

Keynote:

Prof. Dr. Alexander Blair Stonechild

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“Indigenous Spiritual Education for a Sustainable World”

Alexander Stonechild began education in an Indian residential school designed for assimilation, but pursued his interest in learning that led to graduation from prestigious McGill University. However, his true enlightenment started when he was hired as the first faculty member at First Nations University of Canada, founded in 1976. For six decades he has been involved in education as a student or a university instructor. His experience in residential school, in particular “spiritual abuse,” led to a lifelong interest in exploring the differences and conflicts between original inhabitants and the newcomers. His most profound teachers were not professors, but rather Indigenous Elders. They inspired and directed Stonechild to write his six books on topics including history, education and spirituality.

Indigenous spirituality is much misunderstood and unappreciated, despite the fact that it has been the dominant spiritual ideology since the dawn of modern humanity. Stonechild has travelled around the globe and witnessed the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, and their will to survive. In fact, Indigenous peoples were predominant up until the 1820s, a mere 200 years ago when non-Indigenous peoples became the majority of world population. Why is this significant? Is Indigenous spirituality truly different from modern religions? Is this a critical issue to address today, including in our education systems?

This presentation will focus on the collision of world views that accompanied the “discovery” of the Americas as well as why it is a spirituality that supports healthy relationships with land and environment, and how ceremonies promote harmony and healing. Fundamental principles and practices of Indigenous beliefs will be covered. Stonechild will describe his peoples’ teachings that humans are spirit beings on a physical journey in order to learn proper relationships.

Stonechild challenges prevailing concepts about humanity's origins and role in the world, spirituality versus rationalism, the value of artificial versus natural, and the true nature of progress. Today, society is trapped in the "mental box of civilization," and in downward cycles of life. He creates the word "ecolization" to describe how Indigenous philosophy and relationship to the environment was fundamentally different from "civilization."

Fundamental changes to education need to bring focus back to basic spiritual values. Aboriginal education is founded on elders, family and community, and promotes reverence and respect for creation. This is necessary as today's approaches promote work, earnings, wealth, consumerism, competition, expansion and control. These result in loss of meaning, inequality, disillusionment, and violence towards self and others.

With the worry about the future, it is thought that we will organize with the help of artificial intelligence, or fall into anarchy. Virtually no-one sees rediscovering indigenous ways as a path forward. There is an urgency for all of us reconcile with Indigenous heritage for our long-term survival on Earth. Stonechild's trilogy of books on Indigenous spirituality are *The Knowledge Seeker: Embracing Indigenous Spirituality* (2016), *Loss of Indigenous Eden and the Fall of Spirituality* (2020), and *Challenge to Civilization: Indigenous Wisdom and the Future*.