

Truth and Reconciliation

Speech

By Justice Murray Sinclair

Justice Murray Sinclair was born and raised on St. Peter's Reserve in the Selkirk area north of Winnipeg, Manitoba. He graduated from his high school as class valedictorian and athlete of the year in 1968. After a successful career as a lawyer, he was appointed associate chief judge of the Provincial Court of Manitoba in 1988, and then to the Court of Queen's Bench of Manitoba in 2001. He was Manitoba's first judge of First Nations descent. He has been awarded a National Aboriginal Achievement award in addition to many other community service awards, as well as honorary degrees from the University of Manitoba, the University of Ottawa, and St. John's College (University of Manitoba). Justice Sinclair's Ojibway name is *Mizanay Gheezhik*, which means "the One Who Speaks of Pictures in the Sky."

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Before

What does respect mean to you? Do you think having self-respect is important? Why or why not?

During

As you read this speech, think about the tone and language Justice Sinclair is using. Who is the speech directed to? How is this evident?

This is an excerpt from a speech given by Justice Murray Sinclair, commissioner of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, at a community forum in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, in the spring of 2010.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up by the Canadian federal government to learn the truth about what happened in the residential schools and to inform all Canadians about the residential school system and its legacy. The intention of the Commission is to guide and inspire First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples and Canadians in

Reconciliation is about respect. It is about respect.

When the treaties were signed, those who signed the treaties on behalf of the First Nations people, their intent at that time was very clear. It's in all of the documentation on both sides of the debate. The intent was: we will share this land with you. We promise that we will get along with you. We promise that we will respect your right to be here and what we ask in return is you respect our right to be here.

It boils down to a conversation I had once with an elder, a survivor who was speaking at a gathering that occurred at Spanish, Ontario. And I said to him, what do you think reconciliation is? And he said, "Well, I'm not real sure, but I think reconciliation is if we can get the government to understand that they don't own this place and they should stop acting like they own this place."

That's reconciliation. Stop acting like you own the place and understand that we own it, too. But now we own it together. That's what he's talking about. That's what reconciliation is. Reconciliation is not the establishment of a new legal relationship. Reconciliation is about the establishment of the relationship that was intended and that relationship was a respectful one.

But before we can have that mutually respectful relationship, I think we have to have a preliminary step. And that is to our children, for our children, we have to give them self-respect. Our young people do not understand the validity of their own lives. Our young people do not know who they are. Our young people do not know their Creation story. They do not know the story of the life hereafter. They do not know their purpose in life and so they do not know who they are. We need to give that to them. We need to give them that sense of validity. We need to give them that sense of identity. We need to help them understand their responsibilities to each other and their responsibilities to Creation. If we do not do that, then they will continue down a path of self-destruction that we see reflected today in the suicide rates, in the self-abuse rates, in the addiction rates, in incarceration rates that are still rampant.

I was a commissioner of the Aboriginal justice inquiry in Manitoba in 1991. We reported that 77 percent of the young people locked up in the jails in Manitoba were Aboriginal youth. I can tell you now it's probably close to 90 percent. It's gone up. Why has it gone up? It's because even though we recognize the terrible things we're doing in the justice system, that's not where the solution lies. The solution lies in giving to our children, our young people, a better sense of their identity and of their responsibilities to each other.

turned inward. We now see more and more violence directed at other young people. The young people who are being murdered by Aboriginal people and young white people. Aboriginal youth are killing other Aboriginal youth. It's the influence of gangs; it's the influence of other criminal elements that give them that sense of direction. Because we can't give them that sense of direction, others are doing it for them. And we don't need that to happen. We need to talk about it.

Education that got us to this point in time, an education system that was fundamentally flawed. And that was the residential school system. But despite that, the education system is what is going to get us out of this. We need to change the way we educate our children on both sides of the equation, our Aboriginal children, our non-Aboriginal children. We need to ensure that our education system has within it the truth and information about the residential school legacy of this country. We need to ensure that all children are taught about the validity of Aboriginal people and their systems and who they are and where they come from. We need to ensure that Aboriginal heroes are showcased just as much as non-Aboriginal heroes are in our textbooks. We need to ensure that people like Tecumseh (who is a hero to the non-Aboriginal people), that his story is told in our school system. We need to ensure that the story of Big Bear and Poundmaker, and what they stood for in their part of the country, that story is told.

We need to ensure that all of the stories of the First Nations people in this world are not just with the Aboriginal kids, but also with the non-Aboriginal kids. We have to remember, and it's so fundamentally logical that it kind of makes sense if we were teaching Indian kids that they were weak and inferior, then we're also teaching the white kids that. And I use that word [*Indian*] advisedly,

I'm not intending on saying anything to anybody. But the education system is teaching both sets of people that it's very fundamental that is that what is Indian and what is Aboriginal is not only did our children, our non-Aboriginal children, grow up with that belief, but our non-Aboriginal children grow up with that belief as



I'm talking about you here in this room. You don't know it, but the people you went to school with grew up with a false sense of security. And what does that lead to? It leads to racism. It leads to racism in our words, our actions, our thoughts, and our deeds, in everything that we do, in our unconscious statements about things.

The prime minister of Canada, within a year of giving that wonderful apology (that wonderful heartfelt apology that moved all of us to tears), within a year of saying that, at an international conference not long afterwards, he said that Canada has no history of colonialism. And he meant that, he believed that. But, unconsciously he did not realize what he was saying. He couldn't have, because otherwise that apology means nothing. Because that apology was all about colonialism. That apology was all about the wrongness of the government to do what it believed against other people because of the inferiority of their race.

So we need to look at the way we educate our children. We need to ensure that our young people are given a sense of validity, that they know where they come from, they know where they're going, they know why they're here, then they'll know who they are. If we can address those things as objectives, as the purpose of reconciliation, and recognize that we're not going to achieve that in five years, that's ultimately going to be our objective. Then what we have to talk about is how we keep that in the forefront of our thinking. How do we keep that in the forefront of our thinking so that everything we do from now on is premised upon the intent, and the goal of respect, of mutual respect? That has got to be our goal.

After

- 1. Reading for Meaning** In your own words, explain why Justice Sinclair views respect as being central to treaties between First Nations and the Canadian government.
- 2. Reading for Meaning** What does Justice Sinclair think is important to teach all students?
- 3. Critical Literacy** Do you think this speech reveals any biases that Justice Sinclair may have? Explain.
- 4. Understanding Form and Style** What elements of this text make it clear that it is a speech?
- 5. Metacognition** At what points in reading Justice Sinclair's speech did you stop to evaluate his views? Explain your conclusions.
- 6. Student Voice** Explain what reconciliation means to you.

Beyond