

"A Talk to the Graduates"

Acwsalcta School

Bella Coola, B.C.

June 29, 1988

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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 for 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?
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- 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 get 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.

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, (popcorn), 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
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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 North America.

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

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

Can these be applied today? I think they can.

Whatever you do 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 determinations, 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!
