ratitor's note: The following has been edited to remove the embolalia [**embolalia** (m-bo-la'li-ya) **n.** the use of virtually meaningless filler words, phrases, or stammerings in speech, whether as unconscious utterings while arranging one's thoughts or as a vacuous inexpressive mannerism] to enhance readability without sacrificing the meaning of the speaker's words.

Oren Lyons - The Faithkeeper

Interview with Bill Moyers

3 July 1991

Public Affairs Television

Oren Lyons is the Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan, Onondaga Council of Chiefs of the Hau de no sau nee (ho dee noe sho nee), of the Onondaga Nation of the Hau de no sau nee (meaning People Building a Long House). Born in 1930, he was raised in the traditional life ways of the Hau de no sau nee on the Seneca and Onondaga reservations. In 1982 he helped establish the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations where he has participated in the Indigenous Peoples Conference in Geneva, an international forum supported by the United Nations' Human Rights Commission. He is a principal figure in the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders, a council of traditional grassroots leadership of North American Indian nations.

As Faithkeeper, he is entrusted to maintain the customs, traditions, values and history of the Turtle Clan and uphold Gai Eneshah Go' Nah, the Great Law of Peace of the Hau de no sau nee while representing the people's message from the Hau de no sau nee to the World Community in every aspect as deemed necessary by the Onondaga people. In 1992 he was invited to address the General Assembly of the United Nations and open the International Year of the World's Indigenous People at the United Nations Plaza in New York. During that year he organized a delegation of the Hau de no sau nee to the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro and was invited by UNCED Secretary General Maurice Strong, to address the national delegations.

Co-editor with John Mohawk of *Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations, and the U.S. Constitution* (Clear Light: 1992), publisher of *Daybreak*, a national Native American magazine, Oren Lyons conscientiously and steadfastly honors and serves life's needs and the needs of the seventh generation, clearly and incisively addressing such essential issues as Spirituality, Natural Law, and the Ethics of Authority. He is Professor of American Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo where he directs the Native American Studies Program and teaches undergraduate courses in Surveys of Native American History and a Native American Studies Colloquium. He is a Principal faculty member for over forty Master degree committees and five Doctoral Degree Committees. Topic of research supervision includes Native American Education, Native Legal Situation with the Federal Government and the Canadian Federal Government, Economic Development on the Native Territories and Sovereign Issues in the International Perspective, Native American Health Issues, Native American Cultural and Artistic Expression.

Oren Lyons: We can't afford, now, to have these national borders. We can't afford to have racism. We can't afford apartheid. We cannot -- it's one of those luxuries that we can't have anymore as human beings. We've got to think now, in real terms, for that seventh generation. And we've got to move in concert. We've got to sing the same song. We've got to have the same ceremony. We've got to get back to spiritual law if we are to survive.

Bill Moyers: In this hour, a visit with Oren Lyons, the Faithkeeper. I'm Bill Moyers.

[narration] When Dances With Wolves won the Academy Award for the best picture of the year, the recognition confirmed a turning point in the perception of the American Indian. The film was free of those clichés of the Old West created in the earliest days of Hollywood. These Native Americans spoke in their own language. They expressed human emotions and humor and they

appeared as neither victims nor savages, but as real people living in real time, in touch with the land. The movie has been widely praised by Indians as an immense breakthrough in the perception of native peoples. For Native Americans like Oren Lyons, that breakthrough was a long time coming.

Chief Lyons is the Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation and has devoted his life to preserving the experiences and wisdom of his people and interpreting them to the dominant American culture. He serves now as Director of Native American Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. But he also plays an active and peripatetic role in representing the Iroquois and other native peoples on issues ranging from the environment to land claims and the restoration of sacred symbols.

One of his mandates as Faithkeeper of his tribe is to keep alive the legend and stories of his people's traditions.

[interview] You're an artist and this is your drawing, isn't it?

Oren Lyons: Yes. It's a painting. It's a depiction of the Great Tree of Peace and the two individuals who had the most to do with it, the Great Peacemaker (who is on the left as we look at it), and Hayanwatah (who was his supporter). The Tree of Peace, of course, is the great spiritual law and it sits on the back of the turtle, which is our metaphor for this island. We call North America the Great Turtle Island.

Interspersed and intertwined among the leaves of the tree and around the tree, gathered around it, are the great clans. The Deer Clan (and the deer is recognized as a leader of animals), the hawk who sits in the tree, the bear who is another powerful, mysterious entity, and the wolf who is our spiritual brother in this life. He is recognized by native people around the world as a very powerful entity. And over on the left, on the neck of the turtle is a snipe, which is a clan, a huge family.

Bill Moyers: Every part of that painting is a symbol.

Oren Lyons: Yes. When the Peacemaker had planted the Tree of Peace, he placed the eagle in the top. And the eagle would belong to everyone and the eagle would sit there in vigilance and watch and would scream when things were coming towards the tree. He said that there will come a time when this tree will be attacked.

We can look at that at this time or we could have looked at it in 1776 or we could have looked at it in 1620, when it has come under attack. Today, it's still here. The tree is still standing and we, the chiefs of the Long House, are dedicated to its continuance and to its future.

Bill Moyers: When you say the tree is still here, you mean spiritually?

Oren Lyons: Spiritually. Yes. It was a spiritual tree to begin with. Because again, people are so literal. It's hard at times to have a discussion with people who think in linear terms. Because they say, "We come to see the tree." And we say, "It's a great tree. It reaches to the heavens. You can't see it. You can't see it? We can see it." But

it's there. And it's *very* real. And again, as we were told, sometimes the most real things you can't see.

Bill Moyers: [narration] Oren Lyons was an All-American lacrosse player at Syracuse University and in 1983 helped found a team called the Iroquois Nationals. In 1990, they traveled to Australia for the Lacrosse World Championship games, the first time in over 100 years that the Iroquois carried their own flag and performed their own anthem in international competition. He says lacrosse is as native to the Indians as they are to the landscape.

[interview] We watched the children playing lacrosse yesterday. Does it teach them something? Or is it just for the heck of it?

Oren Lyons: No. I think lacrosse and Iroquois are synonymous with life, I think [laughs]. Or its synonymous with continuation [of] community. Everybody's involved. The children [are] involved, parents are involved. Our greatest fans -- the greatest lacrosse fans -- are the women. Women love the game. And it's more than a game, has been.

Bill Moyers: What do you mean more than a game? You were a star goalie back in the fifties. Wasn't it just a game to you then?

Oren Lyons: No. You could have called me a ringer because I had been playing lacrosse for so long by the time that I got to the university that I had a great deal of experience. Because our people do it from these little fellows on up. And my grandfather was a lacrosse player. My father was a well-known goal keeper. It goes back. It's not only us. Some of the great leaders -- Tecumseh was a great lacrosse player.

Bill Moyers: No, I didn't know that.

Oren Lyons: Oh yes. These people, Osceola was noted for his lacrosse playing.

Bill Moyers: Is lacrosse ceremony? Is it ritual?

Oren Lyons: Yes it is. Oh, yes.

Bill Moyers: As I look at it what am I seeing?.

Oren Lyons: First of all it's a spiritual game. It's origin -- it's called The Creator's Game.

Bill Moyers: Lacrosse?

Oren Lyons: Lacrosse is The Creator's Game and he loves to have the contest and the vitality of the contest. And so, the harder you play -- you're supposed to play it as hard as you can -- but, don't cheat and you do things fair. Everything is always fair. Always fair. Do things fair.

Bill Moyers: This game was here as long as your memory takes you back?

Oren Lyons: As long as we can remember. And I think an important point to make at this time was that this was a team sport. This was a sport and it was played by teams of people. And that's a comment on the society, where our technology -- we have great technology. It's too bad I don't have a snow snake here to show you.

Bill Moyers: A what?

Oren Lyons: A snow snake. It's a game that we invented that [has] a long, slender wood which is carved to [a] real fine finish. And it's shellacked and it's varnished and it's waxed and it can be thrown a mile in the snow, in the track. Now that's technology. That's real technology. But we put it into a game.

We didn't develop the F-16, we didn't develop . . . we didn't go in that direction. We are people who sat under a tree for a long time, talking about things, talked about society, talk about the importance of community, talk about law, talk about rules. Indian country, this Onondaga, has got a lot of rules here. Mohawks have a lot of rules. How do you live there? How do you live? None of it written.

Bill Moyers: [narration] Oren Lyons was a successful commercial artist in New York City before returning to his people to take up his duties as Faithkeeper. He lives on native land near Syracuse and we met in his cabin there for this conversation.

[interview] Why did you come back here to live on the reservation? You gave up a successful career as a commercial artist in New York City.

Oren Lyons: There are several reasons. First of all, I believe I learned all I needed to learn about New York City. Probably stayed two or three years too long. The other, of course, was to come back and get back into harness, so to speak here, more directly with the people. And [in] 1967, I was condoled as one of the faithkeepers.

Bill Moyers: Condoled?

Oren Lyons: Yes. That's a process of raising leadership in the Hau de no sau nee. People ask the question all the time, "How did you become a chief?" And it goes back to the roots of democracy.

Bill Moyers: Were you chosen by a vote of the people?

Oren Lyons: No. No. It doesn't work that way. A long time ago, when we first began the process of our governance and we were given this government, the Peacemaker (we call him the Great Peacemaker) came amongst us, brought peace amongst the Mohawk and the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga and the Seneca. And he laid down the rules at that time. We don't know how long ago. Maybe a thousand years ago, maybe two.

Bill Moyers: Maybe more.

Oren Lyons: It may be more. It doesn't matter.

Bill Moyers: This is the legend that's come down.

Oren Lyons: This is the story.

Bill Moyers: The Peacemaker was a visitor?

Oren Lyons: The Peacemaker was a spiritual being. He was a messenger, we would say, the best we could say. He brought a message, the Great Peace. And it was a long process of how he changed the minds of all of these men who at that time were leaders by strength and by force. Then he stepped in there and changed that whole process to deliberation and thought. And he convinced these warriors at that time (who were the leaders) to join with him. And he changed their minds.

He moved from the Mohawk first to the Oneida. And then he moved to the Onondaga. He couldn't deal with the leader at Onondaga, the Tadodaho. So he went on to the Cayuga and the Seneca. And they all came back. And when they came back they had the support of their minds. They had agreed. These men had changed. And so he--

Bill Moyers: Because they had listened to the Peacemaker?

Oren Lyons: They had listened to the Peacemaker and his message. Now -- but he had to bring the Onondagas in. And he did.

Bill Moyers: You were a stubborn people?

Oren Lyons: Very stubborn. In particular, the man, the leader at the time, the Tadodaho, was fierce. He was a man with snakes in his hair. He was a man who was twisted and deformed and fierce and a cannibal. He was so powerful that people feared him and he just stayed in the woods, hard to reach.

So they were given help, their spiritual help, in the terms of a song from a bird. This song was what they learned and what they came to him with. And as they approached -- all these leaders, all these people singing this song, with the Peacemaker and Hayanwatah in front -- whom some people now call Hiawatha.

Bill Moyers: Hiawatha

Oren Lyons: Hayanwatah and the Peacemaker worked together on this great work. They approached him. As they approached him with this they convinced him. And they said that if he agreed to join this Great Law, this Great Peace, that Onondaga would be the center fire, would be the Fire Keepers. The Onondaga would be the Fire Keepers of the Hau de no sau nee. And the Hau de no sau nee would be the name of the confederation who the French call Iroquois and who the English call Six Nations.

So the Hau de no sau nee came about and he agreed. And he became the spiritual leader. They said all of those 50 original men from those nations, their names became offices. And when one passed on then a ceremony was performed, a condolence of replacement.

So then this was the peaceful replacement of authority. It was a very simple process. What he had established in our laws was that each of those leaders was a leader of a family. His family was a clan and clans were given designations of a wolf, of a turtle, of a deer, of a bear, of a snipe, of an eel, of a beaver, of a heron; all of these designations.

Then there would be in each of these clans five leaders. There would be a Clan Mother, whose purpose was to choose the Chief.

Bill Moyers: Why? Why the mother? Why did that go to the woman?

Oren Lyons: Because in his first encounter as he landed on the eastern shores of what is now called Lake Ontario, he stopped overnight at a lodge of a woman. And this woman took him in and said that this was a place where people could stop and could refresh themselves and could eat. It was a neutral place. Even though there was warpath that was on, everybody that came there recognized that this was a neutral place for peace. They'd spend the night here--

Bill Moyers: So they'd leave their weapons outside?

Oren Lyons: Outside. And they passed that particular time together. So when he told her of his mission and what he was about she said, 'That's wonderful. I agree with that.' Her name was Jigonsahseh, she was Seneca or of the Cat Nation, the Erie.

And so he went on about his business. Then he discovered this other man by the name of Hayanwatah who was an Onondaga by birth and who was adopted by the Mohawk in the process. So he established the process of adoption during all of this. At any rate, the two worked together. It was they who were in the lead of the group of men that were approaching Tadodaho with a song. And as they approached him, he transformed and agreed to this Great Peace and--

Bill Moyers: You mean, the people approaching, singing the sound of the bird

Oren Lyons: of the bird

Bill Moyers: and this creature with wild hair and twisted body, as you say, he responded?

Oren Lyons: He responded. He agreed.

Bill Moyers: He changed.

Oren Lyons: He changed. And there was a law, there was a lesson there for everyone. And that

lesson was, no matter how bad a person is, he can change to be the very best.

Bill Moyers: He can be born again.

Oren Lyons: It actually, it was, I hesitate to use that word because it has such a different connotation today [laughs]. But really . . .

Bill Moyers: A spiritual conversion, that's the metaphor isn't it?

Oren Lyons: Yes. It was a spiritual conversion.

Bill Moyers: And the woman, that custom still prevails that the woman who greeted the Peacemaker chooses the next chief?

Oren Lyons: Oh yes. At that time, as we moved along, in his process of when he set down, he said, 'This society will follow' -- because the woman -- the woman was the first to recognize this, 'the society will follow the woman's side, become a matriarchal society, matrilineal society.'

Also what that did very clearly was it established the nationhood. Any child was born was born with an identity. He had a nation. He had the clan. And whatever his gender or her, and so we had, if it was a boy we had a lacrosse player [chuckle] and if it was a girl we had someone who inherited.

Bill Moyers: The power . . .

Oren Lyons: the power

Bill Moyers: of choice. Who chose you?

Oren Lyons: Well, my Clan Mother at that time.

Bill Moyers: What clan?

Oren Lyons: Turtle. I was a Turtle, although I am a Wolf. I am a Wolf. I was borrowed into the Turtle Clan at that time. A wonderful woman who raised many generations of children. She carried, at some point here at Onondaga Nation, four clanships in her hands because of the inability to find a Clan Mother for those clans. So she carried all that extra work. So she was about getting these things parceled out and getting them done and she asked me whether I would consider that and I--

Bill Moyers: consider becoming the

Oren Lyons: becoming one of the representatives of the Turtle Clan in Council. And I said, "Well," your first reaction is, you don't want to do that because the chiefs are always busy. They're always working. They're never home. They're always in meetings. It seemed to be quite a load.

But she said, "Well, don't answer," she said, "Don't answer now. Think about it." And the only words she ever said to me was, "Think of what you can do for your people." So, finally I said, "Well, I'll try." She said, "That's good. That's all I want to hear."

Bill Moyers: Was it a hard choice to bring your kids back from New York to live here?

Oren Lyons: No. No. It was I think, probably the best thing I could have done for them.

Bill Moyers: Where do they belong? Here or out in that other world?

Oren Lyons: Everybody belongs here. All Onondagas belong here. Whether they live there or not. It's the same as if you had a U.S. citizenship and you were living in Paris. You always go back to America, right?

Bill Moyers: Right.

Oren Lyons: It's the same. So if you're an Onondaga and you're living in Boston, which they are, and if you're living in New York, which they are, your home is here.

Bill Moyers: The conflict, it seems to me, is that you're talking -- you just outlined a wonderful story of a consciousness from another time and another mentality. And they're facing all the time, your children, the technology of the modern world which seduces them away from the intuitive thinking.

Oren Lyons: Oh yes, no doubt. There's an attrition. Sure. Every generation has faced an attrition. But on the other hand there's also a distillation. A distillation of these ideas, of these thoughts here and the society itself: the importance of the leadership and the Chiefs and the Clan Mothers. The message that they have is extraordinarily important in these times. And the teachings that are there.

I mentioned the second message, which was the Great Peace. We had a third message. The third message came around 1799 and if you go back in history, this was directly after the Revolutionary War. And you're looking at the turmoil that was in Indian country, particularly Six Nation country, during that time.

We had a third message from Gunyundiyo, who people call Handsome Lake. Handsome Lake was taken on a journey, shall we say, for four days. During that time he was shown the future of what was going to happen. And he was given instructions on how to deal with the white man.

Bill Moyers: Instructions by?

Oren Lyons: By the four protectors, by the spiritual side of our life. And so they told him what was coming. This summer, that story will be told again here in this long house, as it's told every year in every long house across the Six Nations.

Bill Moyers: What did he say was coming? What will you observe? What will you think about this?

Oren Lyons: Well, it goes on and on. Four days of it.

Bill Moyers: Is there a central message?

Oren Lyons: Yes. The central message is there is going to be a deterioration and a falling away of life as we know it. There is going to be destruction. There's . . . well, for instance, how these things were told, and I have to be quite careful about how I do this because we're on national television. I don't have the authority and the right to begin discussing things at large without the consent of the Nation or the people. I'm not free to do that.

But it's clear enough and people have known enough. For instance, for water, [they] talked about water, he was shown things in vignettes. And he said [that] they would ask him, 'What do you see?' He said, 'I see a river.' And they said, 'Pick up the water to drink.' And he reached his hands in and picked the water up and he said, 'I can't. It's filthy.' They said, 'We think what you say is correct. At some time the water is going to be that way.' And he talked then--

Bill Moyers: And he was anticipating the environmental degradation that we, it's not a legend.

Oren Lyons: At one time he was shown a field of corn -- a field. It wasn't corn. It was a garden and someone was working in the garden. And he described that. They said, 'Observe.' At one point, the man reached down and pulled up the plant, to see what was on the roots. And there was nothing on the root. They said, 'What do you see?' He says, 'He's pulled a plant and there's nothing there.'

Bill Moyers: What do you make of that?

Oren Lyons: What they were told . . . as he was told a lot about these things that were coming [he asked], 'What is the hope?' 'Well,' they said, 'it's certain that this will happen. But that's up to each generation to see that it doesn't happen in your generation.'

Bill Moyers: So that the lesson, the vision he received, the chief received, was that destruction -- environmental destruction, physical destruction -- could come in every generation. But each generation is charged not to let it happen.

Oren Lyons: Yes. So actually, the hope lies in the intensity of the life of that generation. You can only live one day at a time, regardless.

Bill Moyers: And yet, the publication that you produce, *Daybreak*, is dedicated to the seventh generation unborn.

Oren Lyons: Yes. Th[ose were] the instructions that were given as a Chief. When we were

given these instructions, among many of them, one was that when you in sit in council for the welfare of the people, you counsel for the welfare of that seventh generation to come. They should be foremost in your mind, not even your generation, not even yourself, but those that are unborn. So that when their time comes here they may enjoy the same thing that you are enjoying now.

Bill Moyers: Is that kind of a moral obligation?

Oren Lyons: I believe that all of this discussion between human beings is one of morality. I think that everyone has to deal with the emotions that are in each individual. And we understand that we have both good and bad in us and that you must strike a balance at all times. This spiritual center then, is what the Great Tree of Peace is. It's a spiritual center. It's a spiritual law--

Bill Moyers: The Peacemaker, when he came, planted a Tree of Peace?

Oren Lyons: A Tree of Peace, a Great Peace, a great law. It's a spiritual law. He said, 'When you become afraid or when you become weak or when you become not able to carry,' he says, 'it's the spiritual law that will stiffen your spine.' He said, 'That's where your strength is. So you must make your laws in accordance with those spiritual laws and then you will survive.'

He called that council the Council of the Good Minds. He said the Hoyanni -- that's what it means, the all-good, the good, peacemakers. So that's what he set up. And when he uprooted this great tree and he asked the Nations to come forward and cast their weapons of war, he says, 'We now do away with the warriors and we do away with the war chiefs. And in their place we plant the Council of the Good Minds who will now counsel for the welfare of the people.' And he said, 'I shall not leave you defenseless.' And he gave us a spiritual strength, Oyenkwaohweh, the Great Tobacco. He said, 'This will be your medium for communication, directly.'

Bill Moyers: With the Great Tobacco?

Oren Lyons: Yes. We have sacred tobacco. He said 'This is your spiritual strength.'

Bill Moyers: The peace pipe, then, is a metaphor as well as a physical

Oren Lyons: actually

Bill Moyers: object, a material object.

Oren Lyons: Actually. That's why this peace is so foremost in our minds. So he said, 'Now, the three principles will be peace, equity and justice and the power of the Good Minds. So everyone must think that way. When your people think that way and everyone has the same position and the same mind of being of one mind [that] is the greatest power there is.' And so that's what we're instructed, to have that

mind.

Bill Moyers: But the history of your people since the Peacemaker came millennia ago has been one like [that] of other people, of enmity and conflict and competition. The Great Teachings were wise and wonderful philosophy breached so often and had been breached so often in the fact, in our behavior.

Oren Lyons: Yes. It's visionaries, in talking or understanding Black Elk's vision, what he said--

Bill Moyers: North Dakota, in the Dakotas

Oren Lyons: in the Dakotas, yes, the great Dakota people, Lakota. His vision was very much along with ours.

And then when we hear the stories of other nations, of how they came to be; when we hear how the Hopis talk about the Spider Woman and coming from the Earth and the Fourth World that they've experienced, the fourth failure of man, again tried, how they come forward and try again.

We hear the walkabout songs of the aboriginal people in Australia when they talk about singing into existence these beings; all the entities of the world, as far as they are concerned, ha[ve] a song.

And we say, 'That's wonderful. We agree. We say yes. Now hear our story. This is how we came.' And they listen to us and they say, 'That's wonderful. We believe that.'

Bill Moyers: But your story; look what the gun, the church, the dollar and the bottle did to your story. You got run over.

Oren Lyons: Well, you pretty much put them all down there. [This is] what they talked about at the time. We did and we didn't. We're still here. We're not through. The story's not over. You're still talking to a chief. You're still talking and you're sitting here in that Onondaga Nation, the center of the Hau de no sau nee. The tree is still here. The roots are still out. And if anything I see the roots growing at this point.

Bill Moyers: What do you mean? What's evidence that . . .

Oren Lyons: Well, as I watch, especially in the eastern bloc of Europe, how these people are clamoring for freedom and for democracy. How they're looking towards the Americas for democracy. How the Chinese were using the symbol of the Statue of Liberty as democracy and they were saying, 'This is great that it is coming from America.' But America got it from the Indians. America got the ideas of democracy and freedom and peace here.

Bill Moyers: Do you subscribe to the opinion that some of what we call founding fathers were

affected directly by what Indians were doing and thinking in the shaping of government?

Oren Lyons: Oh yes. They were impacted very directly. When the Wampanoags met the Pilgrims, there was a great leader by the name of Massasoit. And Massasoit saw to it that there was peace between the two. And now, we see it as our grandfathers talked to Benjamin Franklin and talked to those people and explained--

Bill Moyers: they talked to Franklin?

Oren Lyons: They did talk to Franklin. They explained very directly, in this meeting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1744--

Bill Moyers: Franklin was there?

Oren Lyons: Franklin was taking, recording. He was the recording secretary at the time. He was quite a young man, and of course they were talking to, I think it was the Governor of Delaware, New York and Pennsylvania at the time.

Bill Moyers: The chiefs were?

Oren Lyons: The Six Nation chiefs were talking and they advised them then to join in a union like the Hau de no sau nee. Be like us they said because, 'There's a great power in being together of one mind and we have unity,' as the Peacemaker bound those arrows.

When he [was] illustrating to the chiefs, he took one arrow. He said, 'This is a nation.' And he snapped the arrow. Then he took the five nations and five arrows and he bound it with the sinew of the deer. Then he said, 'You can't break this unity.' He says, 'This is your symbol, unity. You must be united. You must be of one mind.'

Bill Moyers: Is there any indication that Ben Franklin was influenced by what he heard and recorded?

Oren Lyons: I think there's a lot of evidence. One of the things that he did -- he's the one that was listening. The three, the three politicians, shall we say, were not listening. But Benjamin Franklin was, I would say, the visionary. He saw the nation. He saw a free nation. He said, "Why, if these," I think the quote was something like, "if this group of ignorant savages can build something that looks indissoluble," he says, "why can we not, who have all of the same needs, do the same?" More or less. [1]

He called a meeting in 1754 in Albany, New York, called the Albany Plan of Union. At that time he had asked the chiefs of Six Nations and other Indians to come forward and talk about the process of governance and the process of representation in government and the process of the peaceful transference of power from one generation to the next: two houses, a discussion, power of people

in the hands of the people.

All of this really intrigued him. Of course, the King of England wasn't too happy with all of this and put a stop to it rather quickly. But it was on its way.

On the eve of the Revolution, in 1775, delegates from the Continental Congress met with the Six Nation chiefs and said, at the time, that, 'Your grandfathers advised us in 1744 in Lancaster to make a union such as yours. And now we're going to take your advice and we're going to plant a Tree of Peace in Philadelphia that will reach to the sky and people can come under it.'

They used our metaphors . . . and the chiefs said, 'That's wonderful, good. We like to hear that.' And they said, 'We want neutrality in the coming war.' Then . . . the chiefs said, 'It's a fight between a father and son. We love you both and we know you both and we agree that we should be neutral.'

So a treaty was struck then, in 1776, in Fort Pitt and . . . delegates from the Continental Congress came and brought a great belt, a Peace Belt with 13 diamonds in it. And not the diamonds that you wear on your finger, but a design of 13 diamonds representing the 13 colonies. This belt was taken by the Six Nations and they agreed to this peace, which is really expunged from your history.

Bill Moyers: How does it affect you when you go back and look at the record? Despite the sympathetic signals that went back and forth between some of the first Americans, your people, and some of the new Americans, the Franklins and the Jeffersons and others; how, in time, one treaty after another was broken, slavery was practiced by these very men who wrote, "We, the people," your own people shunted aside to reservations, today decimated by alcohol, despair. You yourself have talked to colleagues of mine about the drug use among young people, the rise of crime. I mean, what --

Oren Lyons: Well, it's interesting because I think, in looking, stepping back from the world and looking at it from a distance and looking at it from the time, you would say that in North America at that time, they took an ember, they took a light from our fire and they carried that over and they lighted their own fire and they made their own nation. They lighted this great fire. And that was a great light at that time of peace. Because that's what they said they were following. And that came about.

In 1776 there was this great light and this Earth, if you saw the Earth from back, you would see this brilliance. Then, as time went on, the brilliance died down. It began to die down. And what happened?

The question that you asked was, first of all, they refused to deal with the history of slavery right at the time. That light started to die immediately.

They refused to use spirituality as part of their nation. It died a little bit more. We said, 'You're going to have trouble. Our advice to you was a spiritual center.'

And you say, ‘You separate the church from the state.’ But you already had conflict. So they separated them. And we said, ‘Problem coming.’

And so then, what was beginning to happen, the things that were brought from across the sea began to reassert themselves once they established their position and became strong. And the light diminished more.

So when you came through the 19th century, the 19th century is a terrible page in the history of America, [of] what happened to Indians. It’s a terrible page when many, many millions of people were killed and died. And so this process died. And suddenly, at the end of the century, the turn of the century (the 20th century), the word was to carry a big stick and to talk softly.

Bill Moyers: Theodore Roosevelt.

Oren Lyons: But what was that? That was imperialism. Again, an expansion of power over, dominion over. It was not agreeing with.

So we are now facing another situation. Can we get this light, can we get this great light to come again? And that’s up to this generation. That’s up to, really, we’re elders, you and I now. I mean, we can say from our older position, "It looks like a lost cause." But if you were to speak to the young man, the young person, the young woman, she’d say, "No. This is my life. I shall survive. You can’t tell me that it’s lost. That’s my determination." She will say, and he will say that, and they are saying it.

So we can say, "Well, it looks bad from here." And from there they say, "Well, it’s looks tough, but it isn’t lost." And that’s the law that they were talking about from Gunyundiyo, when he said, ‘Don’t let it be your generation.’ And the law prevails, what we call the Great Law, the common law, the natural law.

Bill Moyers: And the law says?

Oren Lyons: The law says if you poison your water, you’ll die. The law says that if you poison the air, you’ll suffer. The law says if you degrade where you live, you’ll suffer. The law says all of this. If you don’t learn that then you can only suffer. There’s no discussion with this law.

Bill Moyers: There’s no mercy in nature. You can’t get down on your knees and ask forgiveness, can you? Nature takes back what you’ve done to it.

Oren Lyons: Yes, that’s--

Bill Moyers: That’s the spiritual law?

Oren Lyons: That’s really a spiritual law. That’s a very important thing for people to understand. When you transgress, there’s a time . . . People don’t operate in the world time or say the time of the mountain. They operate in the time of the

human being. And that's probably not a good idea. Because the time of the human being is rather short.

And yet, when you're dealing in the time of an oak tree or a time of one of the great Sequoias and you kill that tree [with] your technology today. You can take a chainsaw and in 10 minutes kill a tree that's 400 years old. There's no way that you can make that tree grow. You'll have to wait another 400 years for it to get to that position.

So the technology has overtaken the common sense of human beings and the understanding of time. And just as the time of the ant is very, very short, the time of the mountain is very long, the rivers. The time of the human being has to be passed along. And if you don't have a reference point, if you don't have a good understanding of what this time is, then you can get yourself and your people and your generation into a whole lot of trouble. I think that's where we are right now.

Bill Moyers: What kind of trouble do you mean? You're talking about environmental trouble.

Oren Lyons: Yes, indeed. I'm talking about making payment now. When, as long as I can remember and as long as in the memory of our people, we've had celebrations for the thundering voices, our grandfathers, the rain-makers, the people that bring the rain and bring the fresh water. They refresh the springs and the lakes.

Bill Moyers: Doesn't your language refer to the rain as "Grandfather"?

Oren Lyons: As the grandfathers.

Bill Moyers: --and the sun as "Uncle"?

Oren Lyons: Yes, they do, indeed. But now, suddenly, the rain that we celebrate and the rain that we pray for and the rain that we thanksgiving for begins to kill. What is that? What happens when your grandfathers begin to turn on you and your great brother, the Elder Brother, the Sun, when suddenly, people begin to suffer from cancer from the sun? What are people going to do when these life-giving forces, that you've depended on, that you've prayed to, that you recognize, give thanksgiving to, suddenly turn on you? What happens?

Bill Moyers: Exactly what do indigenous people, Indians, have to offer in this regard to the rest of us?

Oren Lyons: First of all we have a long perspective. We've been in one place a long time. We've seen the sun come up [in] the same place many, many hundreds, thousands of years. And so we have a familiarity with the Earth itself, [with] the elements. We know about them and we know what it is to enjoy that.

So the ceremonies, which are as ancient as we are, carry forward this respect. Our people were always spiritual people, religious people. They always had ceremonies. This was our first instruction, was the ceremony: how to carry that

on. And the ceremonies were our thanksgivings, every one of them.

So we had these extraordinary rounds of thanksgiving every year; all the same songs again at certain time, all the same dances at certain time, are very familiar. Again if you go down and watch the Pueblos as they do their Deer Dance, as they do their Bean Dance, and watch the Hopis as they do their Snake Dance, these are old, ancient ceremonies. Everybody knows them and everybody participates in them. You continue because they are what you are instructed to do which is to give thanks.

Bill Moyers: For what?

Oren Lyons: For what is given to you here. Pilgrims got a hold of it and they called it Thanksgiving. Well that's only one, that's only the harvest part of it. They don't go all the way around the whole clock.

Children are not sat down and taught about what's good and what's wrong. What they see is they see their grandfathers or they see their fathers or their mothers, their grandmothers going to ceremonies. And they say, "So that must be the right thing to do. The old people do it. Everybody does it. That's good." So they do it. And so they learn, in the process, that thanksgiving, what is it for?

Well this one is for the maple, the Chief of the Trees. We're giving a thanksgiving for the maple. Good. Must respect the tree. Must respect all the trees. So respect is learned through ceremony. As a process. It's an old one. And so thanksgiving comes as a natural way, as a being. It's part of life. It's not something that you do occasionally. It's something you do all the time. And that's how the process has been passed down.

And so we have these well-springs of knowledge about places that only aboriginal people would know because they have lived there. They have intimate knowledge of what's there. And when people are destroyed and languages are destroyed, you destroy that knowledge along with it. So what you're saying, What do they have to offer? Indigenous people, I think, may have the long-term thinking required for proper context.

Bill Moyers: Context being?

Oren Lyons: Being life as it functions in the cycles, in the great cycles of life. As we do our cycle of being born and going back to the Earth again. As the tree is a sapling and grows to full being and then falls as it goes back to the Earth again. As the spring comes and the fall and the winter. And it comes again. It's endless this cycle, as long as you protect the cycle. As long as you participate in the cycle. As long as you honor it and respect it. Then it will continue. But it doesn't have to.

Bill Moyers: Do you think it's a given that human beings are a permanent feature of this natural world? I mean, does the world need us that much?

Oren Lyons: The world doesn't need us at all. I think it's probably better off, where the world is concerned, what we call the wilderness, which is again an English term. Indians didn't even have a word for "wild." They didn't know what that meant. So out there in this pristine, shall we say, land where everybody wants to go and see and be for a little while, that's the beauty of a place. And sometimes there's people there who are so unintrusive that you don't even see them. They've acclimated to the place. They live there with it, as part of it. And that's the people who have a knowledge.

Bill Moyers: More and more people are turning to natives, to Indians and saying, "Share your knowledge with us." But don't you think -- honestly, now, practically -- it is too late? For how many years have we had the dominant note, the clarion trumpet of 'conquer the Earth,' you have dominion over the Earth. We're building cities to create habitats far-removed from this. Our mentality is a part of that "civilization" now. What you're talking about is wonderful and wise, the stories are profound and instructive and yet, irrelevant.

Oren Lyons: Well, maybe.

Bill Moyers: To this modern world.

Oren Lyons: It may be irrelevant at the moment. We don't preach here, in this, our country. We don't proselytize. We try to, as a matter of fact, we try to protect what we have from intrusion.

Yet at a meeting that was held in Hopi back in 1969, when we sat there with many Indian leaders from around the country, spiritual leaders, and they talked about these young people who were sitting on our doorsteps every day when we got up and they had come from all over the country and they were coming to be an Indian or they were coming to learn something about us. And we said, 'This is a very strange phenomenon, that our white brother's children are now coming to our doorstep and wanting to be part of us. What do we do with this?'

One of the Hopi elders said, 'Well we have a prophecy about that.' And he said that there was going to come a time when they're going to come and ask for direction. Maybe this is what's happening.

So it came under discussion and it was agreed upon at that time that perhaps this may be true. And if it is, then we should be more responsive then, to the questions. And we should maybe try to help. To see what we can do. To pass on whatever we can, however we can.

So it was agreed upon at that time that we would work more directly, then. And we have been much more directly since that time.

How much can be imparted is hard to say. But the "isms" of this world -- communism, capitalism, all of these "isms" -- are really quite, quite bereft of [a] spiritual side to it.

And what we were told when we made our laws, when the Great Law was put down, was to have the spiritual center of it, the center of the law to be spiritual, the Great Law. So when we see people who don't deal with this entirely, then we say, 'Well, it's only going to be a matter of time when it's going to come to a problem.'

Bill Moyers: The reality of human beings keeps intruding on the stories and the philosophy, the instructions.

Oren Lyons: Well, it's an ongoing discussion which each generation has to learn. What Indians are about, I think, first of all is community. They're about mutual support. They're about sharing. They're about understanding what's common land, common air, common water, common and for all. They're about freedom.

Bill Moyers: But they [are] divided and separated on the reservations. Many of those who come into the larger world perish psychologically, emotionally, spiritually.

Oren Lyons: And on the reservations as well. But this is an intrusion again by our white brother. He has made these reservations. He has controlled that. We've gone from a great power to a small power. Now, Chief Seattle said, 'As the waves come, one behind the other,' he said, 'so nations come. And as the waves disappear, so nations disappear. So perhaps,' he said, 'this is what will happen to us.'

Bill Moyers: Don't your people call yourselves "the real people"?

Oren Lyons: Yes, the real people.

Bill Moyers: The real people in the sense of, not exclusion. That's not meant, as I understand it, in the exclusionary sense. It means, "We are here, material people."

Oren Lyons: Yes.

Bill Moyers: "We are part of this physical world."

Oren Lyons: We are now. We are now. Now is us. We're the seventh generation. I'm sitting here as the seventh generation because seven generations ago those people were looking out for me. Seven generations from now someone will be here, I know. So each generation makes sure that seven generations is coming, all the time.

Bill Moyers: And that's accountability, right?

Oren Lyons: And that's accountability. We're accountable. We, you, I, we're accountable.

Bill Moyers: To people on going?

Oren Lyons: Yes we are. And they are going to call us. They're the ones that are going to say, 'Why did you do this?' Or 'Why did you not do this?'

Bill Moyers: I wish I could believe that about the human being. Because when I see what this generation has been handed. Our present generation's been handed quite a legacy of pollution, poisoned rivers, forests disappearing. These 500 year-old trees you talk about being cut down for the bottom-line now. I mean it's, I'm not sure that what you call the seventh generation and George Washington and Thomas Jefferson call posterity are getting a fair deal.

Oren Lyons: Oh life isn't fair is it? Life has never been fair. It's [a] hard lesson. Because when you're young and you're brought up, you're protected and people make sure that things are even and divided equally among the children. And all of a sudden, when you're out and you find out, "No, it doesn't work that way. How come I'm sick and he isn't? How come they died or this is going to happen here?"

But that's life. And as we say, Each person is born with a number of days in your hand. When you come to the end of that number, then that's your time. And some people say, "Well, they died too soon. They didn't finish." No they finished. They finished what they were going to do. That was it.

It's not fatalistic as much as reality; your part and your time, the time that you're a great tree. Remember the words of Red Jacket when he said, 'I'm an old man.' He says, 'My limbs are old and there's no leaves on them and I'm ready to fall,' he says. 'But my heart fails me when I think of the children and what faces them.' He was talking about me. Well, I'm here. I'm here. I feel pretty good.

And the other thing, I guess, is very important is that we shouldn't take ourselves so seriously.

Bill Moyers: Even a chief?

Oren Lyons: Oh yes, especially a chief, I guess. I think you're just a human being, really. And you happen to take on a responsibility that anybody else could have taken on if they wanted to do it and took the commitment to do it. And you begin to see the serious side of things quite a bit.

But nevertheless, in all of this there's life to be lived. I said [there was] an instruction and the instruction was to give thanks. There was a second instruction that I didn't mention. That was to enjoy life.

Bill Moyers: What sustains you?

Oren Lyons: My belief in the people. My belief in the ceremonies. My belief in the Earth. And I'm really optimistic, coming all down to it.

Bill Moyers: Vaclav Havel said recently that hope is not optimism. Hope is a state of the spirit, a state of the soul.

Oren Lyons: Yes. I deal in reality. I deal very much in reality. In order for us to have survived

up to this point, we have to deal in reality.

Bill Moyers: But you see, you have survived because you -- well, have you survived? Indigenous people have lived for centuries close to nature, in harmony with this world. And yet you've been overwhelmed by the material progress of the industrial society. Have you really survived or is it just the stories that survive?

Oren Lyons: No, I don't think so. I think the spirit is quite there. Then I think the spirit is manifested outside as we look about here. It's all here.

We are told about the long house. As long . . . about the ceremonies, the power of the ceremonies and the thanksgiving that we are instructed to do. They said, "As long as there's one to sing and one to dance, one to speak and one to listen, life will go on." So as long as the instructions are being carried out, even if it's down to the last four, life will go on.

Bill Moyers: [narration] From the Onondaga Nation in upstate New York, this has been a conversation with Chief Oren Lyons. I'm Bill Moyers.

1. By his own account, Franklin said:

> It would be a strange thing . . . if Six Nations of Ignorant savages should be capable of forming such an union and be able to execute it in such a manner that it has subsisted for ages and appears indissoluble, and yet that a like union should be impractical for ten or a dozen English colonies, to whom it is more necessary and must be more advantageous, and who cannot be supposed to want an equal understanding of their interest.

Albert H. Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Macmillan, 1905-1907), III, p. 42. *See also Exemplar Of Liberty, Native America and the Evolution of Democracy*, by Donald A. Grinde, Jr. and Bruce E. Johansen, Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 1991, pp.96,98 and *Forgotten Founders, Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois and the Rationale for the American Revolution*, by Bruce E. Johansen, Ipswich, Mass: Gambit Inc., 1982, pp.65-66.