



*TAKE CARE OF THE LAND...  
AND IT WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU*

A PRESENTATION BY  
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FIRST NATIONS SUMMIT

To

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Ladies and gentlemen and friends, I wish to firstly recognize the Coast Salish peoples on whose ancestral lands we are on. I want to thank the Canadian Labour Congress organizers and you for your kind invitation to speak to you today and to share with you some of my thoughts on your conference theme "Our environment, our jobs and our future". Before I do, I want to tell you in my past, I was a member of the International Woodworkers of America, I worked as a mill-worker in the sawmills in the north. As well, I belonged to the United Steelworkers of America when I worked in an underground mine at Pinche Lake for Cominco.

The labour movement in this country has been a friend of First Nations. There has long been an unwritten alliance between us. When few people came to our peoples' defence, we knew that the labour movement would be there without conditions. In this country, labour has taken it upon itself to understand our people, our issues and our struggle. It has done so with respect, compassion and empathy. You are a powerful ally to us.

Today I want to acknowledge your continued support for our struggle for legal, social, political and economic justice in our time. We have sought to tell our stories to the public, the media, to businesses, to churches and to governments - to anyone who would listen. So alliances, such as the one we have with labour, are extremely important to us.

You do great honour to us. It is in this spirit I want to share with you, teachings that have been given to me, in particular by my parents, grandparents and elders. These teachings relate to what our people have been taught about the land and how today we continue to pass on these teachings. This presentation is not about anti-development – but one for responsible, principled and respectful development.

As a young boy I travelled with my parents, grandparents, and other relatives on our land. There was little in the way of a wage economy – some logging, some mining, some tourism and some sawmill work, mostly seasonal. There was no social assistance or pensions. Our people for the most part lived off the land. In my day, and I'm not that old, we travelled to ancient hunting, fishing and berry picking sites to prepare food for the winter. We trapped fur-bearing animals to feed ourselves and to sell the furs to the Hudson's Bay Company. We walked those trails and paddled the rivers that our ancestors travelled for thousands of years, and we felt close to them.

Our elders told us stories about our ancestors, about the land, about the animals and what we needed to do to survive. They taught us what was important. They said to us "When you leave this earth to pass on to the other world, what is important is not worldly possessions you have accumulated, but what words you leave behind. This is what people will remember about you."

When we slept we dreamt about the land, about our relatives, and about the animals. When we woke the elders talked about their dreams and their travels. They told us how well or poorly we would do in our day's fishing, hunting or trapping. The connection to the land was strong and it pulsed through our very veins. It is from these times when I was a child and later when as an adult I learned the meaning of some of our people's teachings.

In your deliberations on the environment and our future I want to share with you some of these ideals. I summarize them as follows:

1. Take care of the land and it will take care of you.
2. All that is alive is sacred.
3. All life is connected and interdependent.
4. We are connected to and responsible to our ancestors and our future generations.

I will explain as I go along so you can consider their application today and in the future. I share this with you not to impose upon you my people's teachings. I know you have traditions and ways that are important to you. We need to acknowledge the legitimacy of each other's ways and teachings and maybe through our dialogue we will be able to build good bridges between each other for our shared survival on this planet. Perhaps we will be able to develop a common vision for this great country for our own benefit and for future generations.

I want to start off with a legend, and I will tell it in my own language. Before I do, I want you to think deeply and connect with the consciousness of your ancestors within you to see what they tell you as you listen carefully even though you may not understand the words.

### **(Story in the language of the Dakelh {Yinkadene})**

The translation is this: And so it was summer, the salmon had returned in abundance once again and the people were happy. They were all busy preparing salmon, their survival food for the cold and harsh winter, which they knew, lay ahead. They took the salmon from the water, cleaned it and hung it to dry in the smokehouses. In one of the smokehouses, the Chief was pleased with himself. He thought he would dance around the smokehouse fire and as he did, the salmon drying on the rack snagged his hair. In anger, the Chief grabbed the salmon and threw it to the ground. He was angry because it had interfered with his dance. At that moment, all of the salmon drying in the village smokehouses turned whole again and returned to the water. As well, it started to snow – in the middle of the summer. The snow did not stop until it was well above the village smokehouses. As there was no food for the people, they all perished.

My elders tell this story and explain that the people of the old days considered salmon to be sacred and to be treated with respect – that the bones of the salmon, in fact, that of all fish and water animals, had to be returned to the water. And in the case of salmon, they say, to become salmon once again and to return in the future.

There are other stories of similar nature. The elders tell us that if you take a plant for medicine purposes, you must say a prayer before you take its life. You ask the plant to give its life to you to help you or someone else who is ill, and as you take the plant you return an offering to it, thanking it for its life.

My uncle told me this following story, that if you are walking through the bush and there are branches in your way, push these aside – do not break them – they have a life like you, and they too have a right to their life.

The purpose of all of these stories and teachings is to illustrate our relationship to all life and where we fit. They provide a framework, a perspective, and some say even a philosophy with which to view the world and all life on it. Now there are many other Indigenous Nations who have similar stories and I have no references to those stories here. Our names for who we are put us on the land. For example, the name Yinkadena means in my language, “the people of the land”. We name ourselves in relation to the land. Other Indigenous tribes, have names that connect them with their territories, their lands.

I compare this to the teachings I find in the first book of Moses, called Genesis. When God created Earth, he gave it water, light and seeds to grow. As well, He created fish and birds and beasts and man and woman. In chapter one of the book of Genesis, it reads, “So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and God said to them – be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” I am not saying that this is wrong. I only say it is different.

I have no idea how you subdue the earth or have dominion over birds or animals. How do you subdue a hurricane or a tidal wave? How do you have dominion over the insects? For us, according to our teachings, it’s different and it’s simple. We coexist. We depend on each other. We depend on the land for our respective survival. When people move off the land and start to lose their perspective of the land and their connection to it, how likely is it

that they will respect the land? In the corporate boardrooms in the cities, and in the legislative buildings of this country, trees, fish and water, become fibre or pieces, commercial commodities to be exploited, traded and sold. If we are subduing it, it seems we are hell bent on destroying it!

On the West Coast, we have a commercial fishing fleet with sufficient killing power to wipe out every salmon run in any given season. The state has jurisdiction to decide on the fate of all species of animals. What teachings underlie how the state manages its authority? Does it have any? We are told that the underlying principle is one of conservation, but for what purpose and for whose benefit?

Now the teachings to which I have been referring, how do you apply these? Well, consider these few examples. Why do we have a catch and release program for salmon? For our own sport, not for food? Why do we allow a hunt for grizzly bear, for the trophy - surely not for the food! If life is sacred why do we take it simply for our own pleasure and vanity? If you spray herbicides in an area logged and replanted or spray pesticides to control the mountain pine beetle, what happens to the insects, to the birds, the mice, to the martin, all of whom live off each other? What happens to the bear or moose when you spray herbicides over the berries or plants they live on?

Across this land many First Nations have treaties or are negotiating land claims agreements with the governments. The treaty First Nations talk about the implementation of the spirit and intent of their treaties. However, the governments, on the other hand, have shown a strange reluctance to even honour the agreements they have signed in the past.

In this province there are 46 First Nations groups, representing about 70% of the First Nations population, who are negotiating a resolution to the land question. Besides the negotiations process, there are other options available to us. These include keeping the status quo; litigation; or direct action activities such as road blockades. In the end most of these lead back to the process of negotiations. The courts of this land have encouraged us all to resolve this matter through good faith negotiations.

In preparing for, and in the conduct of our negotiations, our elders continually remind us about our teachings. They advise us we should not talk about the land; as in our traditions, it is sacred. But, they say, we should talk about what happens on the land. As we examine these issues and our teachings we move beyond the "real estate" approach of governments to these land rights negotiations. Their approach is simple – give them some of their land, pay them some cash, both on a formula basis, and provide some limited form of authority to govern over their settlement lands. So most people think we're only talking about money. But the elders remind us that money is not important. What is important is the land. When your last settlement dollar is spent and your land is gone what will you do? Who will you be? One of my elders told me this, "My son, the earth is like our mother – it takes care of us, it feeds us, it clothes us, it shelters us and it keeps us warm. We must take good care of it."

So in our negotiations we raise these issues with the government negotiators. I'm not, sure most of the time, whether or not they understand us. They sometimes call it philosophical differences. Sometimes they call it rhetoric. Other times they call it high expectations. Sometimes they tell us it's not in the framework agreement for negotiations. Or at times they tell us they simply have no mandate to talk about these issues.

No matter what they may want to say about these issues or what they want to call them, these teachings have stood us well throughout time. Perhaps in time, hopefully before it's too late, we will collectively see the wisdom and insight to these simple teachings.

The treaty and land rights negotiation process allows us also to examine some critical issues in our relationships. Four of these are healing our people, rebuilding our communities and nations, reconciliation and accommodation with the Crown.

Among ourselves we talk about the need for healing. Consider the devastating and cumulative impacts of the state owned and church operated residential schools that were forced on 3 to 6 generations of our people. In BC there were 16 residential schools. They were to Christianize us, educate us and civilize us. But what happens when children ages 4 to 16, are taken away for 8 or even 12 months at a time from their family, from their community, and from their languages and cultural foundations? What happens when the bonds in the family do not form? What happens when children are physically, sexually and emotionally abused by those in whose care they are entrusted?

We have witnessed the devastating impacts these schools have had. We live today with the consequences of those impacts. Adults, who were apprehended as children, and placed in adoptive homes are looking for their families, villages and tribes. Grandmothers and grandfathers search for their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, wondering where they may be or whether they are even alive. Those who suffered the tremendously degrading and humiliating acts of sexual abuse in residential schools are looking for some form of retribution through the courts, at least those who did not commit suicide or drink themselves to death. Many are just hoping that someone will say they are sorry. People want to get on with their lives. Moving from being a victim to a survivor is a fundamentally difficult journey.

You are familiar with the socio-economic conditions of our people. In your 1992 Aboriginal Rights policy statement and the more recent statement on June 21, 2000 on Aboriginal peoples' solidarity day (National Aboriginal Day) you recognize the stark reality our people face. Sometimes though, we become immune to statistics and do not see the humanity behind the numbers.

The Shuswap people at Alkali Lake have, for some 25 years, struggled to come to grips with rampant alcoholism in their community. In a process of dealing with this alcoholism, other even more horrifying stories of sexual abuses in the Williams Lake residential school emerged. They took on that issue in a very difficult and very public way. As a result, some of the perpetrators of those abuses are spending time in the prison system. Slowly and bit by bit, they are rebuilding.

Dealing with the issue of healing brings us to that of rebuilding. Rebuilding family relationships is not an easy process. It takes time, commitment, understanding, expertise and resources. As family relations strengthen, communities become revitalized, the Nation begins to see itself beyond the shadows of marginalization and victimization, abuse and shame. First Nations people are picking up the pieces of what they know is theirs, who they are and where they're from and they are cherishing these and building on them.

The outlawing of our potlatches (the core institution of our political, economic and cultural identity) in the 1880's on the West Coast and the sending of our people to jail for practising our ways did not destroy or eradicate our identities. These laws together with the impacts of the residential schools and the imposition of the Indian Act were designed to do away with the Indian in us. They did not succeed. We survived and we celebrate.

The Supreme Court of Canada in its famous decision in *Delgamuukw* said to us, "after all, we are all here to stay." We know that. It put a mirror to our face and reminded us of our relationships and responsibilities which go beyond the law and its legalese. The words of the Supreme Court and the process of land rights negotiations offers a unique opportunity to reconcile historic injustices and provides for productive accommodations for each other's needs and interests.

I watched the Olympics in Sydney this fall and marvelled at the feat of the young Aboriginal woman, Cathy Freeman. It wasn't seeing her win the 400-meter race that impressed me. It was the grace and dignity with which she handled herself. In that quiet moment after her victory her eyes showed the strength and firm resolution within her. I could not help but feel pride with her. I'm not sure how the Prime Minister of Australia felt at that moment. I wondered how difficult is it to say, "I'm sorry to the Aborigines."

The reality in this country is no different. Reconciliation requires forgiveness. Forgiveness requires a real apology – not a statement of regret. At our treaty negotiations tables government negotiators will not talk about the past injustices or even mention the word compensation. In fact, the existing government policy dictates that we must surrender or release our inherent Aboriginal rights and Aboriginal title in return for some of our own traditional territories, some cash and maybe some authority, which we exercise at their behest. We want a review of this policy and changes to meet the decisions of the court.

Even though the 1982 Constitution recognizes and affirms Aboriginal and treaty rights, governments see the provision as empty of content. For we, to be recognized as Aboriginal peoples, and for Aboriginal rights and title to exist, they tell us we must go to court and prove it – that the onus is on us. The courts have rejected all government arguments that our Aboriginal rights and Aboriginal title were extinguished. Nonetheless, one of the federal chief negotiators, in a recent book he authored, still thinks we are a conquered people. The positions of governments defy all common sense and logic. It is difficult for our people to understand their position. Naturally, we

reject the governments' views. We know who we are and we certainly know where we come from. However, there is still the outstanding dispute between the existence of Aboriginal title and Crown title. For us the status quo is not acceptable. We want and need changes!!

The courts tell us to reconcile these through good faith negotiations. Although the governments deny they have a legal duty to negotiate in good faith and deny the existence of Aboriginal rights and title, we nonetheless have borrowed more than \$120 million to support our side of the negotiations. We are hopeful governments will honour the Crown...and their people.

If we have to live together, accommodations have to be made. Some of these accommodations were made early on by my people. There is a story among my people as told to us by the elders that in the early part of this country's history, our people knew about the impending arrival of the settlers from the East. And as told by the elders, our ancestors got together and talked about what they would do if they came onto our land. After long and contentious debate – some argued that if the settlers come, they should be killed; others argued we have plenty of land and we should welcome them. In the end it was settled that they would be welcomed to our land and that we should live together in peace and harmony.

What exists in this country's Constitution and its institutions to accommodate Aboriginal peoples? While there are provisions in the Constitution, Sections 25 and 35, these provisions have yet to be given full political and legal recognition. It seems this country lacks the political will to give Section 25 and Section 35 any meaning until the courts provide direction.

But when the courts have given direction, as in *Gladstone*, *Delgamuukw*, and *Marshall*, there is a reluctance by the governments to give anything but the most minimal of interpretations. So when the governments violate or ignore or attempt to minimize Aboriginal or treaty rights, Aboriginal people stand up for strong interpretations and are seen as being defiant or at worst criminals.

If the court says in *Marshall*, that the Micmaq have a right to a moderate livelihood, what do the governments respond with? They respond with a minimalist approach. Shouldn't everyone be entitled to a moderate

livelihood anyways? Why should we need a treaty to tell us that? This is a part of what I mean by accommodation.

Now you may ask, where is all of this leading? Nowhere perhaps. What have all these teachings got to do with anything today? Nothing perhaps. Here's what I think. Our teachings, as simple as they may be, provided a solid foundation for our ancestors and surely they could do the same for our future. Our elders constantly remind us if we take care of the land it will take care of us. This is a fundamental teaching among my people and in my travels I hear the same message from other Indigenous peoples.

A few years ago in a world forum on the future of this planet, I listened to Jane Goodall explain to an international audience that maybe it's about time we paid some attention to Indigenous peoples and their teachings relating to the land. We may learn something from them. She did not say anything about men having to subdue the Earth or having dominion over birds, fish or every living thing. In this same conference I listened to a physicist explain how everything in the universe, not just on Earth, was interconnected through similar molecular structures. Try "all my relations".

These days, scientists such as David Suzuki or Wayne talk about the teachings of our indigenous peoples as being a totally relevant scientific approach to a better understanding and connection of all that is around us. There is interdependence between all life and between the generations. We need to see and understand this. The political, social and economic visions of our future should consider these on a philosophical basis as well as on a practical day-to-day basis. This is part of the accommodation I refer to. Accommodation does not infer imposition – it infers acceptance.

There is an emerging new vision of the Earth and our place on it. Science and traditional teachings surely have a valuable place side by side in helping forge that new future. As peoples, we need to reclaim our place on the Earth, we need to understand our relationship to all that is alive and know that we cannot subdue Earth but we are interdependent with everything on it. Sustainability or un-sustainability is at the core of your work here; I hope these views provide some approaches for your analysis.

As I asked you to do at the beginning, I want you to take your mind and your heart and connect them. Now I want you to connect that to the collective consciousness of your ancestors, the many generations of them.

In my people's language we use the word "nay tso whodihldzul nay" – our parents, grandparents and all of the generations before us – we have responsibilities to them. And we say as well "achuhi nay yaz" to our children and grandchildren, to the many generations of them who are yet to come – we have a responsibility to them.

Now what responsibility do you see which you have to your ancestors and to your descendents? And how will you exercise this responsibility for the benefit of the many generations of your descendents?

It is a good time for this generation to reflect on what we are doing!

It has been my pleasure to share these ideas with you. We say in my language "Snachile ya". You have honoured me in a good way.

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