark a new beginning—a new relationship.

But to many it does feel as if Canada not only closed a chapter on residential schools, they closed the whole book on healing as well.

Some have healed. They'll never forget, but they have been able to face their pain.

For others, this is not the case, as we all know.

In closing, I acknowledge and thank the many individuals who have stood by survivors over the years.

The AHF played its role, but it was the survivors themselves who started this work of healing and who have ensured that it will continue.

After I left the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, in 1998, I had no intention of immediately taking on another job.

But this work was too important and too compelling to walk away from.

I know the healing is going to continue.

We'll never go back to where we were even fifteen years ago—back to the silence and the shame.

Today, this history is out in the open. There's now no denying what was done to us.

And because the past can no longer be denied, neither can the future which is rightfully ours.

We all know what that future looks like. We knew what it would look like even before the residential schools.

A future of mutual respect between nations; a just and right relationship; a proper sharing of the land; healthy people and healthy communities living with dignity and pride.

Thank-you.