

Light Them a Path:

“Witnessing the Fourth Annual Gathering of The College of Alberta School Superintendents”

by Richard Van Camp

Good morning, everyone. What a joy to see all my favourite cousins and Elders and Educators from across Treaty 6, and 7 and even from BC these past three days.

Hello. Edant'e! Ullaakut! Oki! Tansi! My name is Richard Van Camp and I'm a proud member of the Tlicho Dene from Fort Smith, NWT, in Treaty 8 Country.

I'm honoured to have been asked to be the witness for this great celebration, this lovely gathering of educators and policy makers and teachers and light houses for students and families and communities.

For those of you who don't know me, I grew up in Fort Smith, NWT. I was a paperboy and delivered the West Edmonton Journal and the Slave River Journal when I was 8. I've lived in Edmonton 10 years now and care for Edmonton very much. I love being a guest here in Treaty 6 Territory.

All of you should have received a copy of my book with Monique Gray Smith: The Journey Forward. Monique Gray Smith wrote her novella “Lucy and Lola” and, when you flip the book, you'll see my story, “When We Play Our Drums They Sing.”

I hope you all read it. It took us two years to create something so powerful and gentle at the same time. Our books are about Reconciliation and our stories are about reclaiming and our return to wholeness as a family, and the rebuilding of our communities, and I think that's what these three days were about: returning to ourselves in a good way.

My publishers at McKellar&Martin, Tonya Martin, Meghan Hague and my fellow author and friend and hero Monique Gray-Smith all extend their very best to you all. We hope you love The Journey Forward. Of the 23 books I've published, this is my most vulnerable. My mother attended two residential schools in Fort Smith.

She was taken away from Fort Rae--now known as Behchoko--when she was 5. She went for 12 years.

Residential schools continue to haunt my family and it broke my full inheritance as a Tlicho Dene and that is why me, my brothers and so many second and third generation survivors are working so hard to reclaim what was almost lost.

It's because of "When We Play Our Drums, They Sing!" that I finally worked up the courage to record my mother's residential school story. I didn't know she had a number and that number was 12. It's because of this novella that I also reclaimed a very funny Tlicho story from my uncle Alexis Washie: "How Bear Lost His Long Tail." I used more Tlicho Dene than I ever have in any of my books because I knew that this was going to be important not only for me and for my family but for my Nation. This was my chance to celebrate our culture, our language, who we are, our dignity.

The true hero of "When We Play Our Drums, They Sing!" is my mother Rosa Wahshee and there's another hero here in our presence. My Elder Rosa Mantla is here and I would please ask her to stand. If it wasn't for Rosa, I would not have done half of what I've accomplished so far with my writing and reclaiming. I am grateful to Rosa who just received her Master's Degree. I'm also grateful to Dr. Leslie Saxon for helping me learn more Tlicho Yati.

When We Play Our Drums, They Sing! is about a 12-year-old boy, Dene Cho, asking hard questions about Canada, about residential schools, about Reconciliation. He wants to learn his language, he wants to know his creation stories, he wants to know his traditional laws, he wants to be on the land checking nets and learning from his Elders. He wants more storytelling in his classrooms. He wants more traditional teachings. He's questioning curriculum and he's calling his teachers out for not doing more to learn the languages from the territories they are living in and benefiting from. In this story, Dene Cho meets a principal who challenges him to prepare a presentation with his Elders and his knowledge keepers and return to the school's staff meeting to finally speak his truth and be listened to about what he wants to learn and why. Dene Cho can't believe this is finally going to happen so he races to a blind medicine man's house and to a drum that's been calling him. He goes to speak with Snowbird and he begins to prepare for the most important presentation of his life.

My friends, if your students were given the opportunity, what would they say about the curriculum they are faced with daily? Is this culturally relevant? Is this information they will need for a world 12 years away from a tipping point? Would they sing your praise and say you are preparing them now and giving them the information they will use in the future?

Are you teaching what students need most?

Are you giving your students what they are asking for?

These are important questions.

I wanted to give thanks for Wilson Bearhead and the singers for lighting our way with their song and prayer at the grand entry.

I wanted to thank Metis Elder Clara Bowman and Mike Beaver for the opening prayer on Wednesday night welcoming. Mahsi cho to Ella Nasogalauk-Brown for lighting her Qulliq and blessing us all.

I wanted to acknowledge Nakota Elder Wilson Bearhead for sharing with us what his Elders shared with him: "to always show kindness, gratitude, respect." I believe our hosts and workshop presenters have shown us exactly that. We have felt their kindness, their gratitude and their respect for us taking the time away from their families to share their very best. Let's give them a round of applause.

Wilson Bearhead also shared with us that his Elders always told him, "Teach them in a good way so when they leave here they will have a good memory of their time here."

I thank you, Wilson, for sharing that teaching with us and another one: "Knowledge is meant to keep us humble."

Ish Nish, Wilson. Mahsi cho. Here's to the great memories we're creating right now and here's to all of us returning for next year's celebrations a little wiser, a

tiny bit older and a little more humble enough to be awesome and a little more awesome enough to be humble.

The next full moon is on April 19th. That's Good Friday. I know that on that night, I'll be dropping tobacco with my family for you all and for your families and students and colleagues, too.

I ask that you please do the same, my friends.

Drop tobacco for all of us. Make an offering to honour our time together.

CASS Executive Director Barry Littun, thank you for setting the tone for the conference and highlighting what a joy CASS is to organize with your "A Team" Charlene Bearhead, Claudine Cortes, Laurel Knowles, Elizabeth Gouthro, and everyone who helped out. Mahsi cho.

Mahsi cho to Keynote Jesse Wenthe who reminded us that of the 94 recommendations that were set forth to guide us at the TRC--- have few have been fulfilled.

He and Jenna Broomfield said that we all deserve a new narrative for the future ahead as Canadians and Indigenous people and I see every classroom as an opportunity for courageous conversations and a new dialogue: one where Indigenous, Metis and Inuit students finally get to share their stories and the stories of their families and communities.

Jesse said that we are still in the **Truth** stage of Truth and Reconciliation and we need to linger there. He acknowledged that is not a comfortable place to be for Canadians who love to be comfortable. He said something I personally had never thought of before, that Reconciliation is not for Indigenous people. It is our time as Indigenous people to heal. Reconciliation is about understanding how we got here and what needs to happen next.

Jesse said that Reconciliation is a generational project and this process is a gift for our children and our grandchildren who deserve a brighter path. Justice Murray

Sinclar echoed this last night: it's going to take generations to undo the hurt and pain and suffering, but it's happening. I see it. We all do. We feel it.

In this time of Reclaiming, we know that Indigenous, Metis and Inuit students are taking back their power and changing the narrative of being survivors of a culture of extinguishment and genocide and soaring one graduate at a time.

Jesse Wentz and Aaron Paquette reminded us all that the future echoes the noise, sounds, actions that we create now.

As you know, every student is a window into a home and you can all see the reclaiming that's happening right now with culture, tradition, language, songs, names, prayers, wishes, stories, hope.

We all know that we're in the standing wave of an Indigenous Renaissance and you are all a part of it. Your crucial to helping it and continuing to nurture it.

I gave thanks to Elder Joe Eagle Tail Feathers for what his Elders shared with him, his family and his people, "Our Bible is nature. Our history is our root that will guide us."

Mahsi cho, Joe. I loved the workshops on land based learning.

I give thanks to Dr. Cindy Blackstock who reminded us that the term "We are making progress" isn't good enough."

She reminded us as Leaders in Education that where there are challenges, there are opportunities.

She reminded us that what we need more than ever is moral courage to change the system from within and speak out when you see injustice and racial discrimination.

She reminded us to respect the uniqueness in every culture.

"Kids only get one childhood" was my take away. Mahsi cho for reminding us, Cindy, of this truth.

Kids only get one childhood.

What a privilege to be a teacher today and witness kids being kids.

I am grateful to Sharon Morin, program manager with the Musee Heritage Museum in St. Albert, who hosted her Land Based Learning Workshop in which she astounded us with the incredible Metis history of St. Albert.

I didn't know that Canada's first militia was the "St. Albert Metis Rifles."

Did you know that there was a pemmican factory at one time in St. Albert?

I didn't.

I was the Writer in Residence out there for two months. We're showing our new movie Three Feathers there next Thursday and I'll never think of St. Albert the same way again.

Why don't we know more about this? This needs to be celebrated.

She reminded us about the power of intention and that when your intentions are good the Creator is always happy to help out.

She reminded us that there is diversity within the Metis community. Did you know there are over 120 different Metis flags? Sharon gave us all a great teaching about the Metis Infinity Flag. I really feel Sharon should be touring your schools and bringing your students out on the land.

"Outside," she said, "is a different kind of classroom and a new way of learning."

I can still feel her pride when she spoke about the genius and mastery behind the Metis Red River Cart.

I did not know about Metis finger weaving.

I did not know that the Metis sash served also as a tool belt.

Did you know that the Metis sash can also be used as a strap for packing heavy goods? It can also be used as a sling to help nurse an injury. A string can be pulled from the sash to help mend torn fabric, and the sash can also serve as a saddle blanket.

Sharon reminded us all to be mindful when we use the term FNMI.

The term “Indigenous” now replaces the term “Aboriginal” which is in the Constitution. She asked, Where are the Metis in the term “Indigenous”?

These are great points, Sharon.

Mahsi cho.

And mahsi cho to Jenna Broomfield for sharing with us what it means to be Inuk and how frustrating it is to feel invisible and misunderstood outside your region.

Jane Hubbard and Ariel Toloose at the Legacy of Hope gave a riveting presentation: Forgotten: The Metis Residential School Experience.

They shared that Residential Schools still play a role in poverty, violence and many other forms of collateral damage that are playing out in society today. We all know that this is affecting our students.

I think it’s safe to say that the effects of Residential schools are playing out in the second and third generation of Residential School Survivors in our classrooms, as well.

I wanted to thank Jane Hubbard for saying that all Canadians benefit when the survivors of Residential Schools can heal.

Aaron Paquette gave us a great lunch Keynote yesterday. He reminded us to all look around and appreciate the hard work that is bearing fruit today.

He reminded us, like Jesse Wentz, that good things are happening.

They happen by our words.
They happen by our actions.

He reminded us, "Whatever we give our kids, they are going to believe."

"What are we giving to our kids?" He asked. "What are the songs we are singing?"

"Our words, I realized, create our world," he said.

He reminded us that a classroom can be modulated by the power of someone's voice. You can create feelings with your voice and this is why, Teachers, we need you healthy and we need you strong and fulfilled.

Mahsi cho, Aaron. We are grateful.

Justice Murray Sinclair in his keynote last night spoke about how Residential Schools have been and continue to be a source of pain in our communities.

Justice Sinclair gave a staggering history lesson about the culture of extinguishment facing Indigenous, Metis and Inuit students and families last night.

He reminded us that in Residential schools, the kids were taught that they were savages, that they came from inferior people, that they were inferior.

He talked about the residual effects of Residential Schools that survivors inherited once they became parents, once they chose life partners.

Indigenous kids have the highest rates of suicide in the world.

One of the major reasons for this is our history, but we have to change the way we do business.

We have to look at the way we teach our children.

We have to commit to educating our children better than we have in the past.

If we do that we will contribute to Reconciliation in the biggest way.

Indigenous kids have to be given the opportunity to learn about their heroes, their sense of history, their stories.

Sharing that knowledge with Indigenous kids also means that non-Indigenous kids are learning too about the history of the land and people around them.

He urged teachers, "You are the most important Reconciliation fighters in all Canada because you are going to change how your students will be."

It will take generations.

Not years.

A few generations at least.

To make the changes that we need.

He talked about changing our thinking, our curriculums, our institutions and the way the greater society thinks of learning institutions.

The fact that you are here shows everyone you want to be part of that change.

Education is the key to Reconciliation.

So work with patience and perseverance.

Your kids want to succeed in that way.

So teach with patience and perseverance.

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So, to summarize, my friends, here are your Calls to Action:
 Take up that space in the academy, as Jenna Broomfield said.
 Be that noise that Jesse Wentz talked about
 Fight for Reconciliation as Justice Sinclair has requested
 Change that language that Cindy Blackstock urged us to
 Stand in the Truth of History
 Honour that truth
 Be those sounds
 Be those good echoes that we'll all feel generations from now
 Be those actions that light the way
 Be that Superintendent
 Be that teacher
 Be that principal
 Be that Teacher's Aide
 Be that Elder in Residence
 Be the that Knowledge Keeper
 Be that parent that you've always needed and deserved
 Be that guardian
 Be that moral courage
 Be that advocate
 Be that protector and cheerleader for brighter paths ahead for your students and
 their families
 And create those safe spaces that Jenna spoke about.

May our students' modern day medicine bundles be filled with education and
 knowledge that keeps them humble and may it be filled with their culture, their
 languages, their songs, their traditions, their full inheritances wherever they come
 from and wherever they wish to go.

Be good memories to your students so you can uplift them to be healthy and
 strong
 And be good to yourselves, too.
 We need you healthy and we need you strong.

Mahsi and marci cho, ish nish, chi migwitch, Nakurmiik, and merci beaucoup.

Travel safely back to your home fires and may the Creator continue to bless you and your families and the great work ahead. Thank you all for your inspiration and thank you to our organizers, sponsors, and volunteers who have worked so hard to make these three days so much fun. Mahsi cho!