

**Aging and Spirituality:  
Canada's Aboriginal People at a Crossroad**

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Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Elders, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to thank God, the Creator, for giving us life today so that we can enjoy the beauty of Mother Earth here in sunny Alberta. I want to thank the organizers, namely, Lyle Donald, for inviting me to participate as one of the speakers. Thank you all for your warm hospitality, love and friendship that I've experienced since my arrival. I feel humbled, honoured and privileged to be in the company of so many outstanding Elders. My sincere thanks to all the Elders who have played a significant role in my life. Some were mentors, others role models, teachers, advisors, and many shared their experiences, strengths and hopes with me. And for that, I am grateful. I am always amazed at their wealth of knowledge, experience, wisdom, and yes, their sense of humour.

Aging, of course, can mean different things to different people. Let me illustrate this with a little story. One Sunday, after Mass, this strapping elderly Metis gentleman, Xavier Carrière, a widower of 80 years old, comes to me and tells me, in a soft and frail voice that he's in love again, and wants to marry. But this time, Xavier wants to marry Dora, who is 19 years old. I take Xavier aside immediately and try to explain to him some of the problems and conflicts they might have, marrying with such a difference in age, and I warn him that statistics show that marriages like that have proven to be fatal. But Xavier is insistent and again, in his frail and trembling voice says: "I can't help that, Father Guy, if she dies, she dies!"

I decided to become a priest when I was about 16 years old. Some of the village girls told me afterwards that they cried when they saw me leave the village to go and become a priest. They couldn't understand why a good-looking man like me would leave the girls behind, and go and live a celibate life in a seminary. Today, I still meet some of those

girls, some of them are now grandmothers, and we are still good friends, and we enjoy reminiscing about our teen-age years. I was ordained a Catholic priest in my village of St. Laurent, Manitoba, on July 6, 1968, 31 years ago.

I am the youngest of 14 children and I had a very happy childhood. My parents died when I was a teen-ager. Some people say I come from a dysfunctional family: My father and two of my sisters died alcoholic deaths. I, myself, as a priest, was introduced to a treatment center, against my will, 16 years ago, in 1983. However, I admit that the experience there changed my life completely, and I've been the happiest person in the world ever since. I follow a 12 step program that has helped me regain my dignity and self-respect. I enjoy being a parish priest very much, in St. Ambroise, a Metis community, 100 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg. I derive a lot of satisfaction out of my life and work. One of my favourite ministries in the last few years is leading weekend retreats and talks on spirituality and the 12 step programs.

Lyle was very kind when he phoned me a few months ago. He gave me the freedom to speak on a topic of my choice. After much reflection and study, I chose to speak, in a general way, about a topic that is very close to my heart, namely spirituality, and more specifically, *Aging and Spirituality: Canada's Aboriginal people at a crossroads*. To do so, we will take a brief look at the world we live in, more specifically the world of the First Nations and the Metis world. I will have served my purpose if my reflections and thoughts contribute in some small way to your understanding of spirituality, and the role it can play in the restoration of the health and wellness of the Elders, and of all the Aboriginal people in Canada today.

What I want to share with you is one of my deepest convictions: that spirituality is significant only if it is well integrated in our daily lives, activities and experiences. A spirituality divorced from our daily preoccupations, pains and joys does not and cannot have any effects on our lives. To be effective, a spirituality must be grounded in our daily activities: family, social, economics, and political. Accordingly, there is no human activity that cannot assume spiritual significance.

Let me illustrate this point with a personal life experience. For the first eight years of my priesthood, in the late sixties and early seventies, I was somewhat politically involved as a priest, on a part-time basis, with the Manitoba Metis Federation as a Board member, the Manitoba Indian

Brotherhood as a community development worker, the National Indian Brotherhood, and the World Council of Indigenous People as a fundraiser and group worker. I had the privilege of working with such great Aboriginal leaders as Angus Spence, Médéric McDougall, Stan Daniels, Reverend Adam Cuthand, Dave Courchene, George Manuel, Omer Peters, Marie Smallface-Marule and Clive Linklater, to name a few. I mention this because, to me, this is very important in my life. By working with these great Aboriginal leaders, I was able to discover and grasp their notion of spirituality and their vision of the Aboriginal world and how it gave direction and nourished their political actions. In doing so, these Aboriginal leaders helped me shape my own spirituality and vision of what my work and ministry should be. Accordingly, I strongly believe that there can be no political emancipation in the lives of a people without spiritual emancipation as well. In this context, I have no difficulty in affirming that Elders are the well-spring of our spirituality. They nurture our spiritual vision and they affirm and reassure us of our spiritual strength.

An old recipe for rabbit stew begins with this directive: Catch rabbit. Obviously, the person who wrote the recipe was taking nothing for granted. In preparing this talk, I took nothing for granted either. So, I'm following the cook's first directive: catch rabbit. That is, I will define the key words that I will be using, namely, aging, spirituality and crossroad.

The first word is aging. Somebody once said, You know you've reached middle-age when things start to thin out, wear out, or fall off. For me, from the neck up, I'm a healthy 21 year old. However, the rest of my body tells me differently. At sixty years old, this coming November, there are some aches and pains at my shoulders, knee joints and hips, so much so, that I can't dance the Red River jig like I used to anymore. I take one pill a day to regulate my high blood pressure, and I have some trouble controlling the muscles building around my waist.

Whether we like it or not, aging is a subject that applies to all of us. The fact is we are all aging from the moment of our birth. The difference is that some of us age faster than others and some of us have been aging longer than others. One reality associated with aging is that many of us lose our sense of hearing. And that reminds me of a little story.

My old friend, Napoléon Desjarlais, who died a few years ago at the ripe old age of 81, went to see the doctor and complained that his wife Antoinette had a hearing problem. The doctor said, "Bring her in and we'll examine her to see if anything can be done." In the meantime, the



doctor told him, "I would like you, Napoléon, to do a little test to give me some idea of the extent of your wife's hearing problem. Now, go to basement and ask Antoinette a simple question: What are you cooking for supper tonight? And if you don't hear an answer, move closer, until you hear an answer and that will give us some clues of the extent of her hearing problem." So, one night, Antoinette was in the kitchen preparing supper and Napoléon called from downstairs, "Antoinette, what's for supper?" No answer. So, he moved to the top of the stairs and again, he said a little louder, "Antoinette, what's for supper?" and again, no answer. This time, Napoléon moved into the kitchen and asked, "Antoinette, what's for supper?" and again, no answer. Finally, Napoléon moved right up close to her, and facing her, asked in a rather loud voice, "Antoinette, what's for supper?" Antoinette became somewhat irritated and visibly upset. "For heaven's sake," she screamed at him, "For the fourth time, Napoléon, I'm telling you, I'm making a pot of stew!" I guess these things do happen now and then.

Or again, my old cousin, Louis Beauchamp, age 74, whom people call *Zho-Zho*, told me that he knew he was getting old by the number of things he had to take off before he went to bed at night, and he was not referring only to his clothes but his glasses, his hearing-aid, and his false teeth, his plastic hip and wooden-leg, just to name a few.

The second word is spirituality. Spirituality is not an easy topic to deal with nor easy to define. I know very few people who are experts on spirituality and I don't pretend to be one of them. As a matter of fact, few words are as misunderstood in the English language as the word "spirituality." For example, to many people, spirituality is something totally foreign to them, limited to a few celibate monks living in a far-away monastery in the far hills. To others, spirituality brings up images of something mystical, churchy, holy, pious, other-worldly, something on the fringes and something optional. Rarely is spirituality understood as referring to something vital and non-negotiable lying at the heart of our lives.

In his classic book, *Seeking Spirituality*, Ron Rolheiser says, "This is a tragic misunderstanding. Spirituality is not something on the fringes, an option for those with a particular bent. Everyone has to have a spirituality and everyone does have one, either a life-giving one, or a destructive one. No one has the luxury of choosing here because all of us, are precisely fired into life, with a certain madness, that comes from the gods, and we have to do something with that. We do not wake up to this world,

calm and serene, having the luxury to act or not to act. We wake up crying, on fire with desire, with madness. What we do with that desire and madness is our spirituality."

In other words, spirituality is much more than activities like going to church, praying or meditating, reading spiritual books, or even setting off on some spiritual quest. It is far more basic than that. Rolheiser continues: "Long before we do anything explicitly religious at all, we have to do something about the fire that burns within us. What we do with that fire, how we channel it, is our spirituality."

The third word is crossroad. At a crossroad refers to the seriousness of the health situation and conditions in which, we as Aboriginal people, find ourselves in Canada today. Choices and decisions have to be made and be made soon if we are to regain our health and wellness in a wholistic manner. In no way do I want to pull the alarm switch here and sound like a prophet of doom, but we have to be realistic. This is not, in my estimation, a false alarm, as we shall see.

A quick analysis of the world shows an ambiguous reality. We live in a world with exciting possibilities but also with tremendous destructive elements. This is the world in which we experience brokenness and wholeness in our lives, pains and joys, love and bitterness. It is this world that we, as spiritual human beings, live in, cope with, and need to challenge. And while the modern world continues to struggle with religious fanaticism on the one hand, and religious indifference on the other, spirituality explodes with new vision and with fresh possibilities for a more integrated worldview. In this context, spirituality can be defined as the over-all energy that holds our lives together, connects us with each other, with the Creator, and with Mother Earth.

Allow me to share some rather harsh statistics on the health conditions of some Aboriginal communities, especially in Manitoba. In its final report, September, 1998, the Manitoba First Nations Regional Health Survey, stated the following: The majority (80%) of First Nations people in Manitoba live in poverty. Only 19% of First Nations people report having completed high school in Manitoba. High blood pressure and diabetes are epidemic in many First Nations communities in Manitoba. Nearly one third (28%) of First Nations people in Manitoba report having thought about suicide. Eleven percent of First Nations people in Manitoba have attended residential schools and 20% reported this as a negative experience. Nearly one third of First Nations people in Manitoba report run-

ning out of money for food at least once per month. Nearly half of First Nations people in Manitoba report alcohol consumption as a problem in their household. Racism is a significant problem for 30% of First Nations people in Manitoba, having reported a discriminatory encounter with the health care system.

With respect to the Metis World, the information available on the health status of Metis adults and children is limited. However, we know that the incidence of arthritis, bronchitis, asthma is higher than other Aboriginal groups in Canada. Furthermore, Metis communities face an array of conditions that adversely affect the health and well-being of Metis people. Even though Metis face health challenges similar to and sometimes worse than other Aboriginal peoples, they have been largely overlooked and excluded in terms of research, targeted programs and allocation of funds and resources.

Now, according to researchers, the spiritual story of humanity is at least 70,000 years old; by comparison, the formal religions which include Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have existed for a mere 4,500 years. In a general sense, spirituality concerns that ancient and primal search for meaning. The point is that spirituality is, and perhaps always has been, more central to human experience than religion. In this context, spirituality is defined as the universal quest for meaning.

Moreover, one of the most observed phenomenon in society today is the upsurge of spirituality. That, in itself, is a manifestation of a world undergoing global transformation on a scale unknown to us before. The spiritual consciousness of our time is not focused on abandoning anything; rather the deep yearning is to outgrow, to transcend and evolve towards a new vision of life. The disappointment of the external world, the headlong pursuit of consumerism, materialism, hedonism, and the callous disregard of people for each other have all driven many to look within themselves for ways to understand and deal with life and life's problems. People are hurting and they are tired of hurting!

Accordingly, our humanity yearns for a bigger picture than the one being proposed to us by various groups of people. We yearn to reclaim the deep and sacred story of Mother Earth as our cosmic home. We need and want to reconnect with the great traditions of Aboriginal spirituality, including our roots and family values, and live them fully in the context of our time. Spirituality compels us to ask the ultimate questions about



ourselves: what does it mean to be human, what is the meaning of human existence? Spirituality challenges us to try and find ultimate answers to these ultimate questions. Could any task be more exciting? Could any task be more relevant? Could any task be more urgent for the times in which we live?

These are the signs of our time that indicate that people in all societies have an intense hunger for healing of mind, body, and soul. Thus understood, spirituality is the inherent energy within us, within all peoples, within the Universe, put there by the Creator. It compels us to go forward in life. This energy provides us with a new strength to seek a new vision that helps us to develop fully as wholesome and healthy human beings.

In my village school, in the grade one class, the teacher asked the students about their family roots and where they were born. Little Sally in the front row said, "My parents told me they bought me at the Bay Store." Little Tommy added, "My parents told me they bought me at the Northern Stores." Little Jimmy hesitated for a while, and then said, in a really loud voice, "My parents told me, they were too poor to buy me at a store. They told me I was home-made!"

To live a healthy spirituality, it is imperative that we have a healthy self-image and self-concept based on sound self-esteem and self-respect. The Biblical story of creation tells us that it took God six days to create the universe, the skies, the waters, the animals, and people. And on the seventh day, He rested and He saw that everything He created was good. However, what the Bible seems to forget to tell us is that God went back to work on the eighth day. And He hasn't stopped working and creating ever since. He continues to create new stars and new galaxies and new peoples everywhere and everyday. Talk about being a workaholic! The point is that God is creating reality all the time. The reality of our lives is created by God. In a sense, if we don't accept reality, we don't accept God's creation, and God created each one of us. No two of us is the same. Each one of us is unique, we have a unique place in life, and a unique role to play. Each human person is sacred in the eyes of the Creator. At the center of each human being is a spirit, a sacred spirit put there by the Creator. And therein lies the basis for our self-esteem and self-respect.

We are God's masterpiece of creation and when we don't like ourselves or others, we condemn God's handiwork. To love someone means to make the other person feel important and sacred. If you expect some-

thing in return, it's no longer love, it's barter! Self-esteem and the esteem of each other is probably the greatest thing we can do to honor the work of the Creator in us. We must never forget that, as Aboriginal people, we have a soul of our own given to us by the Creator. Our responsibility lies in the tending, the caring, and the nurturing of the sacred spirit within us.

Some people might have some questions about the power of spirituality and rightfully so. Can spirituality really do something about the harsh realities and health statistics described above? Are we not being somewhat naive to think that spirituality can solve all these problems? Perhaps. However, we should remind ourselves that spirituality in itself is an abstract word. Spirituality exists in people who live it. Spirituality is not a theory. You have to live it. Furthermore, spirituality as a way of knowing does not pretend to answer all the problems of the universe. No single approach to knowledge can pretend to have all that power, since all ways of knowing are complementary.

I would like to end my presentation by sharing a spiritual experience I had four years ago. In autumn 1995, I had the opportunity to go in the mountains of southern France and make a 30-day retreat, in silence. During those four weeks, I had ample time to meditate and reflect on my personal life, my relationships with others, with the Creator, and with Mother Earth. I also had the opportunity to taste and savour some of the values of silence, solitude and spirituality. I learned that solitude and silence are precious times of intimacy with one's self. Listening sensitively to one's inner voices, acquainting oneself with the various parts that constitutes the self, and befriending the self as good company—these are some of the good things that solitude made possible for me during those 30 days of silence.

In summary, spirituality is about being integrated or falling apart, about belonging to a community or being lonely, about being in harmony with Mother Earth or being alienated from her. We usually act in ways that leave us either healthy or unhealthy, loving or bitter. What shapes our actions is our spirituality. Spirituality is the fine thread that weaves all of the human dimensions and our relationships together in a healthy and wholistic way. Spirituality has taught me that we are human beings with energy and power, and indeed, we have the capacity of creating healthier lives for ourselves, healthier relationships with each other, and a healthier world for our children and families to live in. Accordingly, it is my view that spirituality is a necessary factor in the healing process



and the development of health and wellness for Canada's Aboriginal populations today. Healing is a product not only of curing but of caring, a caring that is spiritually inspired. To heal means to restore a person to spiritual wholeness.

As we age, we are all confronted with additional losses: loved ones, family members, friends, health, mobility and so on: However, it is a comfort to know that this is not the case with our spirit and spirituality. Our spirituality is the one area of our lives that can continue to grow as we age.

Elders, ladies and gentlemen, if the focus of the 20th century has been on outer space, the focus of the 21st century may very well be on inner space. We are entering a new era, a new age of discovery, not of the world around us, but of the world within us. Spirituality is saying yes to life, to the life of the Spirit within us, and that Spirit, put there by the Creator, is sacred. God bless and thank you.