

A SPEECH FOR CHAIRMAN GEORGES ERASMUS

BC Provincial Residential School Project

21 March 2001

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation

Check On Delivery

Chief Joseph, respected guests, ladies and gentlemen, Danet'e.

As Chairman of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, I am honoured today by the invitation to represent my fellow Board members and staff.

I thank you, Chief Joseph, for this opportunity to speak of the work of the Foundation.

In the next few minutes, I am going to outline the current status of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation's activities.

I am here to tell you that, while a good amount of healing initiatives are underway across this vast country, there is a great amount of work yet to be done.

The Provincial Residential School Project is one good example of the work we support. In our mission statement, we speak of "encouraging and supporting Aboriginal people in building and reinforcing sustainable healing processes."

Through initiatives like the Provincial Residential School Project, we are co-ordinating and enhancing the capacity of Aboriginal people to address the residential school legacy.

Support for the work of healing is not the only feature of our mandate. We also work to engage Canadians in the healing process, encouraging them to walk with us on the path of reconciliation.

On the matter of reconciliation, there is much to be done. The Healing Foundation plays a relatively small yet vital role in the overall healing and reconciliation process.

The really gutsy work is taking place in the communities, at the local level.

Unfortunately, the good work of courageous people can sometimes be overshadowed by controversy.

And so, I encourage those of you working in the Canadian media to reflect on your role when dealing with the issues of residential school.

Many journalists have phoned me since the beginning of the Foundation, most of them wanting me to comment on the latest controversy.

I do what I can, but these days I am committed to the work of the Foundation. That's why I am encouraging you to consider how you may help to advance healing and reconciliation, and to provide hope, for your readers.

Allow me to talk in a bit more detail about the work of healing. I'd like to begin with a background to the kinds of projects funded by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

As you know, the residential school system was designed to assimilate Aboriginal people into Canadian society. To this end, children were removed from their families, in many cases by force.

Some children were physically and sexually abused. I have been all over Canada, and I've heard many stories about these abuses.

I heard of abuse as co-Chairman of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and I hear of it now as Chairman of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

I tell you this because we, the Board and staff of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, know it is important to listen to Aboriginal people when we design or modify our funding processes.

Not long ago, we had 6 Regional Gatherings across the country to hear the concerns and questions of survivors, their descendants, and communities.

Since our beginnings, we have held such gatherings. The first, a strategy conference held in 1998, took place not far from here, on Squamish territory.

There we consulted with survivors to learn from them what kind of healing foundation they desired.

Such meetings are one of the ways we strive to be accountable and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal people in our delivery of support.

This support comes in the form of funding for a variety of project types. Some of the activities we fund are

- a) life-skills training

- b) support networks and leadership training for healers
- c) healing circles
- d) sex offender programs
- e) day treatment services
- f) abuse prevention and awareness training materials
- g) traditional activities such as wilderness retreats and on-the-land programs
- h) Elder support networks
- i) Parenting skills training
- j) curriculum development
- k) conferences and workshops

Through these initiatives, we are addressing the intergenerational legacy of physical and sexual abuse in the residential school system, a legacy which includes loss of culture and language, chronic addictions, lateral violence, broken families, suicide, poor life skills, and spiritual and cultural shame.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation was given 4 years, beginning March 31, 1999, to spend or commit a \$350 million healing fund, plus the interest generated.

We are now almost 2 years into this mandate. Only now are we beginning to appreciate fully the depth and scope of the challenge we face.

That is why I am pleased to have opportunities like this one today. It is good to see people taking the steps required to bring healing to their communities.

Our long-term vision is to see those affected by the intergenerational legacy of physical and sexual abuse suffered in the residential school system address, in meaningful ways, unresolved trauma.

We at the Foundation look forward to a time when individuals, families, communities, and nations have broken the cycle of abuse and enhanced their capacity to sustain their well-being, and that of future generations.

As someone said at a recent Gathering, here in Vancouver, "We have only one chance in a lifetime to put our hopes and dreams to a better destiny for all of us. Whatever you have, give it the best you've got for our survival."

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