

Dialogue on the History of Indian Residential Schools in Canada
Tuesday, November 1, 2011 – UBC First Nations House of Learning
Professor Stephen J. Toope, President and Vice-Chancellor

Ladies and gentlemen, honoured guests:

There is a day coming, just a few days from today, a day that a majority of Canadians set apart from the rest, once every year, to remember and to grieve. We will mark this day with the words, “Lest we forget,” and with silence. We will wear red poppies on our lapels as symbols of our remembrance, and of the sacrifices made. We will tell the stories of those sacrifices in our schools, and in our homes—grandparent to grandchild, generation to generation—lest we forget.

And yet: There is not a single generation of people in this country, elders, adults, or children, *all* of whom know the truth about the residential schools and the treatment of Canada’s Aboriginal people there; no generation who knows these truths about our home-land the way we know the truth of these wars fought on foreign soil.

Forcible removal of children from their families and communities;
repression and destruction of culture and identity; loss of language, of
connection, and in so many cases of life; routine abuse – the effects of all of
this on individuals, their families, and their communities are
intergenerational, and continue to this day. As it is in war, what they have
lost, and what *all of us* have lost as a society, is incalculable. A part of what
we are here to do today is to bear witness to the truth of this, and I
commend your courage and your commitment to doing so.

Another part of what we are here to do today is to address the university's
role in preserving, interpreting, and instructing about this aspect of our
shared history, and to ask ourselves whether there is a place for us in
helping to bring about reconciliation between Canadian society and its
institutions, and Aboriginal communities.

Two years ago, The University of British Columbia set forth a new strategic
plan. We called it *Place and Promise*, and we used the word 'promise' in its
name because we had decided at every level of administration and

operation that we did *not* want to set goals we would strive for; we wanted to make commitments we would keep. One of the primary commitments of the plan says this:

.... In respect of the Musqueam and Okanagan lands on which the University sits, and with all voices raised to tell a new story, UBC advances educational opportunities with and for Aboriginal people on its campuses and in the wider community.

In response to the expressed needs and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples, UBC engages in research and generates curricula across the University that respect, reflect, and include Aboriginal cultures, histories, and systems of knowledge. In both academics and operations, the University addresses issues of ignorance and misunderstanding resulting from the educational failures of the past.

UBC is now academic home to over 50,000 students, a thousand of whom are Aboriginal. While it is a cliché to say that no two students are the same, it is *imperative* that we understand and account for the fact that no two come from the same social, cultural, or family history. Whereas “school” may mean the promise of a better future to some, it may mean something else entirely to others. Sometimes, a desk is not just a desk. In all that we do, we must remember this so that we do not create echoes of the past in *this* time and place.

Before I close, I want to take a risk and bring up UBC's motto. The motto, in Latin, is "*tu um est*," which may be translated as, "It's up to you." I'm taking a risk, though, because it may also be translated as, "It's yours," which, depending on who you're talking to, is a controversial thing to say about a university when that university sits on traditional Aboriginal lands.

Just for today, I would like to re-imagine the UBC motto to mean the following:

- When we say, "It's yours," let us mean: What happened in the residential schools is part of our shared history as UBC students, staffs or faculty members, or alumni, and as Canadians.
- When we say, "It's up to you," let us mean: It's our responsibility now to know the truth, to remember it always, and to pass it on to our children and our children's children ... lest we forget.

There is a day coming, not so very long from now, when we in Canada will all know the truth. When we will be able to look with genuine understanding to the people among us who suffered and say together, Never again. We know. We will remember. On behalf of The University of British Columbia, and in collaboration with all of you, we commit to bringing about *that* day.