

# Giving Voice to Our Ancestors

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*Verna J. Kirkness, Director of the First Nations House of Learning, agreed to be a keynote speaker for the Mokakit Education Research Conference, "Giving Voice to Our Ancestors," held at the University of British Columbia, September 29 to October 2, 1992. Her talk was taped, transcribed, then edited. The text presented here reflects timeless teachings of the Ancestors honored in various ways by people today. Verna poignantly reminds us of these important teachings and challenges us to transform these into our educational thinking and practice.*

I would like to greet grandmothers, grandfathers, my sisters and brothers, and the grandchildren.

*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*. It's by Dave Bouchard and Roy Vickers. In this book they give voice to our Ancestors. Roy Vickers says it is time for change: "Change comes from understanding ourselves, our weaknesses and our strengths. That understanding can be fostered through knowledge of our past, our cultural heritage and our environment." Roy adds, "This priceless wisdom is available from our Elders who like us received it from their ancestors."

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Jo-ann Archibald, my friend, wants you to know that she appreciated your presence at the Sunrise Ceremony this morning. She thanks you for honoring the teachings of her ancestors. She wants you to know that it is important for us in this generation to give thanks to the Great Spirit and to ask for guidance in all that we say and do. Chief Khot-la-cha, 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 his Ancestors. He thanks you for listening to what he has learned from his ancestors, from his Elders. He talked about his grandmother; he talked about Dominique Charlie, his cultural teacher; he talked about Andy Paul, the great lawyer. Simon 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 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. 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 that he had a vision of the meaning of life in which he saw five generations. He was the fourth generation, and in this vision he saw the fifth generation as the generation that would return to the culture, that would mend the Sacred Hoop of life. We in this room 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 the Creator intended it.

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. They are the keepers and teachers of our cultures. It is our responsibility in this generation 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.

My friends, 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 one I just mentioned, *The Elders are Watching* by Dave Bouchard and Roy Vickers, books like *Robes of Power* by Doreen Jensen and Polly Sargant, *We Remember* by the Elders of St. Theresa Point in Manitoba, *Our Elders Speak* by Kari Garnier, *Kôhkominawak Otâchimowinâwa (Our Grandmother's Lives as Told in Their Own Words)* and edited by my wonderful friend Freda Ahenakew and H.C. Wolfart. I want to remind you of two other books, *My Heart Soars* and *My Spirit Soars* by the late Chief Dan George. These are just a few of the many books that we can turn to to hear the voices of our ancestors. There are many more and I encourage you to write many more. We are telling the stories of our

ancestors: we are telling their stories through drama, through ballet, through songs, through dance, and through storytelling. We are returning to our ceremonies to mark births, deaths, name-givings, marriages. This is the voice of our ancestors. We are having potlatches and feasts to honor our people. That is giving voice to our ancestors. And we are even building longhouses, and that is giving voice to our ancestors. 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 World Conference on the Education of Indigenous People. We learned that indigenous people throughout the world are realizing that tradition and survival must go hand in hand. It is the only way for us to go forward.

At that 1987 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*.

How many times do we try to start by taking care of our communities before we have taken care of ourselves? And the late Squamish Elder Percy Paul told us at that conference, "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." They stated that "Cultural survival and educational success lie in applying traditional values to contemporary education practices.... Indigenous people must develop independent 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.

Do we remember celebrations before planting, harvesting, hunting? Do we remember ceremonial rites, myths? It was agreed at that conference that education into culture, not culture into education, must be our direction. That is our challenge. That's the ongoing challenge for us in this room. We're all educators. That's another principle of our people. We're all teachers and we're all learners.

The speakers also acknowledged that our survival as First Peoples, First Nations depends on the recognition and practice of our traditions and that we must make these part of our everyday lives in the present day.

They stated that

We must increase education initiatives that are culturally based.

... the two must join (tradition and change).

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

And a young man, Franklin Machian from Alaska, told us at that conference, "You know 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 in 1987 very little time was spent talking about the obvious: the injustices faced by the indigenous people of the world—colonization, disempowerment, oppression, and the impoverishment in our lands. This was known but no more needed to be said.

Instead we concentrated on the future, we concentrated on our survival because friends, sisters, and brothers:

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, said: "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 that 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 at this conference, again we are accepting that responsibility, as we put our minds and hearts together, "Giving voice to our Ancestors." We must work with our minds and our hearts in giving voice to our ancestors. With their guidance we are seeking ways to make ourselves healthy. At this conference, we have workshops on that. We are seeking ways to make our families strong again, and we are seeking to find out who we are through our languages, and we are seeking an education that is based on our traditions, our values, and our customs.

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Note

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