

The Land That Supports Our Feet

Symposium October 26, 2013

Keynote Address by Marlene Brant Castellano

Se:kon. Greetings.

My thanks to Nathan for opening our gathering in a traditional manner, naming the relatives with whom we share life on this land, and broadening our vision from the earth to beyond the sky.

I am heartened to see the turnout today of members of Settler and First Nation communities who have come together to explore common ground between us.

In the Blanket Exercise later this morning we will be walking through events that have played out across North America, and Canada in particular, over centuries. My purpose in the next few minutes is to highlight a long history of peacemaking among the five, later six nations of the Iroquois, of whom Mohawks are one. And to propose that it is time both First Nations and Settler society need to seriously engage in considering how we can work together to secure peace and the justice which is always the foundation on which peaceful relations rest.

Mohawks have a reputation as fierce warriors and powerful matriarchs. Certainly as a Mohawk grandmother I take very seriously my responsibilities to speak kindly and act justly because of the effects my words and actions can have. What is less known than our warrior tradition is that the well-being and strength of the six Iroquois Nations was rooted in the Great Law of Peace. That side of our character was long omitted from history books and movies.

The Great Law was a constitution, a covenant between nations, a moral and ethical guide for leaders and citizens, and a prescription for ceremonies through which the Law would be engraved in the hearts of the people.

The Great Law is thought to date back to 1100 or 1200 A.D. According to tradition the five Iroquois nations were warring with each other. A messenger called The Peacemaker, said to have been born on the Bay of Quinte received a vision of peace. He travelled south and spent many years persuading the five nations to come together in a confederacy.

In a translation by Arthur Parker of the Seneca Nation the Peacemaker marked the agreement for a lasting peace in these words:

I and the confederate lords now uproot the tallest pine tree and into the cavity thereby made we cast all weapons of war. Into the depths of the earth, down into the deep underground currents of water flowing into unknown regions, we cast all weapons of strife. We bury them from sight forever and plant again the tree. Thus shall all Great Peace be established and hostilities shall no longer be known between the Five Nations but only peace to a united people.

The Great Peace was not to be restricted to the Five Nations alone. The law also provided that:

Roots have spread out from the Tree of the Great Peace....and the name of these roots is the Great White Roots of Peace. If any man of any nation outside of the Five Nations shall show a desire to obey the laws of the Great Peace...they may trace the roots to their source...and they shall be welcomed to take shelter beneath the Tree of the Long Leaves.

The wampum belt recording the founding of the Confederacy is represented today in the symbols used by the Six Nations to identify themselves.

When Europeans arrived on this continent and created settlements, it was time to extend the Great Peace. Mohawks occupied the most easterly territory of the Six Nations and were prominent in relations first with the Dutch at New York and later with the British in the 13 American colonies.

According to tradition, around 1613 the first treaty with a European nation was concluded and recorded in the Two-Row Wampum Belt, of which I have a replica.

The belt consists of two rows of purple wampum beads on a white background. Three rows of white beads symbolizing **peace, friendship, and respect** lie between the two purple rows. The two purple rows symbolize two paths or two vessels traveling in parallel down the river of life. One row symbolizes the Haudenosaunee (that is Iroquois) people with their law and customs, while the other row symbolizes European laws and customs. As nations move together side-by-side on the River of Life, they are to avoid steering each others' vessels or otherwise interfering with one another.

For good reason the measured distance between the European sailing ship and the Haudenosounee canoe has been emphasized in references to the treaty relationship and non-interference. I have been deeply moved by the symbolism of the three beads that link our peoples together. We don't veer off in different directions. We are ethically bound together by the commitment to **peace, friendship and respect**.

One of the things I have discovered in studying history and intercultural relations is that the same words can be used with vastly different meanings to two people or two nations having a conversation. So I want to say more about the meaning of those three beads as they have been handed down and elaborated in Iroquoian oral tradition.

Peace is not just laying down arms by peoples in conflict. Peace is a sacred gift brought by a messenger of the Creator to save the Five Nations from destroying each other and themselves. It means casting all weapons into the deep underearth waters where they are carried away to be seen no more. Like the confederacy, it means that united, former enemies defend one another. Peace allows individual members to live in safety and exercise their gifts.

For those who would say: "But the Mohawks still made war." That is true. But the hope for sacred peace, though battered and suffering disappointment, continues in the language and the culture that we are revitalizing. The greeting: skennen kowa, may you have Great Peace, is still offered.

Friendship. My granddaughters used to sign text messages BFF – best friends forever. But disagreements come, families move, they grow out of old friendships. A teacher of mine said that persons knowledgeable in medicines, who counselled others, sometimes advised that the person seeking healing needed a friend. The medicine person might even describe the friend who would bring healing. A friendship that heals brings people together to celebrate accomplishments and mourn losses. A friend lifts you up when you are down and reminds you to look out for the cliff you are in danger of falling over. And when the friendship becomes frayed friends work to forgive and repair their differences.

The third white bead represents respect. A Cree Elder described respect as "looking twice." He said, when we fall in love we see in the other person just what we were looking for. He or she is a mirror reflection of our expectations. In time we begin to see the other as a

whole person, different from us, with all his or her beauty and flaws. That is when respect takes over – valuing a person or a people for who they are, not having to make them conform to our image of who they should be. That is the relationship symbolized in the two purple rows of wampum each following its own course but linked together.

I have to stop here and share with you that I grew up having no awareness of the history and wisdom of the Mohawk and Iroquois people. I attended school on the Tyendinaga reserve, in Shannonville and Belleville and the only thing I recall hearing about our place in history was the murder of Jesuits at Midland. The Thanksgiving Speech that Nathan recited and interpreted this morning was not spoken. Community affairs were managed by the Indian agent. Band council authority was limited to matters such as fence-viewing and trespass of cattle. As an adult I became a teacher and had the opportunity of listening to Iroquois Elders and those of other nations. I discovered to my amazement that I had absorbed life lessons in my family and community and when I heard traditional teachings I could often recognize them as things I already knew but had no words for. It was like gaining a voice for a part of myself that had been mute.

Back to the story of the evolving relationship between peoples.

Between 1613 and 1763 the relationship of peace, friendship and respect between the Iroquois and Europeans became very strained. Settlers and Indians had very different world views and relationships to the land. A sermon from the early 17th century set out a prevailing Settler view in this way:

“These savages have no particular property in any part or parcel of that country, but only a general residency there, as wild beasts in the forest; for they range and wander up and down the country without any law or government, being led only by their own lusts and sensuality. There is not a mine and thine amongst them, so that if the whole land should be taken from them there is not a man that can complain of any particular wrong done unto him.”

European settlers came from societies where owning land was the mark of full-fledged human beings, citizens with a voice in how they were governed. Indians on the other hand were known to say: “We belong to the land; the land doesn’t belong to us.” Lands were held in

common and settlements moved periodically to give the land a rest, or with some nations, in a seasonal cycle. Hunting territories could be very far ranging from village sites and the Iroquois often made treaties with neighbouring nations with protocols for sharing hunting grounds without conflict. One of those treaties was recorded in wampum as “the dish with one spoon” which contained a beaver tail and a spoon signifying that no sharp objects that could cause harm would be used in the shared ground.

As settlers increased in numbers so did their hunger for land. Shady land deals and violent clashes were occurring. From 1756 to 1763 Britain was engaged in wars with other European powers, some of the battles taking place in the new world. Indian tribes rallied behind Odawa chief Pontiac in 1763 to protest incursions on their lands. To avoid growing conflict King George III issued a Royal Proclamation that same year which is still resonating 250 years later.

The Proclamation declared in part:

It is just and reasonable, and essential to our interest, and the Security of our Colonies, that the several Nations or Tribes of Indians with whom We are connected, and who live under our Protection, should not be molested or disturbed in the possession of such Parts of our Dominions and Territories as, not having been ceded to or purchased by Us are reserved to them, or any of them, as their Hunting Grounds.

The Royal Proclamation was a long way from a treaty committed to peace, friendship and respect. It was one-sided; it asserted that the known continent was at the gift of the King and it became evident that it was unenforceable on the ground. But the Proclamation did have some effect in restraining outright takeovers by land speculators. And, as it turns out, it established an Aboriginal right under imperial law that Indian nations are not to be disturbed in their territories unless the lands have been ceded to or purchased by the Crown. In 1982 the Royal Proclamation was included in the Canadian Constitution Act by reference, giving its provisions constitutional authority.

Following on the Royal Proclamation, treaties were concluded between the British Crown and Indian nations across Canada with the exception of large territories including British Columbia and northeastern Ontario. To remedy the latter omission, Canada, Ontario and the

Algonquins north of us have recently reached an agreement in principle to enter negotiations on the Algonquin land claim. In each territory where treaties were concluded, lands were set aside for the exclusive use of the Indian nations who were parties to the treaty. Annual payments in the order of 6 or 12 dollars per person and certain harvesting rights on traditional territories were guaranteed. Promises were made in some treaties to update benefits in the event of resource development additional to the mining that was foreseen. The federal government assumed responsibility and authority as trustee of reserve lands.

The Mohawks who arrived on the shores of the Bay of Quinte in 1784 were a different case. Our original lands were located in what is now upper New York State. Because we chose to be loyal to the British in the American Revolution our villages were burned and our crops destroyed. With the independence of the 13 American colonies we became enemies in our own land. Some of the Six Nations remained in the United States. Mohawks chose to take up the promise of the British Crown of a new homeland in British North America. Mississauga Indians who occupied lands around the Bay of Quinte agreed to accept payment and move to Rice Lake. The allotment of Tyendinaga Reserve lands was confirmed in the Simcoe Deed, Treaty 3 ½ in 1793.

Although the Iroquois came to Canada as allied nations they found themselves swept into the net of Federal administration of Indians and lands reserved for Indians under the constitution of the Dominion of Canada in 1867. Across the country reserve lands shrank under the administration of Indian agents and the authority of laws that made it legal for Canada to expropriate reserve lands and relocate reserves that were in inconvenient places. You will hear more in The Blanket Exercise later this morning about the oppressive measures imposed by the Indian Act- banning of spiritual practices and ceremonies, pass laws restricting movement off-reserve (which were copied by South Africa), forced enfranchisement (that is revoking status as an Indian under the law) for anyone who pursued higher education, and residential schooling. When I married an Italian immigrant I was automatically enfranchised. For 22 years I ceased to be an Indian under the law, denied the right to live with my family on Tyendinaga Territory. I was a Mohawk but not an Indian.

The rationale for Indian policy was that it was for our own good. The objective of Canadian policy for over 100 years was to absorb Indians into Settler society until there were no more Indians and no Indian problem.

What exactly was “the Indian problem” that harsh measures were meant to solve? The problem was and continues to be that Indians, First Nations, Indigenous peoples cling to the land of their ancestors. They remind Canadians and their governments that they have an Aboriginal right under Settler law to benefit from the wealth of their unceded traditional territories. They declare that the spirit and intent of treaties was to share the land, not to impoverish themselves and their children. Where lands that were reserved and held in trust by the federal government were cut off illegally, they launch challenges for reparations.

For 250 years the ebb and flow of peacemaking, conflict, concessions, broken promises, demonstrations and arrests, have consistently been about land. Always about land. In 2008 there were approximately 750 specific claims recognized as having some legitimate basis, inching through negotiations like the Culbertson claim in Deseronto, with a tiny proportion reaching settlement each year.

Leanne Simpson, a Mississauga academic and activist wrote recently in a blog:

The dispossession of Indigenous peoples from our homelands is the root cause of every problem we face whether it is missing or murdered Indigenous women, fracking, pipelines, deforestation, mining, environmental contamination or social issues as a result of imposed poverty.

On October 15th this year James Anaya, United Nations Rapporteur on human rights issued a statement on the conclusion of his visit to Canada. He noted that

The claims processes have been extremely slow and mired in challenges-challenges that appear in most cases to stem from the adversarial structure of negotiations, in which entrenched opposing positions often develop on key issues and agreement simply cannot be reached.

In my view peacemaking, resolution of differences over land, will not be achieved by adversaries with vastly unequal power and resources sitting down behind closed doors to negotiate. Canadian governments have so often been the perpetrators of injustice; they have

so often taken the stance that representing Settler society requires that they contain, restrain, reduce the capacity of First Nations. The level of trust that allows people coming from different directions to come to one mind is hard to find. Further, in the present climate governments are most often seeking to advance corporate interests with scarce regard for long term costs to the earth.

In land claims negotiations citizens of the region have a stake in local outcomes. Citizens of Canada, whether Settlers or First Nations, have a stake in securing the health of the earth that supports our feet and relations of peace, friendship and respect.

I hope that our conversations throughout this symposium advance your involvement in pursuing those ends.

Nia:wen. Thank you for listening.