

Good afternoon.

Thank-you for this opportunity to speak to you today on the subject of a National Research Centre.

By its very nature, today's topic no doubt elicits a wide range of viewpoints on both practical and philosophical matters, and I'd like to try and contribute to both.

I've been asked also to speak about what is required to promote the success, sustainability, and relevance of this project.

A tall order, and one for which I'll admit at the outset I have only modest, but I hope useful, proposals.

First, let's look at what the Settlement Agreement has to say:

“A research centre shall be established, in a manner and to the extent that the commission's budget makes possible. It shall be accessible to former students, their families and communities, the general public, researchers and educators who wish to include this historic material in curricula.”

For the duration of the term of its mandate, the Commission shall ensure that all materials created or received shall be preserved and archived with a purpose and tradition in keeping with the objectives and spirit of the Commission's work.”

The Commission shall use such methods and engage in such partnerships with experts ... as are necessary to preserve and maintain the materials and documents. To the extent feasible and taking into account the relevant law and any recommendations by

the Commission concerning the continued confidentiality of records, all materials collected through this process should be accessible to the public.”

This helps to frame the discussion within the terms of Schedule N of the Agreement.

Moving from there I would like to offer my own thoughts and observations.

Now, it happens that I've heard quite a few personal stories over the years.

I heard them as National Chief and as the Co-Chair of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and later on as President of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

Both the AHF and RCAP conducted extensive community gatherings, and both had substantial research agendas and produced quite a bit of published material.

In the case of RCAP, and actually in the case of the AHF also, many of the stories I heard are unpublished.

There's a thought that occurs during such gatherings, and perhaps you've had this experience too — the thought that Canada would be a very different place if the stories of Aboriginal people were generally known and were a part of the shared culture of the nation.

Of course there are many reasons why they are not. I'll return to that a little further on.

Right now I'd like to dwell a bit on what I've just said. Let it sink in, if you will, this thought that Canada would be a much different place.

I assume we all agree with that statement. A story is a powerful thing, as anyone who has heard survivors speak knows.

In some cases, societies have been transformed by stories.

The week I was invited to deliver this address, the story of a twenty-six year-old Tunisian man led to a popular and successful revolt against a twenty-three year-old government.

A story can bring about a political revolution, and it can also bring about emotional, spiritual, and cultural transformation.

In fact, rarely is there transformation without narrative, whether it is a religious narrative, a mythological narrative, the story of a nation's founding, and so forth.

A story supplies a context, a meaning, and often a vision.

Returning to our present topic ... it is very difficult for Canadians to comprehend that the story of Aboriginal peoples is a living, enduring story, with a present and a future in which they themselves figure.

That is because the relationship, between Aboriginal people and what I'll call mainstream Canadians, has been severed.

There's been a lack of dialogue, a lack of understanding.

This breakdown of the relationship goes back to the days when the notion of the Indian problem signaled the end of a period of mutual respect.

I would submit that this breakdown is the reason that the stories of Aboriginal people are marginalized in favour of what I'll call the story of Canada.

The critical development in the story of Canada was the settlement of the West and the treaty-making process.

One of the treaty provisions our forebears were keen to obtain was education.

The objective here was to transfer useful Euro-Canadian skills to Aboriginal children, not in place of traditional, Aboriginal ways, but as a necessary supplement.

In other words, the treaty making process was, from an Aboriginal perspective, an instance of parties gaining mutual advantage through a relationship of accommodation and respect.

The churches also played a role throughout this period.

They had been engaged in missionary work since the earliest days of contact.

Missionary activities were typically funded through subscription.

These sorts of activities sustained the earliest missionary schools abroad, but by the nineteenth century religious groups sought a larger and more predictable funding base.

To this end they became eager to draw the Government of Canada into a formal funding partnership.

A now-familiar, triangular relationship — between Aboriginal peoples, religious entities, and Government — began to take shape in the late 1800s. Each brought into this tripartite relationship a particular agenda.

The Government entered treaty negotiations as part of a larger nation-building, colonialist strategy.

The Churches sought formal economic support of their missionary work.

Lost in the Church-Government deal were the spirit and intent of the treaties and the interests of Aboriginal people.

Instead of receiving the skill-oriented education they had negotiated, Aboriginal people found themselves the objects of an aggressive Christian-based campaign of State-supported assimilation.

The aspirations of Government and Churches were accommodated, but for Aboriginal people the Indian Residential School System represented a shocking, painful, and ultimately destructive violation of trust.

Such has been the nature of the relationship ever since. We are still living in the era of the Indian Problem.

And so we return to the thought that Canada would be a different place. What makes this idea compelling?

Perhaps the emotional connection that a story fosters.

There is, common among us, an innate sense of justice, and empathy with the other.

If this weren't the case, nothing would be possible: in this world we would have only a war of all against all.

And knowing that this is so, survivors come forward with their stories, because they trust that understanding and respect and compassion and justice may well follow.

It's a simple and profound thing, and it's what underlies everything that we do, or try to do, in the work of healing and reconciliation.

The idea of a centre like the one we are today discussing has been around for some time.

RCAP recommended one. It could take many forms, but I know we'd agree at the very least that a Centre should be accessible and welcoming, and should accommodate all.

It should reflect the larger vision of a renewed relationship which since the beginning has been founded on treaties, negotiation, mutual respect, and dialogue.

The form must reflect the content. By this I mean to say that stories are intimate and human and organic, because human experience is organic.

Everything belongs, all the disparate bits in retrospect are seen as coming together to constitute the whole which we call a human life.

It's necessary we respect that and endeavour to create an environment in which that respect is manifest.

The story of the Indian Residential School System is not restricted to Indian residential schools.

As I suggested earlier, its principal themes are relationship and trust — trust which was misplaced and then abused by persons of authority.

We can't put this history into a cognitive box with a label that reads "residential schools."

That which came before — the life of the child, on the land and with loving family and a functioning community — is part of the story.

Or the Government's taking of land and the banning of ceremonies; forced relocations; the diseases and the resilience and the relationships forged in the schools but which lasted well beyond: these are also connected.

We are fortunate to have intuitive technologies which can be adapted to the three-dimensional complexity of human experience.

One example of what I mean by intuitive technology is the highly regarded Digital Vaults (<http://www.digitalvaults.org/>) developed by the National Archive in Washington, DC.

I think this project is a good candidate for that sort of approach, if you can find the resources needed to do it.

There are today a good many experienced professional Aboriginal researchers. They are well placed to take on, in cooperation with mainstream researchers, any outstanding areas of inquiry.

Certainly there is no lack of capacity. Nor is there a lack of existing material, collected by Aboriginal people themselves and by provincial and church archives.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation has fulfilled an ambitious research agenda which is now internationally renowned.

We have published research on The Common Experience Payment, prisons, HIV/AIDS, addiction, Inuit and Métis experiences in residential school, the challenges and healing First Nations men, domestic violence, Elder abuse, resilience, sexual offending, historic trauma, and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome — and this is only a selection.

All of these have a demonstrable relationship with the Indian Residential School System.

And as if that weren't enough, there are now in Aboriginal communities emerging issues such as the Child Welfare System, adoption, and the day schools.

These are all facets of Aboriginal reality, and we need them to be part of a National Research Centre.

Together researchers can bring new life and new understanding into the continuing story of the relationship between Aboriginal people and Canada.

Partly this is a conceptual challenge, partly a technological one, and partly it is a creative challenge — a challenge to find new ways to engage and communicate.

There are so many aspects of the narrative which call out for innovative thinking, one being the fact that there is typically nothing in the experience of Canadians to which forced, systemic assimilation may be compared — an exception perhaps being those new Canadians arriving here from places of violent conflict.

How do you begin to make one understand when there is no analogy or precedent? The answer requires an understanding of, and submission to, the simple but powerful act of narrative.

Those who become the keepers of archives become stewards of human stories and relationships, of what has been as an endowment to what will be. Because no legacy is enriched by counterfeit, a nation is ill-served by history which is not genuine.

This is a high calling indeed, and it must be said that too often the promise and potential of this stewardship have gone unrealized.

I believe that together, in a creative new relationship, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers may employ new technologies to great ends.

I trust you share this vision.

I'd like to close with something of a warning.

Indians are a product of institutions. I mean by this that there are indigenous people — diverse, complex, and singular as all human beings are — but then there are the Indian institutions, which in the broad sense of that term includes the Indian Act, prisons and the justice system, the child welfare system, the residential school system, the economic system, cultural institutions, and so forth.

Indigenous people have been poorly served by Indian institutions, to say the least.

And because we have so often been institutionalized, there is a need for creative brainstorming so that this project goes beyond being an

anthropological exercise — where the active, self-authorizing and living voices of indigenous people come to the fore — and where they engage in conversation with ordinary Canadians across the country.

If the stories of Aboriginal people are not accessible to the general public, it will be as if their experiences never occurred.

And if their voices are rendered as museum pieces, it will be as if their experiences are frozen in time.

What we need are open, dynamic, interactive spaces, and participatory forms of narrative, knowledge, and research.

This would be a fitting way to step into the 21st Century and into a new kind of relationship.

I know you would be disappointed, as I would, if we didn't take advantage of all our opportunities and resources, both human and technological.

The National Research Centre ought to be a treasure valued by all sorts of people — people I shall term “ordinary.”

The person on the street. The person who normally would not go to an archive or university library.

And I do think that if the project conforms to the principles I've tried to articulate, then it may well become just that sort of treasure.