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On the Peace Road? Some Reflections on 9/11

On 9/11 I thought of my ancestors. I think about them now.

Some of my mother's Indigenous ancestors were members of the well-known Iroquois Confederacy —or as they know themselves in their own language the Hauden-
ausaunee or People of the Longhouse.

The Hauden-
ausaunee in their classic historic form, were residents of a large territory stretching from the Great Lakes in the West to what is now Albany, New York State in the East.¹

Their own history tells of a time several hundred years ago —long before the arrival of the Europeans— in which they had been five warring nations. These nations, from the Seneca in the west through the Cayuga, the Onondaga, the Oneida, and the Mohawks in the East were bitter enemies. They were caught in a downward spiral of violence, revenge, and increasing violence.

Then an important man appeared, a man who became known as the Peacemaker. His name was Deganawidah. He came bringing a "Great Message of Peace." First he went to an important woman, who became known as the Mother of the Nations. She had lived for many years at the East-West pathway along which the warriors traveled to fight and kill. A neutral, she provided food and shelter to all who passed. To her went Deganawidah. The Hauden-
ausaunee history tells us that, "He said to her, I carry the Mind of the Master of Life and my message will bring an end to the wars between east and west."

The woman, who was known at that time as Jigonhsasee —She Who Lives at the War-Road— replied, "How will this be?"

He said to her, "The Word that I bring is that all peoples shall love one another and live together in peace."

The Mother of the Nations was receptive to the idea of peace and love but she was also very practical. She said to him, "Thy message is good but a word is nothing until it is given form and set to work in the world. What form shall this message take when it comes to dwell among people?"

He replied, "It will take the form of the longhouse in which there are many hearths, one for each family, yet all live as one household under one chief mother.

¹ The quotes from the Hauden-
ausaunee history are taken from Wallace (1986).

They shall have one mind and live under one law. Thinking will replace killing, and there shall be one commonwealth.”

The Peacemaker in his response does something very interesting, very important. He says in part, “Thinking will replace killing.”

He could have said peace will replace killing, or non-violence will replace killing. But he goes a step further to that which precedes peace and non-violence. That step is one which requires a shucking off, as we shuck the skin from the corn, of deadly emotions that stand in the way of peace. Among these emotions are fear, anger, violence and the desire for revenge.

The Haudenosaunee, following the many protocols that the Peacemaker provided to make “the word” take practical form fully recognized that we as humans cannot avoid emotions such as fear and anger. But the very power of fear and anger require that we address them head-on, face to face, and develop ways of controlling them within ourselves. And, if we know that others are doing the same, then we can walk the peace road, not the war road.

The Haudenosaunee successfully ended their bloody long-running conflicts and became an important and complex community. Despite many set-backs after the advent of the Europeans, they maintain strong ties to their roots today.

I thought of the Haudenosaunee, the Peacemaker, and the Mother of the Nations on 9/11. I think again of them today. They mark an important step in the much unfinished epic journey of humans away from violence based on perceived differences, to clear-headed cooperation based on a growing sense of commonality but respectful of the diverse “hearths” that mark the heterogeneity of human beings.

My participation in the Civil Rights Movement in the southern U.S. State of Alabama in 1965 helps me to recognize the significance of the Peacemaker. In fact, the Peacemaker sounds very much like Martin Luther King, Jr. who also spoke of a “house” in which all could live together in cooperation. King called it “the World House” in his important book *Where do We go from Here? Chaos or Community?* (Luther King, Jr., 1967). In that book he emphasizes the corrosive dangers of war, militarism, and exploitation. We will all suffer no matter who wins, he warns us. By contrast, we will all win when no one is being made to suffer.

King, of course, was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. And, as many have noted, Gandhi’s first major public expression of equality and justice through non-violent action is found in his speech against racism and imperialism to the Indian community in Johannesburg, South Africa, on September 11, 1906.

So within my own skin, from my ancestors, from my civil rights work, from my knowledge of the history of non-violence I can feel the pull of a powerful positive current that flows in the midst of a churning field of negativity, crisis, and chaos.

Will this positive clear-headed current of cooperation and mutual respect prevail against emotional thinking that springs from fear and anger in many different quarters of the world? I cannot answer that.

Is this positive current of the Longhouse, the World House real, does it contain actual people doing real things that bring the message of peace into a concrete form? The answer to that question is yes.

In my own work, I call this positive current “transcommunality” (Childs, 2003), a term that is inspired by the Haudenosaunee. Transcommunality celebrates and works from the great cultural multiplicity that we find in the human family. Rather than seeing the many different ways of being as barriers, transcommunal activists seek to draw from this multiplicity of locations as foundations for bridge building. An essential dimension of this transcommunal cooperation is mutual respect for each other’s diversity. This is quite different from a melting pot approach that aims at converting others to one single way of being and which pictures those who do not convert to that way of being as enemies rather than as cousins who live in other rooms of our common global dwelling place. Gandhi expressed something like this when he said, “I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.”

Not long before I wrote this essay, Nelson Mandela, speaking in India at the commemoration of Gandhi’s great work, said that in this world of violence, non-violence is the only route to salvation. Nelson Mandela who, were he in the grip of emotions such as revenge for his imprisonment, revenge for the brutalities of apartheid, would not be saying these words. But he says them. His words fit with the generous humanity of his spirit. It is a humanity that he expressed as President of South Africa that allowed for a peaceful striding toward democracy, and to which he continues his deep and abiding commitment.

Deganawidah, the Mother of the Nations, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and of course others, many of whom may only be known in their local neighborhoods, similarly overcome fear, anger, and the desire for vengeance to emphasize clear-headed thinking that allows the eyes to perceive how much we all have in common, rather than being clouded by that which distinguishes one from the other.

Will such positive people prevail? I do not know. Can the human mind and soul produce such people? Clearly we know the answer to that question to be yes. That is a positive reality on which we can both draw sustenance and build.

As I write, a new United Nations scientific report on global warming is sounding the alarm that the entire world, all human beings —with their many religions, cultures, and nations— all species, all forms of nature, will increasingly be negatively

impacted by the environmental impact of people. I know that if our grandchildren and their children, and their children's' children are to have a viable World House in which to live; if they are to have one commonwealth that allows for the diverse "hearths" of many different cultures all linked in one Longhouse of common well-being; then we must whenever, wherever possible contribute to the clear thinking, mutual respect and understanding that are absolutely essential if that positive current is to have any practical chance of prevailing. We, no matter where we live, must do this if are to move along the peace road rather than flinging ourselves on the spiraling down toward global destruction.



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64; I am of Indigenous (Oneida and Massachusaug) descent on my mother's side of the family, and of African-Madagascan descent on my father's side of the family. My African ancestors were forced to North America in the 1760s. My mother's ancestors lived in what is now the Boston area of Massachusetts and in what is now northern New York State. My mother still lives in Massachusetts. I work with urban organizations, trying to constructively reduce youth gang violence by creating the conditions for community revitalization and economic opportunity among those on the margins of U.S. society. Many of the people with whom I work, and who lead these organizations, are former gang members who gave up violence for peace making. I was raised an English speaker; I also speak French, and am learning Spanish. Professor of Sociology; University of California; Santa Cruz, California.