

Paper Title: The Role of Nature in Iroquois Spirituality

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Abstract:

The role that nature plays in the spirituality of the Native American tribes stands out as having a profound connection with the world. Their worldviews place tremendous importance upon their bond with nature. The specific role that nature plays in their spiritual lives varies from tribe to tribe; although, many beliefs about nature are widely shared among Native Americans. This paper will focus on one such tribe, the Iroquois, or preferably Haudenosaunee ('People Building a Longhouse'). Many misunderstandings of their beliefs have resulted from incomplete observations that were often taken alone and out of context. To gain a proper understanding of their connection to nature, it is essential to appreciate how various aspects of their spirituality are interwoven.

We enjoy in today's technologically advanced world amazingly quick and easy access to a truly immense amount of information. The judgment of other cultures and religions based on mere snippets of information is not only poor research, but also a grave injustice that has often led to oppression and prejudice. In taking advantage of this ability we can perhaps gain a deeper and better understanding of other religions and worldviews.

Biography:

Darren MacDougall, 35 years old, is a proud father and loving husband who has a passion for both theology and the environment. His education includes a BA in Psychology from Niagara University and a MA in Theology from Northeastern Seminary. He has just been accepted into a PhD Program at the University of St. Michael's College at the Toronto School of Theology. In addition to the PhD he will also be pursuing a certificate in Theology and Ecology from the Elliot Allen Institute of Theology and Ecology. He previously spent 15 years in the environmental testing laboratory business, including many years as both a technician and project manager. Mr. MacDougall is currently employed as a computer teacher at Stella Niagara Education Park, a private Catholic school, and as an adjunct professor of introductory Christian theology courses for those seeking certificates in ministry. This unique mixture of education and experience has fueled his passion to become a post-secondary educator of theology with a focus on Christian ethics and the environment. Darren is a great enthusiast of everything Scottish, as well as an avid fisher and golfer.

Paper Text:

When considering the role of nature in religions and cultures the Native American tribes stand out as having a profound connection with the world. Their worldview places

tremendous significance on their relationship with nature—indeed, it is essential to the way they live. The specific role that nature plays in their spiritual lives varies among the different tribes; however, it is important to note that many beliefs about nature are widely shared among Native Americans. The Iroquois, or preferably Haudenosaunee ('People Building a Longhouse') is in fact a confederation of six tribes. Many misunderstandings of their beliefs have resulted from incomplete observations. Single beliefs or practices were often taken alone and out of context. To gain a proper understanding of their connection to nature, it is essential to appreciate how various aspects of their spirituality are interwoven.

While I am not Native American, I may be able to offer a unique perspective. As an outsider looking in, I have long believed that Native American traditions offered profound insight into humanity's spiritual connection to nature. Although this belief may be shared by many it certainly is not shared by all. Particularly in the early days of colonization, many questioned the role that nature played in the lives and spirituality of the Native Americans. A commonly held belief at that time was that the Native Americans were savages who worshiped false gods, and had little spiritual insight or understanding:

If it is the purpose of the Government to civilize the Indians, they must be compelled to desist from the savage and barbarous practices that are calculated to continue them in savagery, no matter what exterior influences are brought to bear on them.~
Henry Teller ~ , Secretary of the Interior, 1883.¹

To refer to this statement as misguided or ignorant would be an injustice. To gain a full understanding of the damage done to the Native American people and culture as a result of statements such as this is well beyond the scope of this research paper. However, some appreciation of the breadth and scope of that damage is imperative in any Native Americans studies. By looking through available resources, with the greatest importance placed on those by Native American authors, there can be seen a much different understanding of the role that nature plays in the lives and cultures of Native Americans. Indeed, you find it not to be foolish practices and beliefs of savages, but a deep and profound spiritual connection with nature.

There has been a great breach of trust that desperately needs to be repaired. Even to this day, there are those who strip-mine the beliefs of the Native Americans for their own political and financial benefits. Understandably, there are many Native American authors that view this type of research as a form of cultural genocide.² I witnessed this concern first hand in my efforts to arrange interviews of Native Americans. There is a definitive apprehension to the sharing of traditions and beliefs with people outside of the Native American community. This is certainly an understandable stance, and further shows the need for open, honest, and compassionate channels of communication.

¹ Teller, Henry. 1883 Secretary of the Interior Annual Report. Located at <<http://mytwobeadsworth.com/NATruth2.html>> (December 4, 2003).

² Churchill, Ward. Indians are Us? Culture and Genocide in Native North America. Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1994. Pg. 139-165.

The name Haudenosaunee literally means People Building a Longhouse. "That Long House is a way of life where the many native nations live in peace under one common law."³ Those united nations of the Haudenosaunee are the tribes of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk and Tuscarora Nations. Their traditional lands comprise much of New York State, northern portions of Ohio and Pennsylvania, and the southern portions of Ontario and Quebec. This is a confederation of nations in agreement to live in accordance with a traditional law of governance known as the Great Law of Peace. They have a tremendously rich heritage that should be studied by any wishing to learn more about their people, and is essential to research work with the Haudenosaunee.

The current state of literature available for this research topic is fairly limited and without significant cohesion. The literature review for this research resulted in two distinct groups. In the first group is a collection of documents authored by Native Americans, and consists primarily of historical accounts, philosophy, journal entries, and poetry. The second group of literature is by non-Native American authors and is predominantly limited to historical accounts and research work. Neither group has complete unity of thought, and a certain amount of internal debate and disagreement exists. However, that is not to suggest that the various authors do not share some common opinions. Particularly in the case of the Native American authors there is a common theme that begins to appear among the various writings. They emphasize different aspects, and appear to have different purposes for their writing, yet there is a sense that they are all headed in a similar direction. Among the non-Native American authors there is more evidence of true disagreement among several of the authors. The majority of the debate centers on whether the spiritual connection to nature is based on superstition and fears, or a profound sense of kinship.

Without easy access to oral traditions the non-Native American authors must rely solely on the sparse written accounts, and therefore credibility and authority is necessarily restrained. Given the severity of devastation brought upon the Native American communities, it is not hard to understand the difficulty in opening lines of communication. The theft and misuse of Native American beliefs and practices for financial and political profit exists even today. As long as this practice exists it will continue to discourage sincere efforts of understanding.

Most research work done within academic groups by non-Native Americans attempt to understand the beliefs and practices of Native Americans. However, these studies do not establish priority among these beliefs and offer no depth of meaning. It was difficult to appreciate which beliefs were primary and of greatest importance. In addition, the sense of how these various aspects connected was not readily apparent. In an effort to better understand the true weight of these beliefs I attempted to interview Native Americans to discern their own priorities. I considered myself quite fortunate, and indeed indebted, to have had the opportunity to speak directly to a member of the Tuscarora nation. Through my discussions with him I was able to gain more clarity on these itemized lists of beliefs and their interconnections.

In working through the literature of the various non-Native American authors I encountered a cautionary note on embarking in research of Native American relationships with nature. In his work entitled *Native American Religions* Sam Gill discusses the outside-looking-in' view of Native American beliefs about nature. As an Anglo-

³ Haudenosaunee Homepage. <<http://www.sixnations.org/>>. (November 1, 2003)

American growing up in the late 20th century my information about these beliefs primarily were deprived from stories I picked up from both my father and grandfather. This was supplemented by occasional discussions and interactions with a few young Native Americans I had come to know through school. Gill correctly points out that this is not exactly an authoritative manner of understanding. His emphasis seems to be similar to that which I have stated above, that there is a lack of honest and sincere effort of understanding. Gill summarizes this caution by stating,

Presently, non-Native Americans often express their admiration for 'the Indian' spiritual relationship with the land, its plants, and its animals - a relationship seen as a harmonious, holistic, and spiritual ecology. This view of 'the Indian' is more the product of a European-American disenchantment with Western lifeways and modernity than the result of a careful study of Native American cultures and histories. It needs to be tested.⁴

Gill goes on to caution that to have such beliefs and expectations about Native Americans, without ensuring that they are correct, in many ways results in manipulation and stereotyping. The result of this would be "... predetermining who they are and how they can acceptability act." (Gill 1988, 141). I think Gill's point is quite well taken, and that he indeed takes an open approach in his research of Native American religions.

Gill notes that among the various religious traditions of the Native Americans the belief in Father Sky and Mother Earth goes a long way to understanding their connection to nature. It demonstrates a foundational relationship with nature that is deeply spiritual in character. (Gill 1988, 150). I believe that Gill's insight here reaffirms the belief in understanding that the Native American connection to their environment is at the very core of their way of life. More importantly, I believe that it offers some insight into where much of the confusion and misunderstanding may reside.

In describing Father Sky and Mother Earth many may question the theology of such a description, wondering how many gods are being described, and in what hierarchical fashion they relate to one another. I believe in doing this the focus and importance is lost. It is my opinion that in this description the meaning is not imbedded in hierarchy and authority, but rather in community, unity, and connectedness. There are other authors that believe to view the spirituality of Native Americans within the context of hierarchy is an inappropriate and ineffective approach. Paula Gunn Allen writes,

In the Native American system, there is no idea that nature is somewhere over there while man is over here, nor that there is a great hierarchal ladder of being on which ground and trees occupy a very low rung, animals a slightly higher one, and man a very high one indeed-especially 'civilized'

⁴ Gill, Sam D. Native American Religions Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience. Vol I. Lippy, Charles H. and Peter W. Williams, eds. New York: Scribner's Sons. Pg. 141.

man. All are seen to be brothers or relatives... and necessary parts of an ordered, balanced and living whole.⁵

There is a deep spiritual connection among all the parts. Misunderstanding might develop when one is on the outside looking in. Taken alone and out of context with the whole a person might misinterpret the meaning of a Native American's connection to a tree. To see an obvious deep spiritual connection between a person and a tree it might be assumed that this person then worships the tree. The individual components are viewed as sacred but in relation to the whole, "The Earth, and those who reside upon her, taken their sacredness from that part of the Great Spirit which resides in all living beings. They are not the source of sacredness, but are no less sacred for that circumstance."⁶ Without a complete and comprehensive understanding the true meaning of the spiritual connection would be lost. It is only within the context of the whole that the meaning can be understood. John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes summed up this point quite well by stating, "To us they are part of nature, part of ourselves - the Earth, the Sun, the wind and the rain, stones, trees, animals, and even the little insects like ants and grasshoppers. We try to understand them... and we need to know more than a hint to give us meaning."⁷ It is imperative to understand the spiritual thread that connects the sky, the earth, the tree, the man, the eagle, the child, and so on. I believe in many ways this is what can, and has, led to the misunderstanding of the beliefs of other people and cultures. Indeed, within any culture or religion, a single moment or fact taken out of the context of the whole could prove to provide quite a misrepresentation of that whole.

This belief in Mother Earth and Father Sky can be traced back to the earliest creation stories of the Haudenosaunee.⁸ It is in these early legends that the seeds of their spiritual connection to nature can be found. Throughout the stories there is a dominant theme of family relation. The "Sky Holder" and his wife "Mature Flowers" exist in the sky world. They are the caretakers of the "Tree of Light". The wife falls to the earth and is caught and cared for by the animals of the Earth. There can be seen at this point the development of a cooperative and caring connection between the spiritual world and the physical world. The emerging relationship is harmonious and nurturing. She is placed upon the back of a giant snapping turtle which is covered with mud and forms the fertile land that she can then plant and grow food upon. The snapping turtle plays a significant role in the culture of the Haudenosaunee, symbolizing the land upon which they live. To this day many Iroquois refer to North America as Turtle Island.⁹ As the creation story progresses The Sky Woman gives birth to a daughter whom herself dies giving birth to

⁵ Paula Gunn Allen. The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective on American Literature. In Hobson, The Remembered Earth, University of New Mexico Press: 1981, p. 225.

⁶ Annie L. Booth, Harvey L. Jacobs. Ties that Bind: Native American Beliefs as a Foundation for Environmental Consciousness. In Environmental Ethics. 12, no. 1, (Spring 1990): 33

⁷ John (Fire) Lame Deer, Richard Erdoes. Lamedeer: Seeker of Visions. New York: Simon and Schuster (1972) 108.

⁸ Haudenosaunee Homepage. <<http://www.sixnations.org/>>. (November 1, 2003)

⁹ Akwesasne's Toxic Turtles, Kanatiiosh 2002, <<http://tuscaroras.com/graydeer/pages/Toxicturtle3.htm>> (November 1, 2003)

twins. The daughter is buried and becomes known as Mother Earth. From her death grow the Three Sisters of corn, beans, and squash. Again it is important to note the theme of kinship. There is a predominant connection between the family of the spiritual world and all the inhabitants of Turtle Island. The individual strands of connection are been drawn together into the sacred web of life.

The creation story continues by describing the twin brothers. It is here that we find the introduction of the battle between good and evil. One brother is good-minded. This brother is known as "He Grasps the Sky With Both Hands".¹⁰ The good mind has a firm grip or connection to the spiritual world of the sky. This would certainly seem to suggest that what is good and right for a person is to maintain a strong spiritual connection to creation. The good-minded brother strengthens these connections as he goes about tending to the earth and creating a variety of plants and animals. All through the work of the good-minded brother there can be seen this repeated theme of kinship with nature.

The good-minded brother set about to create plants, animals and birds. In the sky he placed our Grandmother the Moon, our Elder Brother the Sun (Day Bringer), the Morning Star, and the Milky Way as the path to the Sky World. He created the cycles of day and night, of the changing seasons.¹⁰

All of these various aspects of nature are spiritually tied together forming the basis of the sacred web of life.

By sharp contrast we are next introduced to the evil-minded brother, "Flint - The Mischievous One." Through this comes the creation of thistles, thorns, bats and serpents. All of his work was seen as things that would make life difficult for the people to live on Turtle Island. It seems appropriate to view these things as causing problems among the kinship connection. They would lead to a weakening of the spiritual bond with nature, and deteriorate the sacred web of life. The two brothers then struggled for dominance in this new land. It takes on the form of a classic good versus evil battle and involves various competitions to decide a victor. The *Haudenosaunee Homepage* reports that many of these competitions are practiced today, "as it is a way to manifest the classic struggle of good over evil." In the end the good-minded brother is the victor, while the evil-minded brother is sent underground to rule over the serpents, the deep, and the night.¹¹

The final acts of creation in this story involve the introduction of the races of people.¹¹ Through the good-minded brother nature is used to create the various races. Asians are created from the yellow bark of a tree; Caucasians from the great salt sea; Africans from the dark, rich soil; Native Americans from the reddish clay. These final stories of creation really emphasize the deep spiritual connection between the people and

¹⁰ Haudenosaunee, Culture Page, <http://sixnations.buffnet.net/Culture/?article=creation> (November 1, 2003)

¹¹ Haudenosaunee, Culture Page, <http://sixnations.buffnet.net/Culture/?article=creation> (November 1, 2003)

land. The closing paragraph of this creation story does a tremendous job of drawing the deep meaning out of the story, and completing the sacred web of life.

The good-minded brother taught the people the use of the plants and animals, ceremonies of thanksgiving and to live in harmony and peace. We have come to refer to him as Sonkwaiatison, "the Creator." Before departing from the earth, he struck a deal with the people. We are to protect his gifts of Creation and be respectful of all living things, and were to simply be thankful for all that he has provided, as he has given us all that we need to live a happy life. In return for showing thanks, he would strive to keep the cycles of life continuing for the benefit of the people.¹¹

This creation story, more than any other source, is essential for setting a proper foundation of understanding about the role of nature in the Spirituality of the Haudenosaunee.

Having now taken a deeper look at the story of Father Sky and Mother Earth, Paula Gunn Allen's views become much clearer. Her argument that the spiritual connection of the Haudenosaunee to nature should not be viewed in hierarchical terms is proven in the Creation story. Although a victory of good over evil is present, the overriding theme of the story involves kinship. To focus on developing a system of authority and ranking is to entirely misunderstand the point. The story is not about ranking one thing above another, but rather about connecting all of creation together into one sacred web of life.

Michael Doak also believes that a great deal of misunderstanding was, and continues to be, a failure to appreciate the wholeness of Native American spirituality. He points out that the early European settlers saw these spiritual practices of the Native Americans as barbaric and pagan like.¹² This judgment was most likely based on very minimal exposure to the beliefs and practices of the Native Americans, and as a result was not only inaccurate but also wholly unjust.

In Doak's research work he noted, in a similar fashion to Gill, that spirituality played an important part in the life of the Iroquois, and that this was intimately connected to the natural world (Doak 2001). A crucial component of this spiritual connection to the natural environment involves the predominant use of ceremonies. It is through the use of these ceremonies that the Iroquois are reminded of and drawn closer to that spiritual connection to the environment.

Many of these ceremonies are centered on thanks and honors to the food spirits. There is a realization within the Iroquois community of how intrinsically connected their life is to that of the food. Beans, corn and squash, traditionally the three primary food sources of the Iroquois, were viewed as the Three Sister Spirits. It is these Three Sisters that the ceremonies call on, asking their assistance in providing nourishment for the people. It is interesting here to note that the spirits of these staple foods are viewed as sisters. In this view there is again an overwhelming emphasis on how things work together to support each other and how everything is related to one another. The

ceremony that is set aside for thanks to the Three Sister Spirits is called the Seed Blessing or Planting Dance.¹² This particular ceremony takes place in May.

Here again is another point where a full picture is required for an appropriate understanding. Someone from outside the Haudenosaunee might have come across a Planting Dance and wrongly assumed that they were worshipping a god of corn. Their assumption would be far from accurate and tragically incomplete in understanding. Not only would the Creation story above be needed for an accurate understanding, but also they would benefit from a full appreciation of all the thanksgiving ceremonies. The thanksgiving ceremonies actually exist in a Cycle of Thanksgiving. The individual ceremonies are connected and flow together in one continual circle of thanksgiving. "It is through these festivals that an annual rhythm is established and the cycle of life has a natural flow to it. These festivals follow the changes in the seasons and the ripening of the crops."¹² Having looked at the whole of thanksgiving and how it is all woven together, there is a new appreciation for the individual ceremonies. The Maple Dance in March gives thanks for the return of the 'sweet water'. April brings about the Thunder Dance and shows appreciation for the arrival of the life-giving rains. The Sun Dance in May shows gratefulness for the warming Sun that warms the Earth and allows the plants to grow. All year long there is this continual Cycle of Thanksgiving for the gifts of Creation. Not only do I find this not to be savage or barbaric but rather it is a profoundly deep understanding and appreciation for the connection between humanity and the rest of creation.

Greydeer of the Tuscarora tribe correctly pointed out how these misunderstandings lead to stereotyping and racism. He cites his own experience as a child in school where single ceremonies were taken out of context and resulted in racist portrayals of these sacred dances. "The class was also asked to learn Indian songs and dances. "I was asked to pump my hand over my mouth in a mocking war hoop, to dance around like I had ants in my pants, and to sing the song 'Ten Little Indians'... it was a mockery of my spirituality and way of life."¹³ Here is a clear and painful example of the problems caused in not taking an honest and comprehensive look at the beliefs of other cultures. Had the teacher of this class conferred with the Elders of the Haudenosaunee they would have likely had a much better interpretation of the meaning of these dances, instead of associating them with a child's song about genocide. It would be a mistake, however, to lay the blame solely at the feet of the teacher. As Graydeer points out, there are vast collections of textbooks that promote these false understandings and racist portrayals. The true meaning was never understood from the first observations, and subsequently never made it to future generations. "The dancing failed to teach the children that dancing is a spiritual undertaking, for when one dances they are dancing for the Creator."¹³

These traditional understandings that I have outlined above form the foundation for the spiritual connection with nature. Building upon that foundation is the culture, or *Ongwehonweka*, of the Haudenosaunee. These are the ethics, morals, values, beliefs and philosophy of the Haudenosaunee people. They have as a foundation the traditional

¹² Michael Doak. [Native American Spirituality](http://religionsmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/naspirit.html). December 28, 2001, <<http://religionsmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/naspirit.html>> (September 11, 2003)

¹³ Graydeer. A Haudenosaunee Perspective. [Racism & Our Children](http://www.tuscaroras.com/graydeer/pages/racism.htm). 1/9/2000 <<http://www.tuscaroras.com/graydeer/pages/racism.htm>> (December 1, 2003)

beliefs of their Original People, and it serves as their way of life.¹⁴ Within the Ongwehonweka there is a predominant theme throughout of harmony, equality, and kinship with all of creation. Each person has a spiritual power known as *Orenda*. It is this spiritual power within each person that weaves the thread through the rest of creation. A strong Orenda means a strong spiritual connection and kinship with nature. Several specific points listed bring out clarity to this theme. Item number 13 in the section of ethics specifically points out that they should, "... live in harmony with nature."¹⁴ In their philosophy they point to a basis for this harmony with nature, "There is a Creator who produced the things that give bounty to this life. The universe is full of living beings - sun, moon, stars, earth, winds, and rain. There is a living spirit in all things - animals, plants, minerals, water, and winds." All of these beliefs are woven together into a sacred web of life that points back to their original Creation story. The Haudenosaunee call this initial understanding The Original Instructions. "This era defined the relationship of the people to the Creator and gave them ways to express their thankfulness for the gifts of Creation."¹⁴

The correct understanding of these original instructions is imperative to a proper appreciation of the spirituality of the Haudenosaunee. At a United Nations conference in 1977 the Haudenosaunee Council offered a message about their people and beliefs to the rest of the world. This document was called *A Basic Call to Consciousness: The Haudenosaunee Address to the Western World* and at many points addressed some of the issues discussed above. The primary objective of the document was to, "...call for a consciousness of the sacred web of life in the universe."¹⁵ This document was a means of helping non-Native Americans understand the true meaning and depth of the Haudenosaunee spiritual connection to the rest of creation. Within its pages were several points that support and emphasize the thesis of this paper. In the initial paragraph of the document they acknowledge that they are using the Original Instructions as the source for their beliefs. They recognize their role in the sacred web of life, pointing to the responsibility as spiritual guardians of their land. "We believe that man is real, a part of the Creation, and that his duty is to support Life in conjunction with the other beings."¹⁵ In their writing they do an excellent job of articulating the spiritual connection among all life.

In the beginning, we were told that the human beings who walk about the Earth have been provided with all the things necessary for life. We were instructed to carry a love for one another, and to show a great respect for all the beings of this Earth. We are shown that our life exists with the tree life, that our well-being depends on the well-being of the Vegetable Life, that we are close relatives of the four-

¹⁴ Haudenosaunee, Culture Page,
<<http://sixnations.buffnet.net/Culture/?article=creation>> (November 1, 2003)

¹⁵ Haudenosaunee Council. A Basic Call to Consciousness The Haudenosaunee Address to the Western World. Geneva, Switzerland, Autumn 1977. Akwesasne Notes (1978). (Retrieved October 8, 2003) from
<http://www.ratical.org/many_worlds/6Nations/BasicCtC.html>

legged beings. In our ways, spiritual consciousness is the highest form of politics.¹⁵

They go on to affirm that this spiritual connection among all living things is not limited to philosophy but pervades every aspect of their life and culture. I find it quite interesting to note the words they chose to describe this universal connection, "... everything that is Haudenosaunee has deep spiritual roots."¹⁵ Even the use of the word 'roots' gives you an idea of how concrete the spiritual connection is with nature. It is their very way of life, and is put into action in all aspects of culture, religion, government, ceremony, and family.

Progressing through the pages of the *Basic Call to Consciousness* the Haudenosaunee Council demonstrates some of the ways that this way of life is to be expressed. There is a great emphasis given to giving proper respect and thanksgiving for this sacred web of life. Indeed, they point out that all of this Creation is truly sacred. They suggest that gratitude and affection should be paid to the spirits of nature as they support and create life. Special mention is made to some of the primary supporters of the Haudenosaunee life such as the corn, beans, squash, winds, and Sun. In their conclusion they note that, "We deeply understand our relationship to all living things." Based on this relationship they stress the need for the protection and liberation of all things that support the sacred web of life, the trees, the water, and the air.¹⁶

It seems that some non-Native American authors have received the message offered by the Haudenosaunee Council. There is growing evidence that various authors understand and appreciate the Haudenosaunee spiritual connection to nature. Bron Taylor offers his understandings in a collection titled *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*.¹⁷ It seems in his writing that he is in many ways addressing common misconceptions about the spiritual ceremonies of the Iroquois. As mentioned earlier, one of the predominant misunderstandings was that in these ceremonies there was worshipping of corn, beans, and the like. He correctly points to the true meaning of these practices, "Thanksgivings are not worship... rather they are events to fervently give thanks for gifts that have already been received."¹⁷ He continues by pointing out that these ceremonies of thanksgiving are at the very center of the Haudenosaunee way of life. I found it particularly interesting to note his account of the duration of the ceremonies. Although I found no other source referencing the duration of the ceremonies, this account seems quite credible. Taylor notes that every significant gathering of the Haudenosaunee people begins with a thanksgiving address. This address consists of offering thanks to the various living parts of creation that support the Haudenosaunee life. There will be times where the thanksgiving is limited to but a few thanks, but Taylor comments that at times it may go on much longer. In some instances the list of thanksgiving may last several days. I find that this statement goes a long way to showing the sincerity of belief

¹⁶ Haudenosaunee Council. *A Basic Call to Consciousness The Haudenosaunee Address to the Western World*. Geneva, Switzerland, Autumn 1977. Akwesasne Notes (1978). (Retrieved October 8, 2003) from

<http://www.ratical.org/many_worlds/6Nations/BasicCtC.html>

¹⁷ Bron Taylor. *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. Continuum International, 2004.

among the Haudenosaunee people. Particularly in modern Western culture, there are few things for which people today would spend several days giving thanks.

Taylor goes on to acknowledge the Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee people, which is a way of guiding their life. In this section he offers the basis for this Law, "The Great Law of Peace is based on perpetuating a relationship to natural world powers, such as the grandfather's of thunder and lightning, elder brother sun, Grandmother moon, and mother Earth. These life-giving forces are well known to the Haudenosaunee."¹⁷ At this point that I was reminded of an earlier author. Ake Hultkrantz took a deeper look at the Native American relationship with nature. In this analysis, Hultkrantz views a dynamic tension in the relationship. "The tension was reflected, in part, in the native Americans view of nature, which often included some quite terrifying aspects such as cannibalistic and malevolent spirits. Nature is both nurturing and attractive as well as destructive and dangerous."¹⁸ Among all of the Native American authors whom I reviewed, I failed to notice a sense of fear or terror in the relationship with nature. This is not to suggest that Hultkrantz is mistaken. There is within the Creation story of the Haudenosaunee mention of the evil-minded brother. As mentioned above, the brother creates many things that cause difficulty in relationship with nature, such as, thorns and serpents. The Iroquois legend of the Maid of the Mist tells of a giant water snake that caused sickness among the people.¹⁹ It would appear then that there is some mention of tension, and it is likely that further research would lead to additional sources. It is possible that this lack of mention by Native American authors of tension with nature is that it is not an emphasized point. Taken alone these accounts may not offer a complete picture of the Haudenosaunee connection to nature. Taylor mentions that the Haudenosaunee knew well the life giving forces of nature. It is possible that a partial explanation may be related to a sense of awe at the power of nature. Expressions of awe towards nature are prevalent through virtually every society and culture, and these expressions may often take on the appearance of fear. This could be some of what Hultkrantz was noticing. This may well be an area of further research, and would likely best be served with the assistance of Haudenosaunee authors or elders.

Previously in this paper I mentioned that simple listings and historical accounts lacked much depth of meaning. Without understanding how the various aspects tied together, and what was emphasized in that connection, it was difficult to gauge meaning and importance. I hope that some of what I have already covered has brought clarity to such a problem. In my research I found additional information on what aspects of this spiritual connection are most accentuated. Among the Native American authors there was a significant amount of poetry and conversations that helped further clarify the deeper meaning.

Touch the Earth by T.C. McLauhan is an excellent collection of many of these works.²⁰ It is a valuable resource for gaining a firsthand account of meaning into the spiritual life of Native Americans. As I have previously stated it is somewhat inaccurate

¹⁸ Ake Hultkrantz. *Belief and Worship in Native North America*. Syracuse: Syracuse University press, 1981. Pg. 32.

¹⁹ *Native News, Views and Legends*. Last updated Oct 2002. (Retrieved December 1, 2003) <http://tuscaroras.com/traderdon/Legends/maid_of_the_mist.htm>

²⁰ McLauhan, T.C. *Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence*. New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971.

to state *this* is the belief of Native Americans. There is certainly variation among the people and the various tribes. These first hand accounts, however, seem to do an admirable job of condensing some of the common and core spiritual beliefs. There is an old Winnebago saying that expresses the connection between the people and the land, "...holy Mother Earth, the trees and all nature, are witnesses of your thoughts and deeds." (McLauhan, pg. 5.) Although this is not a Haudenosaunee saying, it seems to synthesize much of their beliefs detailed above. There is the recurring theme of all of nature as exhibiting the works of the Creator. As I progressed through McLauhan's book I encountered several poems and conversations that emphasized how the spiritual connection to nature was prevalent in every aspect of Haudenosaunee life. The simple act of sitting was not to be overlooked; even this seemingly insignificant action was woven with spiritual connection to nature.

... that is why the old Indian still sits upon the Earth instead of propping himself up and away from its life-giving forces. For him, to sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly; he can see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer in kinship to other lives about him... Kinship with all creatures of the Earth, sky and water was a real and active principal. (McLauhan, pg. 6.)

This also serves well as an additional example of how meaning can be misunderstood without a deeper appreciation and understanding. If someone were to come across this old man sitting on the ground he might be assumed to be lazy or uncivilized for sitting on the ground. Only with a full understanding does this become a profound and spiritual act of kinship and thanksgiving.

There are numerous accounts of people recognizing part of the Creator in all of creation. In one such account the person is recalling being in awe of the rivers, the sky, and the animals and how he knew they were created by some great power. He felt unworthy to speak directly to the Creator and instead used the stones as his intercessors. (McLauhan, pg. 16-17.) Not only was there a realization that nature was all the work of the Creator but also that it was created by his command, and demonstrated his wisdom. (McLauhan, pg. 18.) Many of the poems make reference to Mother Earth and demonstrate a deep appreciation for her care and sustaining of the Haudenosaunee life.

Through these various poems and writings I also noticed the strong sense that all of nature is as a church to the Haudenosaunee. This is the place where they worship, this is where they see and feel at one with the works of the Creator. One such writing offered this powerful picture of such worshipping,

Whenever, in the course of the daily hunt, the Red Hunter comes upon a scene that is strikingly beautiful or sublime - a black thundercloud with the rainbows glowing arc above the mountain, a white waterfall in the heart of the green gorge; a vast prairie tinged with the blood red of Sunset - he pauses for an instant in the attitude of worship. He sees

no need for sending apart one day in seven as a holy day,
since to him all days are God's.²¹

This image gives a deep understanding of what role nature plays in the spirituality of the Haudenosaunee. It is here that they are closest to the Creator, and their brothers and sisters of creation.

In my concluding step to gain firsthand understanding of what themes are central in the spiritual connection to nature, I arranged for an interview with a member of the Haudenosaunee. Mr. Morely (Jay) Clause of the Tuscarora nation was kind enough to offer me the honor of speaking with him.²² In my conversation with Mr. Clause I asked him to explain to me what aspects of nature were most significant to his spiritual life. He answered this question by pointing to two essential understandings. The first he offered was the kinship with nature. He stressed the importance of understanding that we are spiritually connected to our brothers and sisters in the natural world, and all part of one family. It is through these family connections, through this sacred web of life that great peace and harmony can be found. The second point Mr. Clause emphasized was the Cycle of Thanksgiving. It is through this continual cycle of ceremonies that a deep appreciation for the gifts of the Creator is shown. It is these two components that Mr. Clause suggested were the most crucial to understanding the Haudenosaunee connection to nature. I am deeply grateful to Mr. Clause for his assistance and compassion.

Collectively, the above discussion shows that role of nature in the spirituality of the Iroquois is central and essential. This spiritual connection pervades every aspect of their life and culture. It is with this understanding in mind that one can begin to understand the amount of devastation that was done to their way of life. Indeed, to take away their land was to take away their life, to destroy their spirit. "When the wild herds were killed, and the sacred lands of their ancestors overrun, then at least one form of the will and spirit of the Indian nations dwindled and died."²³ In *The Soul of the Indian* there is a poem that seems to best summarize the thoughts outlined above. Although it is the work of a non-Native American author, I believe it was included for its clarity of thought and passion of speech.

God! Sing ye meadow streams with gladsome voice!
Ye pine-groves, with your soft and soul-like sounds!
Ye Eagles, playmates of the mountain storm!
Ye lightnings, the dread arrows of the clouds!
Ye signs and wonders of the elements,
Utter forth God, and fill the hills with praise!...
Earth, with her thousand voices, praises God!
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

²¹ McLauhan, T.C. Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence. New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971.

²² Morley Clause. Member of the Tuscarora Nation. Phone Interview conducted on December 2, 2003.

²³ McLauhan, T.C. Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence. New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971. Intro.

Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of
Chamouni²⁴

Here can be seen the spiritual connection among all of creation and how that sacred web of life resonates with the sound of praise to the Creator.

In conclusion, the role of nature in the spirituality of the Haudenosaunee is woven into their very being. In reality, it is not a role in their spirituality, or their culture; it is their very life. Through the work of the various authors above, this message is quite apparent. It is my sincere hope that further lines of communication will be opened, and lead to an even deeper understanding and appreciation of these great people and their profound understanding of nature. I offer a quote from Kanatiyosh (Graydeer) that offers not only an understanding of Haudenosaunee beliefs about nature, but perhaps more importantly an implication of what they may offer to the rest of the world.

In my opinion, Native American Indian traditional teachings hold the key to continuity of life on this planet, if we do not incorporate these traditional laws, ecological knowledge, beliefs, and spirituality back into our communities and laws, no one will survive.²⁵

In today's world of technological advancement we enjoy instant access to a seemingly endless amount of information. At no other point in history have we had such an ability to easily study the beliefs and practices of various cultures and religions. It is imperative to our future that we take advantage of this ability. The judgment of other cultures and religions based on mere snippets of information is not only poor research, but also a grave injustice that has often led to oppression and prejudice. Through sincere and comprehensive research we will gain not only a better appreciation for the beliefs and practices of others, but perhaps also ourselves.

²⁴ 11. Charles Alexander (Ohiyesa) Eastman. The Soul of the Indian. University of Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1911.

²⁵ Kanatiyosh. A Haudenosaunee Perspective. Homepage. 1/9/2000 (accessed on December 1, 2003.) <<http://tuscaroras.com/graydeer/>>

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