

Chapter 6

Our Mother Earth

Oren Lyons

A thousand years ago a man came from the west. And he came across the water, and he brought a great message of peace. He came across the water, the great lake that you now call Ontario; he stopped on the shores, and he visited the various nations who were at war and who had forgotten how to live together. He came with a great message of peace; and he gathered the strongest and the fiercest of leaders in the Great Council. And it took many years; but with the help of Hiawentah, whom you call Hiawatha, together they created the Houdenosaunee, the great league of peace—one thousand years ago. And the principles were set down, at that time, of how to conduct ourselves, of how to raise the chiefs, how to raise the clan mothers; and how to set men in council, so that they could first perform the ceremonies as the spiritual being, the center, of the nation. The ceremonies were the first obligation of the chiefs, and the faith keepers, and the clan mothers. And then they were to sit in council for the welfare of the people.

A thousand years ago we were given this message by the Creator; we were given a government by the Creator. This government was not manufactured from the minds of men, it was given to us; and we were to cherish it. And each generation was to raise its chiefs and to look out for the welfare of the seventh generation to come. We were to understand the principles of living together; we were to protect the life that surrounds us; and we were to give what we had to the elders and to the children. The men were to provide; and the women were to care for the family, and be the center, the heart, of the home. And so our nation was built on the spiritual family, and we were given clans: the turtle-the eagle-the deer-the beaver-the wolf-the bear-the snipe-the hawk: symbols of freedom. We were given an understanding of how free people live. And we were told to protect the freedom of every individual; we were told that sover-

eignty began with the individual, and you protect that. And so a free nation stood, and a great peace prevailed.

Many years later there landed, on our shores to the east, our white brother. And he brought with him things that we could not contend with. We were told at an earlier time that the name Ga-nya-di-yo, whom you call Handsome Lake, would be important; and so it came to pass that in the year 1800 we were given a third and final message of how to deal with the things that were brought across the water—when our men were drunk; when our home fires were out; when the dogs walked in the ashes; and the children and the women hid in the woods because of what the whisky and the liquor did to our men. And we were given a message at that time; and this message told us about Ga-nya-di-yo; and again the Creator took pity on us, He felt sorry for us, and He gave the third message of how to deal with the whisky and with gambling, how to deal with the Bible and the missionaries. We were told at that time what would happen to this earth. And as Ga-nya-di-yo walked with the Four Beings, the Four Protectors, who had been sent by the Creator to look out for mankind, they pointed out to him, here and there, “What do you see?” “I see a woman, so fat that she can’t rise, yet she continues to stuff her mouth, she continues to eat like a glutton.” And they never said whether that was right or wrong; they asked him, what did he see? And so they went, and he was given this opportunity to see, and to be told that one day the water would not be fit to drink, that indeed the water would burn, that the trees would begin to die from the tops down; that the chief of all trees, the maple, would signal to us the time of the deterioration of life, when the end would be near. He told us, and pointed out the variety of events that would occur: the sickness of our children and of the elders, and of what money would do—the greatest sickness of all.

Now we are faced with these things, as leaders of our people, as people given a great responsibility; we in this generation must deal with all of these elements.

When the Creator gave His Great Law and planted the great tree of peace, He uprooted it, and He threw under it all the weapons of war. He said: You are now a nation of peace; and I will give you *oyankgwa-oohtway*, the sacred tobacco; and that will be your strength. That will be what you depend on, the spiritual power of prayer, a belief: the belief of your people. And if you have one mind, and you consider this again, it is the power that you have. So it happens

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when you burn the tobacco and use the sacred cornmeal that all of the animals stop and they listen; they turn, and they listen to these words.

Our brothers, the bears and the wolves and the eagles, are Indians. They are Natives, as we are. At one time we spoke their language; at one time we conversed, a long time ago. The two-leggeds have fallen from grace. Those animals and those wingeds, they live in a state of absolute grace; they can do no wrong. It is only we who have been given a choice, so clearly pointed out by the Four Beings: this is the way it is, they said, and what do you see here? They did not tell him: Do this or do that; they said, This is the way it is: what you do will be up to you. And that is what the Creator gave to us, the choice: a great gift, the mentality that we have. And among us there are even people with other gifts—a gift of art, or a gift of speech, or a gift of a smile that can make everyone laugh. Whatever it is, each of us was born with a mission. We were born with a mission, and we must know what it is and develop it and do it. And that's a choice—that is your choice.

We went to Geneva—the Six Nations, and the great Lakota nation—as representatives of the indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere. We went to Geneva, and we spoke in the forum of the United Nations. For a short time we stood equal among the people and the nations of the world. And what was the message that we gave? There is a hue and cry for human rights—human rights, they said, for all people. And the indigenous people said: What of the rights of the natural world? Where is the seat for the buffalo or the eagle? Who is representing them here in this forum? Who is speaking for the waters of the earth? Who is speaking for the trees and the forests? Who is speaking for the fish—for the whales, for the beavers, for our children? We said: Given this opportunity to speak in this international forum, then it is our duty to say that we must stand for these people, and the natural world and its rights; and also for the generations to come. We would not fulfill our duty if we did not say that. It becomes important because without the water, without the trees, there is no life.

New York City—you live here; you can't get a clean drink of water here. The water you drink is filthy. You don't know what clear spring water is like, because you have to drink what comes out of the tap. And eventually it will kill you. Eventually, you will not be able to clean that water; nor your children, nor your grandfather, nor your

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grandmother. . . . You think about it. . . . When you are sick and when your children are sick, you remember what the Indian said to you about water.

We are indigenous people to this land. We are like a conscience. We are small, but we are not a minority. We are the landholders, we are the land keepers; we are not a minority. For our brothers are all the natural world, and by that we are by far the majority. We want you to understand the opportunity now. It is no time to be afraid—there is no time for fear. It is only time to be strong, only a time to think of the future, and to challenge the destruction of your grandchildren, and to move away from the four-year cycle of living that this country goes through, from one election to another, and think about the coming generations.

We spoke about human rights and we spoke in defense of all people and of all children. But remember that as long as we are burning tobacco, as long as the Indian nations exist, so will you. But when we are gone, you too will go.

Dahnato (now I am finished).

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