

Living Anishnabe

by Allen Gabriel

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She:kon (Greetings),

I was once asked, by a Canadian person, to explain the importance of culture to Aboriginal peoples. I tried, for a while, to bend my thinking around the framing of the question (*pan-Aboriginal approach*). The more I tried the more my head hurt. Finally, I decided that the best way to do this was to explain what my culture means to me.

The following piece is the result. I hope this gives people a little insight into my personal philosophy. It is based on the teachings, principles and values I've received throughout my life which, like my culture, continues to evolve because I learn something new everyday. I'd like to point out that, depending on who I am speaking with, I prefer to use the terms "Canadian," "American", "Anishnabe". Many of our people still use terms like "whites", "non-Indians", "non-Aboriginal people" or "non-Kanienkehaka" to describe people who are not of our nation. Many people (not of our nation) have told me they don't like being referred to as "non-whatever". Besides, I believe it to be disrespectful of peoples' identities (individual and collective). We have long been the victims of such disrespect (to say the least), but I find it difficult to justify using such terms -- I should be respectful of others if I'd like them to be respectful of me.

It is said that, as we walk the path that is our life, there are times when the way is not clear. Things happen to make us lose our way. Perhaps a loved one is sick or has died -- it could be something else that troubles us. When this happens we suddenly find ourselves stumbling through the brush.

As we struggle to push our way through the underbrush, looking for the clear path, we pick up burrs and thorns which cling to our clothing, pricking our skin. We get dusty and scared. Our fear causes us to cry and our hearts pound.

It is good to see that you have arrived here safely and that we may spend some time together. I know that you have come from far away and that many obstacles were in your way. And yet, despite these obstacles, you are able to be here. I take you by the hand as a brother or a sister. I offer you words of greetings and respect. I offer you food and drink. Because that which you carry may cause you grief, we have gathered here together.

I speak these words so that your mind may be put at ease and your load lightened. We come together in this way because you are grieving. We come to offer our thoughts and our support. We come to lift the weight of your burden from your shoulders and to share it among us. We know that as an individual you are very strong. But we also know there are times when one needs the strength of others. We understand that when one is in pain, the mind is distracted and one finds it difficult to use the power of a good mind.

First, we take the finest Eagle feather we can find, and with this Eagle feather, we sweep away the dust which clings to you. We remove any burrs or thorns or twigs which may be caught on your clothing. We remove these things because they surely cause you pain and discomfort. And so, we hope this makes you feel more comfortable and more at ease.

Your eyes may be filled with tears because of the grief you carry. These tears blur your vision and sting your eyes. There may be a sound like roaring in your ears because of the fear, pain and anger you may be feeling. And so, we take the finest and softest deer skin we can find. We gently wipe away your tears so that you may see the beauty that is all around you, and your friends and relations who have gathered here to support and help you.

Next, we wipe away any obstruction in your ears which may prevent you from hearing the good words that people speak to help ease your suffering. We offer you a place to sit so that you may rest your weary body.

Finally, your grief, your pain and your anger may cause an obstruction in your throat. It

is important to remove that obstruction so that, when you speak, your words may come loudly and clearly so that all may understand what is troubling you. And so, we offer you a drink of pure, cool water. Water is indeed one of the most powerful medicines we have, for it has the ability to give and to sustain life. The water will help to remove that which clogs your throat. It soothes your insides and quenches your thirst.

And so, with all this we hope you are now more comfortable and we have helped to ease your burden. We hope these words have helped to restore a sound mind, body and spirit. We hope that now you may focus, with a clear and good mind, on the words of thanksgiving, the Ohentenkariwatehkwen (the words before all others). We celebrate the fact that life exists, for we understand that it is by pure chance that it does.

And so it is Sonkwaiatison, our Creator, that as we prepare to begin this new day, we take a few moments to centre ourselves, to reflect on who we are, on our place within the Circle of life, and on our responsibilities to all of Creation.

We begin by turning our thoughts to you, Ietinistenhen Ohontsa, our sacred Mother the earth. We know that you are sick and you are dying at this time because of the way we, the two-legged show you disrespect and abuse of your gifts. And yet despite this, your love for your children is such that you continue to provide all we need to survive on a daily basis. You continue to fulfill your responsibilities and carry out your duties in accordance with the instructions given you in the beginning of time. For this we are grateful. And so it is, we turn our minds to you, we acknowledge you and we give thanks. So be it in our minds.

We understand that we share our time here with many different forms of life. From the smallest micro-organism, and the insects which live in the body of our Mother Earth. It is your responsibility to keep the body of our Mother healthy and strong. It is your duty to fight the effects of pollution. We know your task is great at this time because of the demands we the two-legged place upon you. And yet, despite this, you continue to struggle with the weight of the burden we place upon you. You fight to carry out your responsibilities and fulfill your obligations in accordance with the original instructions. Because of this, the cycle continues. And so it is, we turn our minds to you, we acknowledge you and we give thanks. So be it in our minds.

We turn our minds to the different forms of life that walk on the face of Mother Earth. There are those of you who crawl and those of you who slither. We acknowledge you Okwaho, (wolf), Okwari, (bear) and Anowarah (turtle). You represent our clans, our families. There are those of you who provide us with shelter, tools, clothing and food. We call you Skanionsa, the moose and Oskenonton, the deer. You give of yourselves so that we may survive. We understand that there is a relationship of respect that must exist among us.

We turn our minds to the fish and other forms of life that live in the bodies of water. We know that you struggle because of the disrespect we show you. We pollute your world and treat you as "resources" and products".

We look now to all the different birds that are around us. When the Creator made you, he gave your feathers the colours of the rainbow. He gave each of you a beautiful and distinctive song and he asked that you greet each new day with that beautiful song. Every day, when your voices come together in a beautiful chorus, we are reminded of the importance of the diversity and harmony in the Creation.

From among the birds the Creator chose you, Akweks, our brother the Eagle. You are the strongest and are able to fly the highest. Your keen eyesight allows you to see the Creation. Upon your shoulders, the Creator placed the added burden of being his messenger. Our Elders teach us that, should you appear in a dream and speak to us, we should pay particular attention to your words. For it is said that you are bringing a message directly from the Creator.

We turn our minds to the rooted nations of Creation. We acknowledge the grasses, the medicine plants. We greet you, the Three Sisters -Onenste (corn), Osaheta (beans) and Onononsera (squash). You are the staple of my people. We know that, when we plant you together, you protect one another from disease and insects. We acknowledge the trees. And you, Wahta (the maple), you provide us with wood for heat, tools and shelter. You also provide us your life's blood so that we may have Wahta osis (maple syrup) for medicine. It is indeed a happy time when you give us this gift, for we know the Creation

is awakening and the cycle of life continues.

We turn our minds to you, the various bodies of water. The rivers, the lakes, the oceans and the springs. You fulfill a vital function in the continuation of the cycle of life. You provide us with the most powerful medicine there is, for water has the ability to give and to sustain life.

As we look around us this morning, we see, Karakwa, our brother the sun, that you have chosen to grace us with your presence once more. You bring the warmth of a new day. You bring us light so that we may see the beauty that surrounds us. Working with all the other elements of Creation, you help perpetuate the cycle of life. We know that your time with us will be short this day and that you will soon disappear where the sky and earth come together in the west.

We know that, as darkness surrounds us, Ahsontenka Karakwa (Grandmother Moon), you will watch over us. You work with all the female life in the universe. You decide when children will be born. You work with the waters and help to keep the cycle going. We are reminded everyday, as you share the sky with Karakwa, of the balance that must be maintained between the roles of the female and of the male. We are reminded of the equal importance of both, and we understand that without the one there is no other.

As we look to the night sky, we see you Tsiitsistokwaronion (the Stars). Some of our Elders teach us that you represent the spirits of those who have gone on before us. You represent the past, our history, and yet you are still here in the present. We understand that your teachings are as old as time itself, and yet they remain unchanged by the passage of time. You also show us the way into the future and we have but to look to you for guidance.

Once again this morning, we have felt the presence of unseen forces that are around us at all times. We feel the air. You represent the breath of the Creator and you bind all life together in an unbreakable circle. We understand that we must respect your gift for, should we ever destroy you, we will destroy all life and the cycle will end. We feel the presence of the winds. Coming from the four directions, you bring the changing seasons. You help to keep the air we breathe clean and pure.

And now we come to you, Sonkwaiatison. You have created all this and you have given us certain instructions. We see that all the different Nations of your Creation struggle to carry out the instructions you gave them in the beginning of time. They continue to strive in fulfilling their responsibilities and carrying out their duties as you have asked them to. It seems that only we, the two-legged, have difficulty in remembering your instructions. We seem to be blind to the lessons you have placed all around us. We are deaf to your teachings.

We invite you to spend some time with us. Move among us, feel our hearts and our minds. We have done our best to remember our place within the circle of life. But, we are frail and afraid. We build many things to help us survive, to help us control your Creation. The Ohentonkariwatehkwen helps to remind us of our responsibilities and duties. Hopefully, one day, we will begin to see the wonders of your Creation. Perhaps we will learn to live in harmony with it, rather than try to control it. Perhaps we will see that all things, and all people, have their rightful place in the Circle. We hope that you are pleased with us and that we have shown you the respect you merit. We have done our best to honour you and the rest of Creation. Finally, we acknowledge one another. We give greetings and thanks that we have this opportunity to spend some time together. The issues we are struggling with are great and we carry a heavy load. There are others who are not with us in this Circle and I hope they will gain some comfort and strength from the medicines we offer and the words that have been spoken.

We offer a special thought for our families, our friends and our loved ones, where ever they may be. We ask that you watch over them and keep them well until we can rejoin them. If it should be your desire to call one of them back to your side, that will be a sad time and we will grieve. We understand, however, that this is the greatest honour we can achieve and we will try to not let our grief hold them back from the journey they must make.

Finally, Sonkwaiatison, I ask that you give us all the courage, the strength and the wisdom to use the power of a good mind in all we do. Help me to speak clearly and honestly so that all may understand the how I feel and why. Help me to listen carefully

to what others say and to not react in anger if negative things are said about me. Help me to understand that even harsh words contain teachings and that I must sometimes look and listen hard to find them. Help me to be a better person today, then I was yesterday.

I am one person. I have a language which, while it has certain similarities with other languages of the Rotinonsionni, is distinct from any other language in the world. My name is Kanatiao. In the English language it means "Nice Village". My name situates me within my clan/family, community and nation. My name places me within time and space as it is derived from an event or other significant factor surrounding my birth. My name identifies me to Sonkwaiatison, the animals, medicine plants and other elements of the Creation. During the Atonwa (Naming Ceremony) I was held up for all Creation to see, so that all may know me and remember that day.

My mother's name is Kaseniiosta (She Makes a Name Beautiful), for reasons obvious to anyone who has met her. My father's name is Kanatase (New Village). He was given this name to commemorate the fact that he was the first one born into the new house his father built for his mother and older siblings.

My daughter is Ioseriio (Nice Winter). She was born at a time when the weather was particularly pleasant for the season. My sons are Rowente (Big Voice) and Rotewe (Good Humour). The boys' names reflect the characteristics inherent in their nature. They are whole people. They learn and they teach. I speak to them as equals. I have brothers and sisters. I have aunts and uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces. They all have names as well.

I come from a community which we call Kanesatake (Where the Frozen Snow is). Long ago this name was given to that place because the sunlit sand hills, seen at a distance as one paddled down the river towards it, looked like frozen snow.

There are two other communities near Kanesatake -- Kahnawake (Where the Fast Waters Are) and Akwesasne (Where the Partridge Drums) -- and I have relatives there too. Together we are the three Eastern-most communities of the Kanienkehaka. In all, there are eight communities within our territory. They are located near larger communities within our land that have strange names. Kahnawake is near Montreal, Ganyengeh is near Plattsburgh, Akwesasne is beside Cornwall, Tyendinaga and Belleville are neighbours, Ohsweken (which has people of all six Rotinonsionni nations living there) is close to Brantford and the people of Wahta occupy lands near Muskoka.

Kanatsiohareke is near Palatine, New York. It is the newest community and was established by Sakokwenionkwas (Tom Porter) in order to restore peace of mind to several families who were severely traumatized by the events of 1990. You see, when we had total control over our territory, we were better able to maintain peace among ourselves. If a conflict arose in the community which could not be resolved, one side in the dispute made the ultimate move to restore peace and a good mind -- they packed up and left to establish another community elsewhere. This alternative dispute resolution mechanism can no longer easily be implemented, however.

I am born with a gift. Part of the challenge I face in adolescence is to discover that gift. My greatest challenge now is to develop it so that I may use it to the benefit of those I come in contact with throughout my life. I have a way of life. It is a spiritual way of life. My spiritual beliefs influence and guide all that I do. I believe in peace, friendship and respect. I strive for justice and equality. I understand the need to respect and recognize the diversity the Creator has made. I am part of that diversity, I am not arrogant enough to think I am above it, or in control of it. I believe that all things have the equal right to exist. This is what the Creator intended.

I have the right to choose my way of life. I have the right to choose to live alone. I have the right to choose to live with others. If I choose to live in the company of others, I have a responsibility to live in a manner where I do no harm or become a burden on them. I have the responsibility to maintain peace by using a good mind.

I am part of a continuum. The principles which are the heart beat of our way of life are still valid today. I try to keep them alive and to live by them. Being human, the most fragile of Creation, I sometimes stray from these principles. I forget to apply them to my actions.

Because this happens, I take the time, before I begin each day, to reflect on my past, to acknowledge Creation and give thanks that the cycle of life continues for another day. I reflect on my responsibilities towards the future of Creation. I hope that I will learn from my errors for then they are no longer errors, they become lessons. Errors only remain so if I learn nothing from them.

I have a history that is almost as old as this land. My people are Kanienkehaka (the People of Flint). We are called this because of the particular nature of the land we come from. Some of you call us Mohawks. Long ago, my people were barbaric. Hatred, cannibalism and war were the essences of our lives. Then, over a period of time and with the help of a messenger from another place, we came to understand that the true power to accomplish great deeds is in the use of a good mind. We came together to form the spiritual and political alliance of the Rotinonsionni (People of the Longhouse or Iroquois Confederacy). My people became some of the world's most accomplished practitioners of diplomacy and democracy.

I have a government and a constitution. I am a man of law. The law I choose to follow is known as the Kaianerekowa (the Great Good or Great Law of Peace). It is a law of peace -- peace of mind, body and spirit. I lead by example. I follow by choice. My government represents my mind, it doesn't make my decisions for me. It is my responsibility to seek to maintain peace through the use of a good mind.

Our society is based on an organized societal structure of checks and balances. Balance is important in maintaining peace and harmony. We have found a way to strike a balance between the rights and responsibilities of the individual and the collective. Our spirituality makes it easier for us to remember our place in the Circle of Life. Our spirituality helps to use a good mind in coming to a mind on issues.

The Kaianerekowa provides the primary guiding principles for our people. It is among the most cherished teachings of the Rotinonsionni (People of the Long House or Iroquois People), that alneed and I will use all of what I take. I will not waste. When I pick medicines plants, I leave two for every one I pick. This way, I make sure the next person has medicine to pick, and I also ensure the sacred medicines will not disappear.

When I pick medicine, cut wood or take an animal or fish -- indeed, whenever I take from Creation -- I give thanks. I'm not sure if what I take has feelings as I do, or if it has the capacity to understand or communicate as I can. But, it is certainly alive. It grows and perpetuates itself. It plays a vital role in the Circle of Life and, eventually, it dies. When it gives of itself, I perform a ceremony to honour the gift of its power. In order to properly honour this relationship, I kindle a fire and I offer Oienkwenonwe (Sacred Tobacco) so that the spirit of that which I have taken may hear my words and thoughts.

The relationship between us is an intimate and personal one:

"Look what I have done to you. I have taken your life. It gave me no pleasure to do this. I had no choice for, you see, my children are crying because they are hungry. They need the healing powers you possess. In order to honour your sacrifice, I will see to it that you are not wasted. What we cannot use will be given back to Mother Earth. That which may be more than I can use will be shared with others. I will not take more than is absolutely necessary. Your sacrifice is proof that you continue to fulfill your responsibilities and carry out your duties according to the instructions the Creator gave you in the beginning of time. Because of this, the cycle of life continues and I am able to provide for my people so that we may survive. And so it is, I acknowledge you and I give thanks."

In me is vested the responsibilities of many institutions. I am father and provider. I am protector, policeman, judge, priest, soldier, mediator, teacher, student, doctor. I fulfill whatever role is expected of me by my people.

I speak the truth for I know the Creator knows my mind and heart. I hope my actions today will make me a better person, will make my part of Mother Earth a better place. I hope that I will be able to help someone by sharing with them in some way. But, most importantly, I hope my children will someday look to me and tell me they are grateful that I was able to allow them the opportunity to have a good life.

When I die, my body is returned to the womb of Mother Earth. In time, my body turns

back to earth and I become nourishment for Creation. Because of this, it is important for me to keep my body clean and healthy. In so doing, I give of myself and complete the circle.