

"A Talk to the Graduates
Bella Bella"

by:

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Graduates :

This is a very special day for you. It is "special" because today you are recognized for your achievement. This graduation marks an achievement made possible by your own efforts. You studied, you remained in school even though you were probably tempted many times to quit, to give up. You made sacrifices in order to reach this day. Now, we can share in your achievement because it is not only an achievement by you, but it is an achievement for your families and even more it is an achievement for all Indian people.

Many thoughts go through your minds today. You probably have mixed feelings. You feel joy, because you have finished high school. You feel sorrow because it means "breaking up the old gang" and you may even feel a bit of fear or apprehension about the future. Now, what? Now, where?

As you make plans for your future, take strength in those strong qualities of yours and of those people who helped you to get to where you are today.

- Make good plans for yourself.
- Make challenging plans for yourself.

Remember that you are needed. Our people need young Indian men and women to become doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, accountants, engineers, electricians, plumbers, almost any vocation you choose can be a way to provide a service to your people. In the traditional culture of our people, our measure of success was "How much service have I rendered to my people?" In today's society that is no less important. The modern

"Indian World" has many problems:

- over 90% of Indian children never finish high school.

Why?

- unemployment rate for Indians is over 50% going as high as 90% in some places. Why?

- mortality rate is four times that of the general population. Why?

- one out of three Indians will die a violent or accidental death. (Man. study) Why?

Only Indian people helping Indian people can change that picture. Education and training will provide us with the tools to be of service to our people.

What helped you to succeed to where you are today? I would guess that you have a fairly good image of yourself - a good feeling of who you are. That is what is needed in order to achieve. Many of our people have had only negative experiences. These experiences have led many to defeat.

Sometimes, schools are responsible for this negative feeling. As we study history for example, we read and hear very often that Indians were pagans (irreligious). Yet Indian sources tell us that: "The Redman had the most spiritual civilization the world has ever known"

"The Redman's approach to all life and thought was spiritual. The culture of the Redman was fundamentally spiritual; his measure of success was fundamentally spiritual; his measure of success was - How much service have I rendered to my people" (Giving - sharing)

"The Redman's religion was not a matter of certain days but was a part of his every thought and his daily life"

"The Redman believed that the great spirit is with us every day and all the time. The Redman regrets that the Whiteman's God comes only one day a week."

Source - The Gospel of the Redman by Ernest Thompson Seaton first printed in 1937.

The Redman had a creed:

"There is one great spirit, the creator and ruler of all things, to whom we are responsible." Even though many Native people today belong to various faiths that were brought to this country, many still practice this part of the creed. e.g. Fisher River -

The creed also states:

"Having arrived on this earth, the first duty of man is the attainment of perfect manhood. Manhood must be achieved in the Body Way, the Mind Way, the Spirit Way, and the Service Way.

The Redman also had twelve commandments - two more than found in the bible.

To destroy the myth that Native Indians were pagans, Indians must be aware of this true heritage of our people.

Besides many references to Indians as pagans, history books are filled with many false statements about Native people. We are definitely denied our heroes.

History books tell us that:

- Columbus discovered America.
- that North American history began in 1492.

- That MacKenzie, Hudson, Fraser, etc. discovered certain rivers, lakes which bear their names.

Is this true?

How about biased statements found in textbooks? What do these do for the Indian self-image? What do you think of these quotes?

- 1) "A few natives went home with him. They were souvenirs of this trip, as were the bright coloured birds, the tobacco plants, and the potatoes." (Cartier)
- 2) "Perhaps the sailors made friends with the Indians as you would make friends with a puppy - by offering something to eat."
- 3) "The Indians came pounding after them, waving their tomahawks and knives, and yelling blue murder."
- 4) "The Bourgeois willingly paid premium prices for top quality pemmican. They also scaled down the prices paid for poor stuff, unhappily described by one of them:
"Take scrapings from the dirtiest outside of a very stale piece of cold roast beef, add to it lumps of tallow, rancid fat . . . then garnish all with human hair . . . and short hairs from dogs and oxen, and you have pemmican."

The real recipe for pemmican precedes this description. However, the imbalance is effective enough for a child to remember the "bad" pemmican. By this manner, pemmican is downgraded and the importance that it held as a main food is not understood.

This kind of teaching can negatively affect children's minds. On the other hand, if Indian children grow up realizing the positive aspects of Indian culture and heritage, they will develop a good self concept. We should therefore ensure that children and adults are aware of the many contributions our ancestors made to the development of North America. Our success depends upon this knowledge.

Examples:

1. exploration
2. settlement
3. food - corn, (pop-corn), peanuts, chocolate, tobacco
domestic turkeys, honeybees, gum.
4. agriculture - irrigation
5. mining - copper, gold, silver, oil
6. medicine - cascara, cocaine, plant derived drugs for birth control, miscarriages, bone setting, polltuces.
7. transportation - canoe, snowshoe
8. design in art, architecture and music
9. language - potlatch, Canada, Saskatchewan, Chinook, Mocassin.

These are just a few of the contributions of Native People to the development of Canada.

Let's think of our traditional cultural values. Our elders teach us that we should maintain our traditional values:

1. sharing (potlatch)
2. age (respect)
3. extended family
4. cooperation
5. harmony with nature.

Can these be applied today? I think they can.

Whatever you as graduates decide to do, think of your culture and heritage with pride. Pass this message of the true story of our people onto others both Indian and White. If we do this, the greatness of our people will surface once again. We will be a people of pride and a people that has the means of living in this modern day. The statistics I spoke of earlier will change.

I will conclude with words appropriate to our thoughts this evening. They are the words of Chief Dan George found in his book

My Heart Soars:

"There is a longing in the heart of my people to reach out and grasp that which is needed for our survival. There is a longing among the young of my nation to secure for themselves and their people the skills that will provide them with a sense of worth and purpose. They will be our new warriors. Their training will be much longer and more demanding than it was in older days.

The long years of study will demand more determination, separation from home and family will demand endurance. But they will emerge with their hand held forward, not to receive welfare, but to grasp the place in society that is rightly ours. I am a chief, but my power to make war is gone, and the only weapon left to me is speech. It is only with tongue and speech that I can fight my people's war.

Oh, Great Spirit! Give me back the courage of the olden Chiefs. Let me wrestle with my surroundings. Let me once again, live in harmony with my environment.

Let me humbly accept this new culture and through it rise up and go on. Like the thunderbird of old, I shall rise again out of the sea; I shall grab the instruments of the white man's success - his education, his skills. With these new tools I shall build my race into the proudest segment of your society. I shall see our young braves and our chiefs sitting in the houses of law and government, ruling

and being ruled by the knowledge and
freedoms of our great land."

Thank you for inviting me to your graduation.

Congratulations!