

A GREAT DEAL TO TEACH: THE ENDURANCE OF CULTURE AND SPIRITUALISM IN INDIGENOUS NATIONS

LORRAINE CANOE (KANARATITAKE)*

I want to thank Henry, Lida, and Lisa most of all for struggling with me. And I think you know what that is all about.

We have gathered together, so our cycle continues. We are given the duty to live in harmony with one another and other living things. Our people still share the knowledge, and the new faces are coming towards us. For this we give thanks for mankind in mind, health, and spirit.

The mother earth—she has given us strength in health; she supports our feet as she was instructed. The women and mother earth are one: givers of life. We are her color, her flesh, and her roots. Once we acknowledge and respect her role, a true relationship begins. All that is from her returns to her: the plant life; the medicine plants; the strawberries; the three sisters, corn, beans, and squash; the bodies of the water.

The spirit of the waters for our strength of well-being. Animals, trees, birds, the four winds. Grandfather the thunderous, the day sun. The source of all life, brother sun, nourishes mother earth in winter—just enough heat and sunshine to allow the earth to rest. The moon, she is our grandmother. In our cycle, she makes harmony with other female life. She determines the arrival of children on earth, causes the tides of the ocean, and she also helps us measure time. The stars and the sky dwellers.

We turn our thoughts to the creator. We will choose our finest words to give thanks and greetings. And if I leave anything out, or if there are some who have other needs or other words, send your voice in your own way so that we will fulfill our responsibilities.

I could be here for the next two hours. Our goal is to change forever the way people view native people of this hemisphere, to correct misconceptions, to end prejudice, to stop injustice. And to demonstrate how Indian cultures have enriched the world. In our social system we have endured and have a great deal to teach. And one of the best teachers we have is how the natural law was given to us, how the plan was made out, and how I lived my life. I am Longhouse tradition. I am not a tribal Indian. I am Kanaratitake. I am wolf clan of the Mohawk Nation. It is not a pride, it is hard work, and it is a struggle to maintain that identity. A lot of words were said today about chil-

* Lorraine Canoe is an elder at the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasna and a professor in the Department of Black and Puerto Rican Studies of Hunter College. This speech was delivered at the *New York University Review of Law & Social Change* colloquium, *The Native American Struggle: Conquering the Rule of Law*, on April 11, 1992.

dren, about the past maybe, about the future. But let's not forget the contributions of indigenous nations [such as] what you learn in the Iroquois Confederacy.

A friend of ours [Gregory Schaaf] wrote this and put it together after we adopted him, kind of. Many times he didn't have a shirt, we got him a shirt. He didn't have money to go home or something like that. Maybe he's one of the new Indians.

The Constitution of the United States. Gregory Schaaf wrote that from the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the ratification of the United States Constitution, the opportunity to create and to establish a new government challenged people.¹

How to search for the roots of democracy? One of the little-known secrets of the founding fathers is that they discovered a democratic model not in Great Britain, France, Italy, nor any of the so-called cradles of civilization. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and others found the oldest participatory democracies on earth among American Indians. Representatives of the United States [Continental] Congress met privately with ambassadors from the Haudenosaunee Six Nation Confederacy as well as the Lani Lanape Grandfathers of the Algonquin Family of Nations.

For centuries these American Indian people were governed by democratic principles through wampum diplomacy. Their traditional philosophy of liberty was advanced in a series of peace talks focused on the law of the land, the balance of power, and the inherent rights of people.

American Indian George Morgan and others served as intermediaries in these talks. His role as a diplomat demanded an intimate knowledge of the cultures, social structures, and governments of American Indians. He traveled safely through Indian communities and met with Indian leaders of frontier democracies. He witnessed societies where people were endowed with the right to speak freely, the right to assemble, and religious freedom, as well as the separation of governmental powers into three branches. A system of checks and balances was firmly in place, like the branches of the great tree of peace among the Haudenosaunee, people of the Longhouse.

The United States government was structured surprisingly similarly to the seating pattern of the Haudenosaunee Grand Council. The Six Nation Confederacy led by Tadodaho, the firekeeper of the heart of the confederacy, paralleled the presidency of the United States executive branch. Their legislative branch was divided into two parts. The Mohawk and the Seneca, united as elder brothers, formed the upper house of the traditional senate. The Oneida and Cayuga composed the younger brother, similar to the House of Representatives. After meeting with representatives of the Six Nations in the

1. GREGORY SCHAAF, *THE GREAT LAW OF PEACE AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES* (n.d.); see also Gregory Schaaf, *From the Great Law of Peace to the Constitution of the United States: A Revision of America's Democratic Roots*, 14 AM. INDIAN L. REV. 323 (1989).

summer of 1754, Benjamin Franklin first proposed the creation of a colonial grand council in the Albany Plan of Union. A general government was to be formed in America and administered by a president-general, with a grand council to be chosen by the representatives of the people of several colonies.

Franklin's plan for the grand council of united colonies clearly resembled the Grand Council of United Haudenosaunee. Why did the founding fathers choose to keep secret the original design of the United States government? One clue may be related to a major difference between the Iroquoian and United States judicial branches. The Iroquoian Supreme Court is entrusted to the women. Clan mothers and women's councils maintained the balance of powers in their matrilineal society. Women nominated chief statesmen as political and religious leaders, lending a maternal insight into good leadership qualities.

Their standards were set very high, while under the United States Constitution, the qualifications for congressmen were limited to age—don't forget I said *congressmen*—citizenship, and residency. Iroquoian women, moreover, required all chief statesmen of the five nations to be honest in all things. They must not idle or gossip, but be men possessing honorable qualities. Their hearts shall be full of peace and goodwill and their minds filled with the yearning for the welfare of the people of the confederacy.

Women also held the power to impeach any leader who failed, after three warnings, to serve the best interests of the people. If the founding fathers had disclosed the political powers of many Indian women, perhaps women like Abigail Adams, wife of future president John Adams, could have effectively assumed positions as founding mothers. White women could have argued they deserved at least equal rights with American Indian women.

On behalf of the people, women preserved title to the land through families and clans. This may be another facet of the Iroquoian system which some founding fathers may have preferred not to make public. In contrast, women in the United States were not permitted the right to own land nor even to vote, much less control a system of justice. Iroquoian women also maintained a sort of veto power to stop wars. If women across the land had known the truth about the power of Indian women, the call of equal rights could have been heard earlier. American history might have changed over the past two hundred years.

I was born in Kahnawake about six miles this side of Montreal, on the St. Lawrence River. My people came from Deerfield, Massachusetts, at the end of the Mohawk valley in 1500. We have seen the white people for almost five hundred years. What we do in seven or eight communities of the Mohawk Nation is win our case by hook or crook. The women where I was born are tough. And the men are tougher, because they built this city, all the bridges, all the tall buildings. To live in a house with my great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother, four generations of women, how else can you grow up? Use your own judgment.

My grandfather, my mother's father, went to Carlisle College. His father sent him there, because he knew that the outside world was going to happen. That's why my mother was the first one to speak English. Education. How are we going to deal with the outside world? Do you know how hard it's been to live in two worlds? Because when I go home next month, my friends and my family stay away from me for over a week because they want me to calm down from this city.

Sitting in the house two years ago, and my daughter is visiting my friend five miles away. No car—only my bicycle. And it's very close to the highway, maybe from here to that wall [about seventy-five feet]. All of a sudden I see fourteen state trooper cars going by. Something's wrong. Get dressed, get on the bike, go five miles, find my daughter, and say, "What's going on?" She said, "I don't know. Let's go and find out."

My god. Some minor fight. In the meantime, we have two bingos and we have casino gambling—the tribal council casino gambling. The arm of New York State is the tribal council. The arm of the federal government is the tribal council. Please understand what the tribal council is. I heard "tribal" all day today. I got it up to here with "tribal." All my life I never heard the word "tribal." My grandmother never uttered the word "tribal." *Nation*. If you speak a language, you are a nation. If the Lakota speak their language, they are a nation. The United States doesn't even have a national language. And you call yourself a nation and sovereign!

Let's go back to sovereignty. You know what sovereign means? When you're strong enough that those damn fools want a treaty. Shall I go back to the Two-Row Wampum, dated 1713? Let's talk about the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, or the Haldimand Pledge in 1779, or the Royal Proclamation in 1763. The Treaty of Fort Stanwix—it's still in effect today. We've used it. Ask him, Oren Lyons. He's sitting at the end of the table. The Treaty of Canandaigua.

When you have the power of reason and you have the power of righteousness and you followed the way the natural law teaches you, there is no way you are going to go wrong. None. I'm going to depend on some damn law that gives me the right to do something? No. I have my own law, and it's called the Great Law. I don't need the law from the United States government to decide for me what I'm going to do.

When my daughter and I reached the Bear's Den, there's a whole bunch of warriors over there that want this gambling. And on this side, a whole bunch of state troopers. And then there's a handful of us from the Longhouse wondering what's going to happen and what are we going to do. They arrested the owner, they put him in the car with his lawyers, they took one slot machine and put it in the trunk. They're going to take him to Malone, process him, slap him on the hand with a fifty dollar fine—he's going to come back and go back to business.

Like hell he is. Because my friend went to that door with these big goons at the door, and they said they're not going to open the door, and he said,

“Open the door or I’ll break it down.” And I looked around. Who’s going to go and help him? I can’t name you the people who came with me, but I was the oldest woman that walked into that casino. And we trashed it. We threw the goddamn things out the door. We smashed it. I had a matchbook. I wanted to burn it. They wouldn’t let me. Children, sixteen years old, don’t want to go to school, they don’t want to go to work because they’re in the casino making tons of money.

Economic development? In casino money to educate your children, never. Because what’s going to happen to them here?

In that struggle that Alex [Ewen] was talking about where he helped me get food together to take up to feed the people in the siege, because we were barricaded, we started a school. It’s called Akwesasna Freedom School. In that school we teach children the language. Everything is in Mohawk. They are immersed in the language. Arithmetic, science, you name it, it’s in Mohawk, no English. Because those children, twenty years from now, are going to do the ceremony. How can we do a ceremony in English? Because what you say in Indian, you lose it in the English translation. How do you say *konarokwa* to somebody so easily and how do you say *oneh*? There’s no good-bye. There’s no curse words. There’s no downgrading. The language is female and it honors women. How can you go wrong with something like that? And our door at the Longhouse has never been closed for other Indian people to come, because the Iroquois confederacy has adopted another nation and they’re called Tuscarora. Today we are known as the Six Nation Confederacy. We don’t adopt one person. We adopt the whole damn nation.

I have so much to say, and he’s already given me a piece of paper. Okay, Alex. I’m going to close with this. The traditional native people hold the key to the reversal of the process in western civilization, which hold the promise of unimaginable future sufferings and destruction. Spiritualism is the highest form of political consciousness. And we, the native people of the western hemisphere, are among the world’s surviving proprietors of that kind of consciousness, and we are here to impart that message. We saw each other as human beings. I thank you.

