

MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY

CONVOCATION

MAY 11, 1990

Verna J. Kirkness

U.B.C.

Madam Chancellor, Madam President, Members of the Board of Governors, Honoured Guests, graduates, ladies and gentlemen.

I'm delighted to be here. I love lobster, I love fog, but most of all, I love celebrations! Today, we are here to celebrate achievement. My most sincere congratulations to the graduates. Convocation has finally arrived and your **hard work, commitment, and sacrifices** are being rewarded. Today is your day! Today is when you join the ranks of those prepared to meet **global challenges**. I'm indeed, fortunate to share this day with you and **to receive an honorary degree from Mount Saint Vincent University**. You will be interested to know that this is the Alma Mater of our Dean of Education at UBC, Nancy Sheehan (O'Hearne). She received her B.A. in 1956 and her B.Ed. in 1957. She was pleased that her Alma Mater was honouring a member of her faculty. She sends her greetings. (Now I know why she's such a good Dean.)

I was interested to learn that Mount Saint Vincent University is a university committed to **the special educational needs of women**; a university which adheres to the principle of education as a **preparation for life** aiming for full equality for women in society.

These are the same aspirations held by our people, the First Nations of Canada. We are committed to identifying a meaningful education that will address the **special educational needs of Our people**.

You are aware that from the 17th Century to the present day, the formal education of First Nations people has been largely designed and directed **without Our involvement**. The failure of this process has been well

documented. In the late 60's, our people finally took a strong stand in education and in 1972, we articulated a policy of "*Indian Control of Indian Education*" designed to **improve educational opportunities for our people** that would lead to meaningful and equal participation in today's society.

The policy of Indian Control of Indian Education stated that "*We believe in education as a preparation for total living. Our aim is to make education relevant to the philosophy and the needs of Indian people.*"

- * *We want education to give our children a strong sense of identity with confidence in their personal worth and ability.*
- * *Instead of a one-sided view of history, we want our children to learn a Canadian history which attaches honour to the customs, values, accomplishments and contributions of our people.*
- * *We want our children to learn science and technology so that they can promote the harmony of man with nature...not destroy it.*
- * *We want our children to learn about their fellow men in literature and social studies, and in the process to learn to respect the values and culture of others.*
- * *Our philosophy of education looks at learning and teaching as an integral part of living, both for the teacher and the child. It is not a five hour, five day a week exercise for a dozen or so years. It is a life-long commitment."*

Like Mount Saint Vincenty University, we too, are committed to meeting the special educational needs of a very important segment of society - Canada's first people. We, too, adhere to the principle of education as a preparation for life - for equality.

Mount Saint Vincent University is also committed to the **preservation of knowledge** and **cultural heritage** and to the **intellectual, moral, spiritual and physical development of those who share in the life of the University.**

Canada's First Nations are also committed to the preservation of knowledge, all knowledge but particularly our peoples knowledge. Paulo Friere, often referred to as a radical Brazilian Educator, describes knowledge as "*an active force used by the learner **to make sense of his life's world** and as a **liberating tool** which represents the basis for social action."* He suggests "*that all educational experience begin with **questions** concerning the meaning of knowledge itself."*

"Whose reality is being legitimized with this knowledge?

*Why this **knowledge** in the first place?*

Whose interests does this knowledge represent?

Why is it being taught this way?

Does this knowledge have meaning for the learner?

Is this knowledge part of the learner's cultural capital?"

We must address those questions seriously. Think of what they mean to you

- as a woman
- as a member of minority group

Is the knowledge we're gaining **helping us to make sense of our life's world?**

We believe that in order for First Nations to have a successful educational experience, **knowledge** must be based on **our peoples traditions and culture**. We must **strive toward the ideals of our ancestors** whose approach to all life and thought was **spiritual**, whose measure of success was based on **how much service we rendered to our people**, whose duty it was to achieve full personhood through the Body Way (physical development), the Mind Way (intellectual development), the Spirit Way (spiritual development) and the Service Way (Social development). The knowledge of First Nations learners must be based on our cultures if we are to make sense of the world.

* **This is the challenge that has confronted my colleagues and myself for the last few decades.** We are in a situation wherein we must identify a meaningful education for our people. We must **break the cycle of failure** that is experienced by many of our young people.

As a colleague of mine, Dr. Eber Hampton, a Chickasaw, currently at the University of Alaska/Fairbanks put it, *"Indian education is a thing of its own kind and we are in the process of defining it."* In the process, we have applied different meanings.

- (1) **Schooling for Assimilation** has dominated
Historic approach to formal education which has resulted in high failure rate. (enemy)
- (2) **Traditional education** which includes: (before contact)
Today oral histories, teaching stories, ceremonies, apprenticeships.

(3) Schooling for Self-Determination

Characterized by: First Nations languages, positive attitudes toward First Nations cultures, good community-school relations.

(4) Education by First Nations

Movement began in 1972 based on parental responsibility and local control

- * First Nations board
- * First Nations personnel
- * First Nations studies
- * First Nations elders.

Is it some of these - all of these - other things. First Nations education "*is a thing of its own kind and we are in the process of defining it.*" That is not a defeatist statement. On the contrary, it is an optimistic statement. As we have been in the process of defining it, we have made strides. One great achievement is in the numbers of First Nations people who can be counted as contributing to the solution today. (Helping in the definition). Compared to 1972, when we had a First Nations teaching force of 200, we now have over 1600 teachers in Canada. From a handful of lawyers just twenty years ago, we now have over 200 First Nations lawyers in Canada. At UBC alone where just ten years ago, we were fortunate to have half a dozen graduates each year, this May we will have about 35 graduates.

12 B.Eds
 2 Ed. Diplomas
 4 M.Eds
 1 Ed.D.
 1 Computer Science
 7 Law
 8 B.A.

As First Nations' educational experience relates more closely (1) to preparation for life, (2) to the preservation and recognition of our peoples knowledge, as our culture is reflected in a holistic way: mind, body, spirit and emotions, we are slowly but surely approaching our definition of education.

I feel secure in the knowledge that we are not alone in our ideals - If they are good enough for the Mount Saint Vincent Univeristy - they are good enough for us.

As I reflect on my life, I'm thankful for the teachings of my people, teachings that I have had the privilege of passing on to our young people. I have referred to these teachers (Chief George Manual, Chief Simon Baker, Elder Minnie Croft) as cultural warriors/heroes. There were many I would like to share some of their teachings with you. Dave Courchene, Grand Chief from Manitoba once issued this challenge to First Nations students. He stated:
(1973)

"Education is the golden key to the future and the educated is its protector. To our Indian students I say that you must take advantage of all the education offered you because our forefathers gave up the entire country so that the right would be yours. Our people need you like never before. You have an entrusted obligation to return to their midst, prepared to fight for the cause--your weapon being education and your sheild being determination...We have placed a sacred trust in you--With education, positive views, and

*constructive action you have an obligation to prepare our **people for the exodus to independence.***"

Chief John Snow of Alberta gives us confidence in the future by following the trails of our ancestors. In First People, First Voices, he says,

"As I look across this beautiful valley, it seems I am looking across the next one hundred years. I am reassured about our future because I have faith in the Great Spirit, the Creator, and I am reminded of the Hebrew prophet of old and I repeat:

'They that wait upon the Great Spirit shall renew their strength,

They shall mount up with wings as eagles'

They shall run and not be weary,

They shall walk and not faint.

(Is. 40:31)

The old path is a proven path to travel on; it has withstood the test of time, not only over centuries, but over thousands of years. This is the path my ancestors walked on and it shall be the path my future generations will walk on. It is the path of the Great Spirit, the Creator.

Those of you who are graduating today recognize that your success is shared by your family, your friends, your community. Without their love and support, today may not have been possible. Our people believe that "*the honour of one is the honour of all*". So your honour today extends to your family, friends and community.

The honour bestowed on me at Mount Saint Vincent University is shared by my family, my friends, my colleagues, my teachers and my cultural heroes.

*** My honour is their honour.** Not only is it an honour but it is a statement.

I will close with a quote from a dear colleague of mine who is no longer with us in person but will always be with us in spirit. It reflects the insights I have gained to sustain me throughout my life. He was another of my teachers-
-Robert W. Sterling, a Thompson Indian from Merritt, B.C.

"I have learned that I am a product of two worlds and my survival and the survival of my people depends on me being the best of both worlds.

I have learned:

Not just to look - but to see!

Not just to touch - but to feel!

Not just to take steps - but to stride!

Not just to listen - but to hear!

Not just to talk - but to say something!

Not just to dream - but to do something!

Not just to take - but to give!

Not just to exist - but to be!

Akoosani, Merci, Thank you.