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“Resources and Skills for First Nations Libraries”

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Good Evening. I hope you had a good day. What you were dealing with today was way over my head – specialized subject headings/classification, computer labs – the parts I can relate to are lunch, displays, Gene’s library tours, and dinner. So here I am (with Gene’s arm twisting).

I have only spoken to a group of librarians twice in my life. Scary! The first time was in 1971 at a Western International Library Conference held in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

According to a news clipping that I found, I spoke on the need for library service in Indian and Metis communities and reported that “one out of 54 reserves in Manitoba had a library.” I stated that the “immediate needs of housing and jobs making arousing interest in libraries difficult.” I urged librarians to approach the chiefs to discuss the need for libraries.

The second time I spoke to librarians as a group was in 1972 at an International Festival of Books held in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I entitled my address “Bread before Books or Books before Bread.” I was tempted to use this in its entirety this evening.

I took the title “Bread before Books or Books before Bread” from a book of essays titled “The Only Good Indian” edited by Waubegeshig. This particular essay is written by Basil Johnston, an Ojibway Indian from the Cape Croker Reserve in Ontario. I would like to quote his introductory paragraph to you:

A person suffering pain seeks relief; any community enduring widespread hunger or other forms of physical deprivation seeks food and provisions to ameliorate its circumstances. If causes of pain, suffering, and poverty were purely physical and economic in nature, then the mere application of medicine to a personal wound and the provision of massive financial and technical assistance to communities would be sufficient to overcome individual and corporate ailments. However, human experience in medicine and economics has demonstrated that individual and communities maladies, often physical in form, are psychological in nature and origin; and for healing, require in addition to physical relief psychological, intellectual, and spiritual restoration.

He goes on to say:

But before the Indian people can move forward and break economic, social and political impediments, the mass of the people must first overcome their want of

confidence. In this sense the issue becomes a case of books or intellectual growth before bread.

I will continue with excerpts from that 1972 paper (my words):

I believe what is happening is that we, the Indian people, not traditionally belonging to a book-oriented culture are now beginning to explore this avenue toward psychological, intellectual and spiritual restoration. Let us consider this point and ask ourselves: are our books of today going to provide us with the kind of material that will restore us psychologically, intellectually and spiritually. The Indians' first introduction to the printed word was the missionaries' bible and hymn book. The purpose for teaching reading and writing was primarily to decipher religious materials. Our people's next exposure to books was the schoolbooks; textbooks and storybooks. Our school-age children have for many years had "a kind of" access to books found in school libraries. The effect some of these books is debateable as many storybooks about Indians portray Indians as dangerous savages. Even authorized school textbooks have content that perpetuates the image of the Indian as unreliable, lazy, cruel, and thieving. I speak not of the distant past but of now – today. I'm sure I don't have to elaborate of the effect such books have on our children. Even comic books are allowed the dignified category of "books" – comic books! These are very popular among our children, just as they are to all children. However, many of them definitely perpetuate an image of the Indian as a blood-thirsty savage. This probably does more harm to white children by instilling this picture of Indians in their minds. This, needless to say, has an effect on our children both directly and indirectly. So we have progressed in the world of books from religious material, to textbooks, to comic books (and true romance, true love, etc) when you consider our connection with literary art, is it any wonder that books have played only a limited role in our lives. However, we are arriving at a time when we are prepared to place more faith in books. We look to books for positive intellectual growth.

At this point, I gave some examples of good books and described them:

1. Young children – The Makwa Series – experiences of northern Indian children
2. Young children – The Nanabush Series – series of Indian legends
3. Youth – No Word for Goodbye
4. Youth – The Last Noble Savage – NOW, I Once Knew a Woman
5. Adult – The Only Good Indian

6. Adult – For Every N.A. Indian Who Begins to Disappear, I Also Begin to Disappear
7. Adult – The Unjust Society

I also gave an example of undesirable books (Ruffled Feathers and Reservations are for Indians).

Finally, I suggested that several conclusions could be drawn from the discussion:

1. That many books exist today which will do virtually nothing for Indian people toward restoring pride in us as a race of people
2. That some books do exist that can contribute positively to our goal of psychological, intellectual, and spiritual restoration
3. That if there are any good authors in the crowd, they had better get cracking on writing meaningful books for us – a book for 10 to 15 year olds is sure to be a seller (unquote)

That was 22 years ago.

Where are we now?

- We definitely have more books (good books) on Aboriginal peoples (written by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people) and our issues (need more) – we also have film, videos, etc
- We definitely have more Aboriginal authors and producers (need more)
- However, we continue to have unacceptable books on the market – some old, some new (need less/none)
- I “suppose” we have more libraries (school, public, on-reserve) (need more)
- I know we have more Aboriginal librarians (need more)

You might add to this list.

Where do we want to go? What is our goal in terms of libraries?

1. We must have libraries in our communities, be that on-reserves or in urban areas (high density of Aboriginal people).

I have had this dream of a community library for many years which would serve young and old. Ideally, it would be library centre with a toy library, play area, sofas for moms to bring their young and have a coffee or tea and read or visit (prevent phobias about libraries). It has been well researched and documented that “reading to young children greatly enhanced their learning

ability.” Such a centre would encourage this. There should be one library to serve the school and the home in each community.

2. We must have more Aboriginal librarians (teachers and lawyers) – they must be trained. Various programs exist in colleges and universities. Programs like the one in Alberta for Aboriginal students should be encouraged. You could introduce summer programs (eg. short courses for principals, school board members, F.N.H.L)

We need our own trained librarians so the cultural, historical knowledge remains in the community. Non-Aboriginal librarians are likely to move on. They should provide “on-the-job-training” for local people. This should be a condition of their employment.

3. We must raise “the level of consciousness” regarding the need for libraries in our communities:
 - Proposals to Chief and Council
 - Articles for Aboriginal newspapers (KAHTOU, Native Voice) – anyone here or at your sessions?
 - T.V. interviews/radio – get coverage on your two day session

Lobby, lobby, lobby! You’re good politicians! Create an exciting proposal – approach foundations.

4. Networking – newsletters – organize (fundraising, raise profile)

As a group involved with libraries, you have a great challenge in our move toward self-government.

- You have to ensure that your libraries contain materials that will restore and promote our people intellectually, psychologically and spiritually (eg. Courageous Spirits)
- You must lobby for more libraries, librarian training programs, on-the-job-training, and you must lobby for recognition.

You are an integral part of the process of self-government. Continue your struggle to make libraries a priority and don’t give up. I wish you success!