

We must Stop the Violence against Women

I am writing at the request of an Indian woman who I carry great respect for in my life. Her request was clear, that as male leaders among our people we must speak out and set an example for respectful relationships with the women in our lives. Her request came in the wake of an Amnesty International report that claimed, “more than one in three Alaska Native and American Indian women will be raped in their lifetime.”

I am a Gwich'in son, a husband, a brother, and a father of three children, including two beautiful daughters. I have long prayed for the well being of our people, in every sense of the word. As with us all, I am far from perfect as a human being, but I strive to live a good life, learn from my mistakes, and be there for my family and people as needed. I am writing to lend my voice to stop the violence against women. This letter is in honor of my grandmother, mother, sister, wife, and daughters. It is for all our relations.

It sometimes brings tears to my eyes when I think of the challenges and hardships that our peoples are facing. Every one of us carries a heavy weight from our personal experiences and those of our parents and grandparents. The spiritual and cultural fabric of our peoples has been torn in many ways.

The question that we are left with is: How are we going to manage the weight we carry?

There are paths we can follow that are dangerous for our selves and the people around us. Such as self-blame, jealousy, hatred, and self-pity. These often lead to depression, insecurity, alcohol and drug abuse, and many forms of violence against our selves and others. On these paths we perpetuate many of the same violations we have experienced upon those who we love the most. In this way, over generations, our torn cultures have adopted many kinds of abuses as normal.

While we cannot change the past, we have a responsibility to stop the cycle of violence for our own good and the good of future generations.

It is unacceptable for a man to violate the personal space of a woman in any way. It is unacceptable for any one of us to intentionally harm another person; physically, mentally, spiritually, or emotionally unless in protection of our own life or our people.

What I am proposing is not easy. It is in fact the greatest challenge we face as human beings because it requires us to get to see and know ourselves. Do we ever lose control of ourselves? Why? Under what circumstances? Do we need help to work through the mental, emotional, or spiritual challenges we are facing in our own lives?

It also requires us to change how we are and the decisions we make, many of which have become a way of being in our lives. This is what I refer to as healing ourselves. If we are not on a path of becoming healthier, then we will continue to dig deeper into the cycle of violence.

Traditionally, we were people who were aware of our environment around us, as well as within us. In this way, we were able to make wise decisions for our selves and our people. As more of our people embark on a path of healing, we then begin to carry a communal responsibility to mend the spiritual and cultural fabric of our peoples.

I ask that our men look at themselves; at who they are and what they have become. If you cannot control yourself or know that you are doing harm, seek the help you need to change your ways. It may be within your self, out on the land, in laying down the bottle, or with a trusted healer or counselor. Think of the respect you carry for your grandmothers. This is the way in which you should be respecting all women.

I encourage our people who are on the path to stick with it. Build support and trust among one another. You are doing good work for our peoples.

With prayers for all our people,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Evon Peter", written in black ink on a light-colored rectangular background.

Evon Peter