

Speaking Notes for
Mending the Past: Memory and the Politics of Forgiveness

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I was taken, by a Roman Catholic priest, in broad daylight, right in front of my parents! We were at our summer camp near Naujaat, a tiny settlement on the west coast of Hudson's Bay, getting ready to walk to inland, for our annual caribou hunt

It was 1958. I was 11 years old, and I was to attend Sir Joseph Bernier Federal Day School in Igluligaarjuk – Chesterfield Inlet - for the first time.

Little did my parents or I know that this was the beginning of leaving behind my culture, language, Inuit spirituality; and the practice of shamanism for which we used for healing, special relationship among us Inuit, with animals, land, our past and the future? We were to be assimilated into the Qablunaaq world, to think like a European.

The losses we experienced were to be permanent. The impact on all of us – my family, my friends and many of us who are now seen to be leaders of our people – was traumatic. Many of us have spent our lives trying, in many different ways, to bring 'meaning' back into lives that were emptied of the ideas, beliefs and relationships that for thousands of years, brought meaning and purpose to Inuit. Some have turned to this modern religion, called Christianity. Others, like me, are convinced that recovering the culture we lost is essential to giving direction not only to ourselves, but also to future generations.

I am so pleased to be invited to speak today during this important gathering on the subject of '*Mending the Past; Memory and the Politics of Forgiveness*'. Many people are watching what we are doing here and looking for direction.

Naujaat - Repulse Bay - is about 1000 miles to the north of Winnipeg right on the Arctic Circle. In 1958 the settlement had about 100 people; 95 Inuit and five non-Inuit. In 1958, my parents were in their 50's. I had

one little brother. I understood little English and was used to hearing French, as spoken by the clergy. We rarely stayed in the settlement, as my father preferred to be at one of our several camps. We still dressed in skins and lived in tents or snow houses in the wintertime. We harvested wildlife and fish for all our needs. My mother and sister carved and sold to 'The Bay' to supplement our income.

As a young boy, living in the vicinity of Naujaat/Repulse Bay, I was loved by my parents, taught what I needed to know by both my mother and father and encouraged to be inquisitive, attentive, independent and courageous. We lived nomadically and I was accustomed to entertaining myself and to learning by observation. Life was hard and often unpredictable because of the weather, migrations of the animals, and the ability of my parents to predict these. I remember these times with my family with a great fondness and respect for their wisdom.

I also remember other things that I would like to forget, but that must be addressed if the past is to be mended.

These include:

- That we should never say “no” to the demands of the Qablunaaq (the white man), and that if we dared to “talk back” there would be trouble.
- Hearing the Hudson’s Bay Company traders say to me things like: “We have a whole bunch of ‘sons-of-bitches of Eskimos’ around here. They don’t know how to hunt and trap”.
- Or picking **up hints**, like the Hudson’s Bay Company Clerk saying to others: “The RCMP, is wondering when are you moving back to the land?” (In other words, you better get out of town soon!) Or: “If you don’t let you son go to school in Chesterfield Inlet, they can put you in jail, or take away your family allowance”.

We were moved around, told when to come into town, often for a religious holiday, or **never to hunt animals on Sundays**, and then told to leave for fear that if we didn’t get out trapping, we might become dependent on government social assistance. We understood little of these **new ideas that were brought before** us.

Then there were books to teach us to become good little ‘Eskimos’. *The Eskimo Book of Knowledge*, produced by the Hudson’s Bay Company in the 1930s, instructed the Eskimo how to be clean and to live in a safe, clean tent or igloo, and reassured us that “our father” the King, was looking after us. In return, we were to be grateful and do as we were told. Even the Canadian government got in on the act, producing its own booklet, *The Book of Wisdom for Eskimos* first published in 1947. It also told us how to live, and addressed us like unknowledgeable children, telling Inuit women how to look after a baby, Inuit hunters how to hunt, and encouraging us to use plenty of soap and hot water. I challenge any of you to use plenty of soap and hot water, living in a snowhouse with outside temperatures down to –40 or –50C, with only precious seal oil for fuel!

For Qablunaaq, all Inuit were happy, smiling children playing in a land of ice and snow; an image reinforced by Qablunaaq photographers and writers in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. I remember that many of the Qablunaaq who came north acted as bullies towards the ‘Eskimo’! Most of the Inuit were obedient and felt they always had to listen to the Qablunaaq’s instructions.

In Igluligaarjuk (Chesterfield Inlet), where we were assembled for school, we were told to forget our language. We got slapped with a meter stick for speaking ‘Eskimo’ in the classroom: “Don’t ever let me hear you speak that language again in this classroom!” In 1958, during my first year, my teacher scolded me in front of the other kids. “Forget about your language, your culture. You are here to learn to speak and write English and to do arithmetic”.

When we were taken away to school we, as children, were helpless and voiceless. Our parents - who up till then had full responsibility for their children - suddenly saw them taken away, felt powerless against the ‘government’ and ‘clergy’, and accepted the actions of these people.

Even if we had someone to run to, no one would have believed us at that time! We were so far away from our homes and families. Some of our teachers and caregivers at the schools abused us in every way they could. This abuse was physical, mental and sexual. Those who did not

participate in the abuse appeared not to know anything was wrong. Instead of protecting us, they protected each other.

I can also tell you that those of us, who went to the residential schools became the best educated Inuit. If I did not have this education, I would not be here speaking to you today. That is the terrible tragedy of all of this. Those of us who became the best educated and the most capable of leading the drive toward the creation of Nunavut – of talking back to the Qablunaaq – were also the ones to be most negatively affected by the same education that made all of this possible. That is why, to put it bluntly, my friends and colleagues deserve your respect and understanding even as we struggle with this difficult history.

In our particular case, in the early 90's, two friends, Marius Tungilik and Jack Anawak - and myself - spoke of the reality as we remembered it; of the pain and the shame. We knew we had to do something about this reality. We suffered abuse at the hands of those who were entrusted with our care at residential schools.

After much work and fund raising, in the summer of 1993, we held at Turquetil Hall/Joseph Bernier Federal Day School, a reunion of former students. Because we cannot easily erase the memory of the sexual, physical, and mental abuses that we've suffered at the hands of the various religious groups, we have had to do something to restore our health and history and **pride.**

Healing, or mending the past, involves two actions. Among those of us who had experienced Joseph Bernier School, our reunion involved students remembering, sharing and crying. This helps to heal the psychological wounds - but it is only half the struggle. There is nothing worse than having those who abused you deny or rationalize away their abuse. Our second objective was one of getting clergy and the church, as well as the government, to assume their responsibilities and to work with us in finding ways of healing these terrible wounds.

This is not an easy task. While the sexual abuse of children is something that no culture tolerates, other forms of abuse are more easily swept away. For example, some teachers will argue that in the 1960s, strapping a child was acceptable and normal punishment. Not so in my culture. While your ideas about this may have changed, some of these

former teachers will argue it was acceptable at the time. Therefore, they see nothing to apologize for. And others will argue that removing children for school was necessary and the only alternative to giving us an education. Without this, they argue, young Inuit would not have been able to relate to the rest of Canadian society. Again, some see nothing to apologize for.

But my point is this. It is not just *what* we have done, historically, it is *how* it was done and that needs mending. Even more importantly, the problem lies with the ideas that lay behind what the Qablunaaq did: that we were primitive, ignorant, child-like pagans in need of civilization. What we need is a clear acknowledgement that these ways of thinking were wrong; that there are other ways of ‘making sense’ that have merit, deserve recognition and are – for all of us – you as well as me, important to what I would like to call, the re-enchantment of the world – the return to ‘ways of being’ that respect mystery, tradition and cultures other than your own. My culture is a precious resource that can teach all of us – including those of you here today – a great deal about how to live in a society that respects both the environment and people.

As guests at our Joseph Bernier reunion, representatives of the school administrators issued a verbal apology to the former students. We applauded the Catholic Dioceses of the Arctic for taking such an important step in acknowledging and addressing the horrific acts committed against Inuit children. Unfortunately, beyond an apology, they have done nothing. We also applauded the apology delivered by the Government of Canada in 1998. It takes courage and wisdom to make an apology to us in the name of forgiveness. It is more difficult to figure out how to make amends. Financial compensation is not the only – and sometimes not even the best - route to go.

Canadians also have a right to know about what we went through. Much of what has been written about northern history is a fairytale. Canadians have a right to know the history of residential schools for aboriginal youth. Canadians have a right and duty to correct past mistakes, correcting has only been attempted recently, and something that depends on re-writing much of the historical record.

We have carried the scars and trauma of our past for too long. In order for us to be healthy and to raise healthy children we need to resolve *our personal* issues. Inuit must deal with our own healing however we can. We are reclaiming our culture, heritage and language through Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit – Inuit Traditional Knowledge. As *communities* we must build bridges and open doors to healthy lifestyles. We must encourage in the strongest way possible, our leaders: politicians, professionals and clergy, to model strong, healthy, respectful lifestyles.

But we cannot do this unless we first of all acknowledge and make sense of our past. We need to recognize our history as a colonial one and to use that understanding as the basis for healing. I can assure you that this history, when it is told, will be a very different one than what most Canadians currently understand, which is a history of great (white) men doing heroic things to bring civilization and progress to a backward people. Addressing these myths will be an important step forward.

Nunavut is a government for all, but it is a promised homeland for Inuit. Since Inuit are in the majority we are in a position to forge new solutions to our old problems. We have opened a new chapter and have new challenges ahead of us. As a new Territory we are trying to create a Government that is closer to the people it serves. We are creating a government that understands it's past, uses the past as strength for the future, and through Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, creates a friendly approach to governing.

Inuit are compassionate. We want to promote harmony in our homes, communities and territory. We have taken steps towards healing and reconciliation. Various groups are taking steps towards reconciliation. Inuit and the RCMP in Nunavut have been working towards reconciliation and mending the past. The churches and the governments are making their efforts at addressing outstanding issues.

Other organizations, such as the Hudson's Bay Company, should step forward to make a gesture of reconciliation. We have in the eastern Arctic a history of corporate responsibility that parallels what many of you are likely familiar with in the behaviour of oil companies in places like Nigeria and the Sudan, countries that also have a colonial history. Reconciliation means changing practices. It is time that business,

economics and ethics are seen as elements that must work together, not concerns that exist independently of each other.

Mending and forgiveness obviously involves all of us: business people, clergy, educators, social workers, public officials, politicians – no one is exempt because history is made by all of us. Carrying a grudge against those who have done us wrong is, ultimately, soul-destroying. Inuit have worked long and hard to not carry grudges into the future against those who have done us wrong.

We need to work together and by working together, I believe that we can bring about results which will ensure a better tomorrow for many people in Nunavut, particularly our children.

We feel for others because we actively hold to our values of connectedness and empathy. We would never want to see others, in the future be overwhelmed, intimidated, devalued, isolated or abused in any way. Never again!

Let all of us, attending this important conference, journey together and encourage others to do the same.

Out of great pain there are lessons for all of us:

- Out of our suffering there comes insight, compassion for others and a deep resolve to move forward, treating other people with greater awareness and kindness.
- Out of our frustration and isolation comes a desire to *acknowledge and confront*, rather than avoid what is obvious and continuing to suffer in silence.
- Out of a deeply-held Inuit belief in survival and always moving forward, comes a genuine wish to reach out and help each other progress.
- Out of our marginalizing experience comes a profound need to connect with others, to reaffirm our own identity, while respecting diversity.

- Out of our pain comes sensitivity to others who have suffered.

That provides a lot of fertile ground to engage with you and seek common reference points, common terms and common understanding.

Let us then, from this day forward, journey together to build a better life, with trust, honesty and determination. We all have a duty and responsibility, to leave a better world for our children and grandchildren. Thank you very much!