

Citation read on the occasion of the granting of the degree of

Honorary Doctor of Education to

Eugene Richard Atleo (Umeek)

by the Senate of the University of Victoria

June 15, 2016

Madam Chancellor, it is my honor to introduce Umeek -- Eugene Richard Atleo -- Hereditary Chief of the Nuuchahnulth peoples of Ahousaht, educator, author, environmentalist, philosopher, and founder of Aboriginal Studies programs in British Columbia and elsewhere.

Dr. Atleo has been and remains a remarkable shape-shifter, capable of bridging between settler and indigenous realities and epistemologies, forging alliances on behalf of indigenous communities here and worldwide. He is a leader within his community, the larger community of Canada and advocate on behalf of the greater community of all those who call out for our care and protection.

Dr. Atleo began his life as the eldest of 17 children born into the big house known as Klaaq-ish-piithl owned by his father, the last of the Ahousaht whalers. Removed from his family for 12 years, Umeek attended Port Alberni residential school, yet persevered to become, in 1990, the first indigenous person to achieve a PhD in this province. Before that, Dr. Atleo had spent over 20 years as an elementary school teacher, principal and assistant superintendent in Bella Bella and his home community of Ahousaht. During this part of his career, Dr. Atleo helped to build new schools and craft new policies to support the educational development of his people. The former residential school student was now ensuring that his children, grandchildren, all future descendants, and all other community members would never have to leave home in order to learn.

But, of course, there was much learning occurring in the big houses of Ahousaht, over many generations, through the creation stories. The principle of *heshook-ish tsawalk*, or 'oneness' is at the heart of Dr. Atleo's influential books, which bring indigenous ways of knowing into educational and environmental contexts. His books encapsulate reality as an integrated, interconnected, and orderly whole. "Who owns the light of day?" asks Son of Raven as he steals a scratching of sunlight for his people, suffering in a world of darkness. This symbolic light is still held today in a ceremonial box by all the chiefs of Nuuchahnulth to remind the community of the warmth and life-giving power of the sun.

Following the completion of his doctorate in education at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Atleo helped to create the First Nations Studies department at Malaspina University College (now Vancouver Island University) where he taught from 1994 to 2004, and where his son, Shawn Atleo, former chief of the National Assembly of First Nations, is a former chancellor.

In the 1990s, Dr. Atleo served as co-chair of the Scientific Panel for Sustainable Forest Practices in Clayoquot Sound. This challenging work led to reports still cited today and is a model for how indigenous and scientific communities can act together for the common goal of environmental protection.

Here at the University of Victoria, we are honoured to have had Dr. Atleo's leadership and guidance as adjunct associate professor in the School of Environmental Studies. His close colleague, Dr. Nancy Turner, says of him that, in the face of generations of colonial oppression and environmental devastation, "he points to a different pathway that [leads] to greater understanding, greater empathy, and stronger connections with each other and with all the other life forms with whom we share this planet".

It was Dr. Atleo's mother who encouraged her children and grandchildren to pursue education. Her son has walked that path throughout his life, and has opened up the trail for all those who will follow.

Madam Chancellor, it is indeed a privilege to present Umeek, Eugene Richard Atleo, to this convocation for the degree of Doctor of Education, *honoris causa*.

Written and presented by
Dr. Monica Prendergast, Associate Professor
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Faculty of Education
University of Victoria