A Time of Celebration

Hello, my friends. I'm happy that you invited me to come to be with you today. I'm always ready for a good celebration. I'm pleased to know that you have not lost the tradition of having a long celebration. For the past six days you have stepped into the world of our ancestors and you have shown respect for the traditions of our people through prayer, dance, arts and crafts, games, and of course, food. By listening to Elders, youth and other authorities, you have broadened your knowledge of the past and learned how the past can be part of the present and the future.

What you did during this week was "to gather into the circle" Aboriginal students, faculty and staff from "houses of learning" throughout the Lower Mainland. In the spirit of cooperation you shared your cultures and you shared information on a diversity of educational programs in which you are involved. You have demonstrated what unity is all about.

It is like the lesson Hiawatha tried to teach his people - that it is necessary to work together in order to survive, to progress. He showed that you could take one arrow and easily break it in half but if you put several arrows together, it is virtually impossible to break them. That was my Saturday night lesson/reminder as I watched "The Song of Hiawatha" on TV. That same principle applies to your coming together this week. The circle of support formed during this event must be continued.

Your next challenge will be to make every day an Aboriginal Day. How about a T-shirt with "Every Day is an Aboriginal Day" written on it. This could be a fundraiser to enable you to get together several times a year. (I can see the Coordinators cringing)

As I looked over your program for the week, I was reminded of the first World Conference on the Education of Indigenous Peoples that we organized here in Vancouver in 1987. It was organized to address education, culturally and wholistically. We were determined to recognize that education was not only a process of the mind (the cognitive) but that it includes the spiritual, the physical and emotional growth as well. We chose "Tradition, Change and Survival" as our overall theme along with the sub-theme "The answers are within us".

The theme Tradition, Change and Survival related to the need to bring Elders and Youth together. It also related to the past, the present and the future. The "answers are within us" meant that we, as Aboriginal people, have to find our own path to a better existence.

I have very fond memories of that conference because it sparked a cord of unanimity and friendship among the Indigenous peoples and other delegates from around the world. After the Opening Ceremony, with the Grand Entry of the evening before, we spent the first full day of the conference at the site of the Capilano Longhouse in the territory of the Squamish Nation. In the Longhouse, we were welcomed by the Squamish Nation. The
1500 delegates from 17 countries were recognized and we gave thanks to the Great Spirit. The traditional fire was lit and our hearts and minds became united.

Following the ceremony in the Longhouse, the day was spent in traditional methods of learning which included: storytelling, dances/songs, drama (performing arts), games, food preparation, elders' spiritual teachings and more.

The tone was set! We became in tune with ourselves. This one day carried us through the remainder of the conference held at the University of British Columbia.

In addressing Tradition, speakers stated:

1. Tradition must be part of change
2. The Elders must be our teachers
3. Our traditions and cultures are at the heart of who we are
4. We must reconnect with Mother Earth
5. We must seek spiritual wisdom to obtain balance and harmony in our lives
6. We must take care of ourselves first, through prayer and meditation, then our families, then our communities

(6) Quote by Squamish Elder, Percy Paul. "We came from the four winds. We have been put on this island for a reason. Your efforts and sacrifices are not in vain. We are all seeking a vision. We ask our ancestors to guide us on our chosen path."

In response to CHANGE, the speakers stated:

1. Cultural survival and educational success lie in applying traditional values to contemporary educational practices.
2. Traditional culture should be taught as definitively as possible. It is in everyday living...where culture develops. The passing of culture from one generation to another becomes traditional culture. (Jeannette Armstrong)
3. Traditional cultures developed unique teaching methods which unleashed special abilities within individuals. Individual powers (gifts) could be internalized through such practices as vision quests, fasts, and other forms of personal endurance aimed at developing excellence. (Jeannette)
4. Education into culture not culture into education must be the strategy.

In addressing SURVIVAL, speakers stated:

1. We must recognize and practice our traditions and make them part of our everyday lives
2. We must increase educational initiatives that are culturally based
3. The two must join (tradition and change) to ensure our future
4. We must be of one mind - young and old
5. Quote by Youth, Franklin Machian. "You have planted a seed in our heads so that we can have ideas to take back to the people in our villages. True understanding of traditional values starts with a personal vision of who we are and what we could become".
That conference was a statement that "we must know the past, to understand the present, to plan wisely, for the future. It was a celebration of culture. It was a celebration of learning among a diverse groups of indigenous people from around the world. The Aboriginal Awareness week that is concluding today has been a celebration of culture and learning among students, their families, staff, and faculty in the Lower Mainland.

We all have a part to play in finding our path. As the late Chief Dan George has said, "If the very old will remember, the very young will listen. The young and the old are closest to life, they love every minute dearly".

In closing, I would like to share with you the words of the late Robert Sterling (Sr). Robert was an educator and very influential in the education movement at the time if his untimely death in 1983. He was a wonderful colleague and friend. His message was given to a group of students/graduates as he responds to the question, "We are trained but are we ready?"

I must be honest...in that I recognize that I am one of the 'behind the scenes' leaders. I am dedicated to Indian people. Any decision I make will hinge directly upon whether it may help or hinder the progress of Indians in seeking their place in society,

I have learned that my development has been mental, physical, spiritual, social, family, financial, political, scientific.

I have learned that I am a member of an Indian tribe but more importantly, I am a member of the best of the human race.

I have learned that all people are learners and all people are teachers. We teach by the way we learn, and we learn by the way we teach.

Each thing I have learned has changed me; and the more I change, the more I stay the same. The more I learn, the more I discover I need to learn.

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 to just 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!
If life in the future means to challenge me, change me, depend on me, use me, criticize me, tempt me, complicate me,

Then I am ready.

We are trained - but are we ready?

I wish you success in your future endeavours. Thank you for including me in your program.

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by
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