

Aengus Finnan - UNESCO FAI Presentation, Jan. 28th, 2019 ~ Paris, France

Dia duit. Is é mo ainm Oíngus ó Fionnáin, agus rugadh mé i mBaile Átha Cliath, Éire. Is onóir é labhairt leat.

Hello, my name is Aengus Finnan, and I was born in Dublin, Ireland. It is an honor to be here today.

I wish to thank UNESCO for the invitation to address the global citizenship responsibilities of organizations like Folk Alliance International on this, the launch of the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

My few opening words were in Irish, the Indigenous language of Ireland, a language in existence since the 4th century, with the oldest vernacular literature in Western Europe, and a language once taught in secret for fear of persecution.

It saddens me that I don't know my birth country's native language, that growing up in Canada my parents rarely spoke it, that fewer and fewer people do, and that most are unaware it exists (as one of over 7000 Indigenous languages in the world today).

Make no mistake, colonization has been the chief contributor to the demise of most Indigenous languages.

I join you today from Kansas City (affectionately known as the Paris of the Plains) in my role as the English-speaking Executive Director of Folk Alliance International, a US-based charity with a global mission to preserve, present, and promote traditional and contemporary folk music.

I am acutely aware that the dominant languages of the Americas, (English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese), are each a foreign language there.

One of the profound observations in my role is the dismal recognition given to Indigenous artists and language within the music industry. As an international organization our leadership duty commits us to doing our part to change that, to hold space, to elevate voices, and to expand our view.

Buried beneath European landfall, the righteous banner of Manifest Destiny, and the callousness of assimilation (including the brutality of residential schools) Indigenous languages in North America were scorned,

banned, and eradicated. And yet, through resilience and resistance Indigenous nations cling to and proudly carry forward the languages of their ancestors as part of living culture.

But it remains equally destructive today for dominant language culture and organizations to disregard the significant social and spiritual value of Indigenous languages, or to ignore the need to support the preservation and rejuvenation of each.

Language is at the heart of human identity, a way to share and validate our very existence, a way to give voice to our dreams, and turn ideas into reality. And each language has its own depth, nuance, beauty, and humour.

Loss of that language is the loss of verbal citizenship, loss of original voice.

I applaud the United Nations for declaring 2019 as The International Year of Indigenous Languages, and for the associated programs and partnerships. It is a time to celebrate these languages, and also a time for us, as the leaders of well-meaning dominant language organizations, to reflect, listen, and act.

In our partnerships, projects, and operations we must look at how the systems, words, and concepts that we use may be in conflict with Indigenous people, languages, and culture, and the ways we have required each to fit our mold.

As public organizations we have an obligation to listen, and evolve. To nurture mutually beneficial and genuine community engagement we must ask ourselves, beyond programs and ceremony, have we considered the role and place of Indigenous ways within our work, and work culture?

Have we considered this responsibility fully? Have we developed the capacity, sensitivity, or vocabulary to navigate new conversations? As dominant language organizations we must endeavor to do so, and to enshrine these commitments in proactive policy.

This takes time, patience, and humility. And, like learning a new language, it takes practice and repetition, despite all the challenges.

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Folk Alliance International believes that greater diversity in organizations engenders a more creative and compassionate community, spurs awareness and understanding, provides enhanced opportunities, and challenges assumptions while revealing similarities.

For us, these values are demonstrated by strategic priorities and specific initiatives, one of which started in 2014 to include Indigenous community participation in our consultations, outreach, ceremonies, programming, and leadership.

This February, during our 31st annual conference (to be held this year in Montréal, Canada with a specific Indigenous focus across all programming as culmination of a now five-year initiative), we are proud to partner with and hold space for Indigenous artists and leaders to convene the world's first International Indigenous Music Summit.

We are also honoured to announce today our alignment with UNESCO for our Artist In Residence project featuring a commissioned song by acclaimed artists Twin Flames, an Indigenous duo from Canada who will be performing here later today.

As proud as we are of these efforts and initiatives, it's not the ebb and flow of programming content that demonstrates an organization's commitment... it fundamentally requires an internal cultural shift in thinking, a decided effort to listen, and the willingness to learn and evolve as institutions and community.

It's fledgling territory for us, still... and we don't always get it right, but we know we must take steps beyond our comfort zone and known community. And for us this applies to our approach with many different communities, members, and issues.

Like any relationship, understanding each other is a two-way conversation. And while we may naturally default to certain dominant languages, there are subtle and profound differences inherent in each community language and the associated way of thinking, and interacting.

We would be wise to expand upon dominant language paradigms and consider that we have much to learn still from Indigenous language and outlook.

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Through the global exchange of music, Folk Alliance International believes that the preservation and promotion of Indigenous language is critical to meaningful work regarding diversity and inclusion, and a pathway to understanding and reconciliation.

We celebrate today's launch just as we call on ourselves and all invested leaders and partners to commit to this work in lasting ways beyond 2019.

My sincerest thanks for this time and the invitation to speak today,

Merci beaucoup

Muchas Gracias

Tusen Takk

Shukran Jazilan

Chi Megwetch

Go raibh maith agat!