

1992 MOKAKIT CONFERENCE

UBC

GIVING VOICE TO OUR ANCESTORS

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They told me to tell you the time is now
They want you to know how they feel
So listen carefully, look toward the sun
The Elders are watching.

This verse is from a beautiful book entitled, "The Elders are Watching" by Dave Bouchard and Roy Henry Vickers. In the book, they "give voice to our ancestors". Roy Vickers says it is time for change. "Change comes from understanding ourselves - our weaknesses, our strengths. That understanding can be fostered through knowledge of our past, our cultural heritage and our environment. This priceless wisdom is available from our elders, who like us, received it from their ancestors."

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Elder Ellen White wants you to know that she appreciated your presence at the sunrise ceremony this morning. She thanks you for honouring the teachings of her ancestors. She wants you to know it is important for us to give thanks to the Great Spirit and to ask for guidance in all that we say and do.

Chief, Dr. Simon Baker, elder of the Squamish Nation wants you to know that he is happy to be here to share with us in acknowledging the teachings of our ancestors. He thanks you for listening to what he has learned from his elders. He wants us to remember to carry on this tradition.

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Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux medicine man, wants us to know that "In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and as long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished.

The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain, and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance." MANL, 1992

Black Elk witnessed how the sacred hoop of life was broken as generation after generation experienced the tide of destruction. Black Elk wants us to know he had a vision of the meaning of life in which he saw five

generations. His was the fourth generation and in his vision, he saw the fifth generation as the generation which would return to the culture, which would mend the sacred hoop of life.

We are that generation.

It is our responsibility to light the traditional fire so that our hearts and minds can become united in a common cause aimed at reaffirming our traditions, our cultures and our unique place on Mother Earth as determined by the Creator.

It is our responsibility to give voice to our ancestors, by learning from our elders, as they pass on to us the teachings of their ancestors, as they are the keepers and teachers of our cultures.

It is our responsibility to ensure that the ties between the elders and the youth are firmly entrenched so that the youth of today can continue the process of mending the sacred hoop for the benefit of future generations.

As we stand before our Creator today, we must ask ourselves if we are contributing to Black Elk's vision. We must ask ourselves if we are accepting that responsibility which is to mend the sacred hoop of life of our people.

No doubt we must answer in all humility, yes - we are trying but the path is rough and rocky.

We are attempting to accept that responsibility in a number of ways. We raise our hands to those who are using the printed word to record our peoples stories. Books such as:

The Elders are Watching by Dave bouchard and
Roy Vickers

Robes of Power by Doreen Jensen and Polly Sargent

We Remember by the Elders of St. Theresa Point,
Manitoba

Our Elders Speak by Kari Garnier

KOH-KOMINAWAK ACHIMOWINAWA
Our Grandmother's Lives as Told in their own words
edited and translated by Freda Ahenakew and H. C.
Wolfact

My Heart Soars & My Spirit Soars by the late
Chief Can George

These are but a few of the many books we can turn to, to hear the voices of our ancestors.

We are also telling their stories which are our stories through drama, through ballet, through songs, through dance.

We are returning to our ceremonies to mark births, deaths, name-giving, marriages.

We are having potlatches and feasts to honour our people.

We are even building longhouses.

Yes, we are attempting to accept the challenge to return to our culture in this generation though the path is rough and rocky.

We accepted that responsibility when we talked about Tradition, Change and Survival at our 1987 conference. We learned that indigenous peoples throughout the world are realizing that tradition (the past) and survival (the future) must go hand in hand. It is the only way for us to go forward.

At that conference, speaker after speaker acknowledged the importance of the traditions of our ancestors. They stated:

Tradition must be a part of change.

Elders must be our teachers.

...Our traditions and our cultures are at the heart of who we are.

...We must reconnect with Mother Earth

...We must seek spiritual wisdom to obtain balance and harmony in our lives.

...We must take care of ourselves first, through prayer and meditation, then our families, then our communities.

And the late Squamish Elder Percy Paul, told us that - ...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.

The speakers acknowledged the change that has been taking place - to reaffirm our cultures, our traditions and our unique place in today's society - in today's world.

They stated that:

...Cultural survival and educational success lie in applying traditional values to contemporary educational practices.

...Indigenous people must develop education systems independent of the dominant society.

Jeannette Armstrong told us that -...Traditional culture should be taught as definitively as possible. It is in everyday living, the current lifestyle, where culture develops. The passing of the culture from one generation to another becomes traditional culture.

...Indigenous cultures developed unique teaching methods which unleashed special abilities within individuals.

...Individual powers (or gifts) could be internalized through such practices as vision quests, fasts and other forms of personal endurance aimed at developing excellence.

- celebrations before planting,
harvesting, hunting
- ceremonial rites
- myths
- food gathering

It was agreed that - ...Education into culture not culture into education must be the strategy.

The speakers acknowledged that our survival as first peoples, first Nations, depends upon the recognition and practice of our traditions - and that we must make these part of our every day lives in the present day.

They stated that:

...We must increase education initiatives that are culturally based

...the two must join (tradition and change) to ensure our future. (Play)

...We must be of one mind (young and old).

Franklin Machian, a young man from Alaska told us - ...You have planted a seed in our heads so that we 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.

At that Conference very little time was spent talking about the **obvious**, the injustices faced by indigenous people of the world. Colonization, disempowerment, oppression that has led our people to be the most **deprived** and **impoverished** in our own lands. This was **known** but no more needed to be said.

Instead we concentrated on survival (on the future).

We have survived.

We will continue to survive.

We will even prosper - lead.

We might even save the world.

Thomas Banyaca, Hopi prophet and spiritual leader stated: "If we follow the Great Spirit, the world will not be destroyed. The indigenous people of the world must become strong, to withstand the destructive forces through prayer, meditation, songs, dances, and the use of herbs which are good for the body and mind. Indigenous people will lead in the protection of the environment."

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Today, as we gather together at this Conference we are accepting that responsibility, as we put our minds and our hearts together in "Giving Voice to our Ancestors". With their guidance:

- we are seeking ways to make ourselves healthy
- we are seeking ways to make our families strong
- we are seeking to find out who we are, through our languages
- we are seeking an education that is based on our traditions, our values and our customs

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I will close with a Cree Prayer to the Great Spirit.

O nee soo kum a ka win
 Ka tip ay i chickate
 O sa ki hi waywayin
 Kisamunito
 Owee chi hi way win
 Ka kunatis sit aschak
 Ka we weecha wi konaw
 Anoosch, mena kakeeka

Akoosani

(Note: Cree is phonetically written)

Reference

1987 Tradition, Change and Survival, Proceedings, World
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1990 Bouchard, Dave, Vickers, Roy, Henry The Elders are
 Watching, Eagle Dancer Enterprises Ltd., Tofino, B.C.