

Sharing a Heritage: The Great Peace and the Constitution

The Peacemaker and the Great Law: A Legend of the Haudenosaunee

Note: When sharing this, please honor the tradition of using the Peacemaker's name only respectfully in connection with the ceremonies of the Great Law.

The Legend

In the ancient time a great evil spread across the land. Warfare was rampant, revenge the rule, and no one was safe; not the women in the fields, the men on their hunting parties, nor the children at play. It was even said that some—the most evil ones—ate human flesh.

A woman of the Wendat tribe, fearing for her safety, took her young daughter to live in the forest near the beautiful lake Ontario. The girl grew to be a young woman and, though she had seen no person other than her mother, her body showed signs that she would soon have a child. The mother wondered how this could be, until one night a shadowy figure appeared to her as she slept. “The child who will soon be born to your daughter is sent by the Master of Life,” the vision said. “His name shall be Deganawidah and he has great work to do. He brings a message that all people are to love one another and live in peace.”

The mother told the daughter of her dream and when the baby was born they named him Deganawidah and raised him together. He grew rapidly and was always gentle, kind to the animals, intelligent, strong, and handsome. His mother and grandmother took him to their village that he might begin to spread his message of peace, but the villagers only thought him odd and mocked him.

When grown, Deganawidah said, “I must go east toward the sunrise, where people will hear the message of the Great Peace. It is time for me to prepare for my journey.”

His mother and grandmother asked when he might return. "I will not be back," Deganawidah told them, "but if you wish news of me you can make a small cut in this tree upon the hill. If the sap runs clear I am well and my mission a success. If the tree bleeds you will know that I am dead."

He had carved a canoe of white stone and as he pushed it into the lake, his grandmother cried, "It will not float!" But it did float. Deganawidah said, "By this sign people will know my word is true."

The canoe skimmed quickly across the waters. On the other shore Mohawk hunters were amazed to see the arrival of this man in a stone canoe. "Where do you come from and where are you going?"

Deganawidah answered that he came from the Wendot people across the lake, sent by the Master of Life to bring a message of Great Peace and Power. Seeing no smoke or cornfields, Deganawidah asked, "Is there no village here? Why are you alone?"

"We left because of the strife from so much warfare," the hunters replied.

"You must return to your villages," Deganawidah told them, "and tell the people that one day I will come and show them a way that all may live without warfare and bloodshed. One day they will live in peace and good health."

The hunters returned to their villages within the stockades, where the people were hungry and quarreling. They told about the man in the stone canoe who would be coming with a message of Great Peace. If this were true, the people would welcome the new way.

Deganawidah traveled on to a house at the edge of the war trails, home of a woman named Jigonhsasee who fed the warriors and acted as council in their disputes. She prepared food for him and he told her, "I bring a message from the Master of Life that will end this warfare."

"How can that be?" Jigonhsasee asked.

"The message has three parts," Deganawidah said. "The first is Righteousness, that justice will prevail between people and between nations; the second is Health, of mind and body; and the third is Power, authority of law and custom for the good of all."

"The message is good," she said, "but how is it to be done?"

“In the longhouse there are many fires,” Deganawidah said, “that of the mother, and one for each her daughters and their families, all dwelling together. In the Longhouse of the Great Peace each of the five nations will have its own fire, and yet they will have one mind and one law.”

“I embrace that message,” Jigonhsasee said.

“Because you are the first to embrace it, and because the women know who among their clansmen are the wisest and best leaders, it shall be the clan mothers who will choose the sachems, the councilors who will attend the fire in the Longhouse, and you Jigonhsasee, will be known as the Mother of Nations.”

“I will stop feeding warriors,” the woman said, “but you must convince them not to make war. Where will you take your message next?”

“I go east,” Deganawidah said, “toward the sunrise.”

“That way is dangerous,” she told him, “for that way lives one who eats humans.”

Deganawidah responded, “That is just the sort of evil that must be changed if people are to live without fear. I will go there.”

When Deganawidah came to the house of the cannibal he crept onto the roof and waited, peering down through the smokehole. Soon the man came home carrying a human body, which he put into a kettle.

Seeing the reflection of Deganawidah’s face in the water, the man thought it was his own. “That is the face of a great man,” the cannibal said. “I did not know I was such a man.” He looked again and again saw the face of Deganawidah looking up at him. “Surely a man that wise and strong would not eat the flesh of other human beings.”

With that he took the kettle to the forest and emptied the contents under the roots of an upturned tree. As he walked back he thought, “I will no longer kill and eat humans, but I must do more to make amends for the suffering I have caused.”

He found Deganawidah waiting at his house and told him about seeing the face and changing his ways. “But I have caused such suffering,” the man said. “However will I make amends?”

“This is good,” said Deganawidah. “You have a New Mind which knows Rightousness and Health and Power, but you are troubled by the old memories. Heal them by working with me to spread the Good News of Peace and Power.”

“I will do this,” the man said. “I embrace the Good News of Peace and Power.”

“Good,” said Deganawidah. “Now let us eat together. While you get fresh water from the spring I will get a deer which is the intended food of man.”

Deganawidah came back with the deer which had large antlers. “These antlers shall be worn by those who will oversee the new order of Peace and Power.”

After they had eaten the man told Deganawidah of a great wizard, Tadodaho, a chief of the Onondaga, whose mind and body were twisted and his hair a mass of tangled snakes. “He is so evil that birds fall from the sky at his cry. Indeed, it was his sorcery which killed my wife and four of my seven daughters,” the man said, “twisting my own mind to evil ways.”

“We cannot fulfill the cause of peace unless we deal with such a man,” Deganawidah said. “You must go to him, for the Onondaga are your people. Give him the message of the New Mind. He will not listen, but you must try again and again, and will at last succeed. For this, I will give you a new name, Hiawatha, He Who Combs, for it will be you who combs the snakes out of Tadodaho’s hair.”

Before continuing his journey to the east Deganawidah sought out Tadodaho. “I have come to prepare your mind for the Good News of the Great Peace,” he said. “When people embrace it there will be an end to war and bloodshed.”

Tadodaho was indeed terrible to behold, his body twisted, his face tortured with hatred, and his matted hair might well have been writhing snakes. “Ha!” he mocked. “When will this be? *Hwe-do-ne-e-e-e-e-e-eh?*” His howl pierced the forest to frighten all who heard it.

But Deganawidah was not frightened. “It will be,” he said. “I will return with Hiawatha who will comb the snakes out of your hair.”

While Deganawidah traveled to the east, Hiawatha went to spread the news among the Onondaga people. He was glad to see his three surviving daughters and found the

people ready to accept the New Mind and embrace peace. But the wizard Tadodaho was not.

Three times Hiawatha called a council to discuss how they might straighten the kinks from Tadodaho's twisted mind. The first time as people paddled their canoes across the lake Tadodaho called up a squall and many were drowned. The second time fewer people came, and again Tadodaho broke it up. On the third try only Hiawatha came. As he sat waiting, out of the sky came the terrible voice of Tadodaho, "Hiawatha-a-a-a-a!" Hiawatha's heart was troubled.

Soon after, the first of his three remaining daughters sickened and died. As he grieved the second one fell ill. Efforts of the shamans and medicine men were to no avail and she too died. Hiawatha was inconsolable.

In an effort to cheer him the people called a stickball game. His last daughter, great with child, was bringing water from the spring when a beautiful bird flew overhead. A loud cry pierced the sky, "*Asonke-ne-e-e-e-eh! It is not time!*" The great bird began to fall. Looking up the warriors did not see Hiawatha's daughter and trampled her. This time Hiawatha lost not only his last daughter, but his grandchild as well. Grieving and discouraged he took his pouch and split the sky, heading south.

Deganawidah continued his journey into Mohawk territory, where the hunters had told of his coming. Some were ready to embrace the Good News of Peace and Power, but others doubtful. One chief said, "How can we be peaceful when those around us continue to make war?"

"Ah," said Deganawidah, "that is the message. All will agree to live in the same Longhouse, under the same Great Law. You will no longer fight one and another and together you will be strong. Those on the outside will not wish to attack. They too may one day join the Great Peace."

"This sounds good," the chief said, "but how can we know your words are true? You must give us a sign. Climb to the top of that old tree overhanging the river and we will cut it down. If you live, we will believe your message."

Deganawidah had no fear, for his message was true, so he climbed to the top of the twisted tree. The Mohawks cut the tree and watched as it fell into river below. Nothing could be seen of Deganawidah.

“So,” the chief said, “that is that.” And they went back into their lodges.

But at sunrise, a warrior spotted smoke and went to investigate. There he found Deganawidah and brought him back to the village.

At the council fire the chief said, “It is now certain that your words are true.”

So it was that the Mohawk nation was the first to embrace the News of Peace and Power and became the founders of the League of the Longhouse.

Grieving for his daughters Hiawatha wandered until he came to a lake where the ducks flew into the air lifting the water that he might pass. Crossing the dry lakebed Hiawatha picked up purple and white shells, some of which he strung together to mark his grief.

Each evening he sat beside his fire, the three strings on a pole in front of him. “If I found someone grieving as I am, and covered by darkness, I would take these strings in my hand and console them; one string to wipe the tears from their eyes that they might see, the second to clear their ears that they might listen to the words of condolence, and the third to unblock the throat that they might breathe and express their grief. The wampum strings would be as words and the grieving person would know they speak truth.”

Some saw the smoke of Hiawatha, and knew of his grief, but none came to console him. After a time he made his fire near the Mohawk village where Deganawidah was staying. Seeing the smoke, Deganawidah came to investigate and stood listening as Hiawatha once again picked up the strings and repeated what he would do should he find someone in grief.

Stepping into the light of the campfire Deganawidah took the strings in his hands and began to say the words. “I wipe the tears from your eyes so that you may see the daylight and once again have hope. I unblock your ears that you may hear my words of sorrow at your loss. I clear your throat that you may speak of your grief and breathe more easily.”

Hiawatha then spoke of his great grief and his mind began to clear.

“This is good, Hiawatha,” Deganawidah said. “With wampum strings such as these people will condole one another for their losses instead of taking another life in revenge. The wampum strings will hold the words to help people remember. We will make more belts of wampum to record all of the laws of the Great Peace.

So together the two made plans and strung belts of wampum to help them remember each point. Then they took their words of the New Peace to the western tribes singing as they went,

“Hail! Hail! Hail!

To the Great Peace we bring greeting...”

They came first to the Oneidas who soon agreed. Passing through the land of the Onondagas they heard the terrifying cry of Tadodaho, *“Hwe-do-ne-e-e-e-e? When will this be?”* It was a dare to keep the people trembling. Hiawatha and Deganawidah went quietly by. It was not yet time to deal with Tadodaho.

The Cayugas were the third nation to join the Great Peace and with three nations united, Deganawidah and Hiawatha went back to some of the Onondaga chiefs. The daring cries of Tadodaho still pieced the skies, *“Asonke-ne-e-e-e-eh? Is it not time?”* Though worried about Tadodaho, the Onondagas too agreed to join.

The Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga and Onondaga all sent sachems, or peace chiefs, to accompany Hiawatha and Deganawidah as they took the Good News of the Great Peace to the Seneca nations. The Senecas were of two minds. One group wanted to join. The other rejected the Good News, until at Deganawidah’s command the sun went out and all was in darkness, convincing them the Peacemaker spoke the truth. Five Nations were now joined in the League of Longhouse.

“Now,” Deganawida said, “we must straighten the mind and body of Tadodaho for that is all that stands in the way of the Great Peace.”

He and Hiawatha went back to the knoll upon which the great wizard waited impatiently. His terrible cries rang through the skies taunting and daring them. *“Hwe-do-ne-e-e-e-e-e? When will this be-e-e-e-e?”*

“I have returned as promised,” Deganawidah said, “and brought Hiawatha to comb the snakes from your hair.”

“*Asonke-ne-e -eh!*” Tadodaho howled. “It is not time!”

“It is time,” Deganawidah said, “for it is the wish of the Master of Life.” And he began to sing the words of peace, “*Hail! Hail! Hail! To the Great Peace we bring greeting...*”

The singing began to soothe Tadodaho, and when he was calm enough to listen, Hiawatha presented the wampum belts, telling with each one all the parts of the Great Peace. As he spoke, Deganawidah massaged the body of the wizard with herbs, relaxing the kinks. “The Great Law and the Great Peace are one and the same,” Hiawatha said. “In the Peace is Righteousness, Health and Power that all people will live as the Great Creator intended. ”

“Where is the power to make this Great Peace?” Tadodaho asked.

Deganawidah handed a single arrow to Tadodaho. “Here break this.” Tadodaho did that easily. Then Deganawidah bound five arrows together. “Now break these.” Tadodaho tried but was unable to break the bundled arrows.

Deganawidah then summoned Jigohnsasee and all the sachems from the five nations and they gathered around. “Here is the Mother of Nations and the wise men of all five tribes who have agreed. In this agreement is the power.”

Hiawatha began to comb the snakes from Tadodaho’s hair with his words. “Here at Onondaga will be the council fire of the Great Longhouse in which all five nations shall participate. Each shall tend their own fire, but in matters of interest to all, the sachems chosen by the clan mothers and sent by the people shall gather to make decisions. Each nation shall have one vote, but you, Tadodaho, will tend the fire that never dies, a position of great importance.”

Tadodaho’s appearance was changing into that of a more normal man, the hatred no longer contorting his face, the snakes gone from his hair. His mind too was becoming more open. He looked out at the gathering. “All have agreed to this?”

“All,” said Deganawidha and he called out, “Yo-hen.” One by one the sachems of each nation replied, “Yo-hen.” All were of one mind.

“Then I too agree,” Tadodaho said. “I embrace the Great Peace.”

“You are a new man Tadodaho, with a new mind. You will tend well the fire of the Longhouse where all five nations shall live in harmony as one family. The smoke of that fire will reach the sky and be seen by all people.”

Jighosasee then placed the antlers of authority on the head of the sachem Tadodaho, and on the heads of each of the other sachems of the five nations who would together sit around the council fire and keep the Great Peace, or Great Law.

“In this place we have planted this Great Tree of Peace,” Deganawidah said. “Now we must bury all weapons and causes of war.” He uprooted the tree so the warriors could throw their weapons into the chasm where they would be carried by the underground stream deep into the earth.

Replacing the tree Deganawidah said, “The white roots of this great tree shall grow in the four directions, east, west, north and south, reaching out to all parts of the earth. Any seeking peace need only follow the roots back to this tree, where they too can rest in the shade of the Great Tree of Peace.”

“At the top sits an eagle whose far-seeing eyes will keep watch for any sign of danger,” Deganawidah said, “for maintaining peace takes constant vigilance, courage and a caring for the well-being of all. Rightousness, Health and Power, this is the Great Peace.”

Taking one arrow from each of the five nations he tied them in a bundle signifying that all the people of the Five Nations were one and placed the bundle beside the Great Tree saying, “We shall in the future have one body, one head and one heart.”

He then charged each of the sachems that they should have skin seven spans thick that it could not be cut by any instrument no matter how sharp. This skin would give them patience and forbearance to deal with all matters that might come up with good will, guided the good tidings of Peace and Power.

He instructed them in the ways they were to conduct their business, make agreements, offer condolences, transfer authority from one sachem to another, and when this first council fire of the Five Nations had ended, Deganawidah said, “If you ever need me call into the bushes and I will return.”

Some say he waked off into the forest, others that he paddled away in his white stone canoe. In either case, the tree on the hill watched by his mother and grandmother never flowed red. The Great Peace between the five nations lasted for many centuries and the League of the Longhouse continues today.

Background of the Legend

The Legend of the Peacemaker belongs to the Iroquois or, as they prefer to call themselves, the Haudenosaunee (HO de no **SHAW** nee), People of the Longhouse. The vision of the Peacemaker is kept alive in their oral traditions and the sachems still hold the Grand Council at Onondaga, near Syacuse, New York, and the Council of the Six Nations of the Grand River, in Canada, following the Great Peace or Great Law as their ancestors have for centuries. In their language there is just one word for peace and law. They are the same. The head sachem of the Onondaga still takes the name Tadodaho.

As with most legends this story is part history and part myth and having passed through many routes and generations has many variations. Even the same storyteller has been known to vary the story from one telling to another. I read a number of versions and have tried to be as faithful as possible in spirit and detail. What I have told here is actually quite short. In full it includes all of the laws, names, and details of just how the new league was to conduct its business. It takes days to cover it all. A version dictated by Chief Joseph Gibson in 1912 is 529 pages long, and his short version, dictated in 1899 is 189 pages. I did not get my hands on either of those, but did read excerpts of the latter along with notes by William Fenton in his book, *The Great Law of the Longhouse*. I also read a shorter version, which I understood to be approved by a Committee of Indian Rites and Customs formed by the tribal chiefs in 1900. Duncan Campbell Scott presented this version to the Royal Society of Canada in 1911. I also read a beautiful book, *White Roots of Peace* written by Paul Wallace. First published in 1946, the current printing has forwards by two Tadodahos, which indicate to me that it is sanctioned by the Haudenosaunee. Another complete version I found was Brian "Natoway" Rice's dissertation, *The Great Epic*, which includes not only the Peacemaker

legend, but the whole story of the creation of Turtle Island and all the tribes and clans. I found it on the Internet at wampumchronicles.com.

The history is recorded not just orally, but in the wampum belts and strings passed from one Wisdom Keeper to the next. The elders say their wampum records show that the Five Nations established the League as early as 1000 AD, and there is some evidence to support they aren't too far off, including the occurrence of a solar eclipse in 1142 in just the right place and at the time of year that the Peacemaker commanded the sun to disappear. Another eclipse occurred in 1451 and many historians prefer this date but, but this eclipse would not have been as complete that far north. Whether it began around 1100 AD or 1450 AD, it is clear that the Confederacy had been in existence for at least three centuries when the Founding Fathers began discussing such a system of government for the American colonies.

The name of the Peacemaker is not to be spoken except respectfully in connection with the ceremonies and "good tidings of Peace and Power", but the name Hiawatha is quite familiar to us. It was picked up by Longfellow who mistakenly mixed it into an Ojibwa legend. The real Hiawatha was not Ojibwa, but Onondaga. In some versions of the Peacemaker legend, Hiawatha himself is the Peacemaker. At least one historian takes the position that the Peacemaker and Hiawatha might be two sides of the same person, or that the Peacemaker may have appeared to Hiawatha in a vision in which he asked Hiawatha to be the spokesperson for this great idea. The similarity in their appearance plays a large role in the legend, enabling them to almost magically replace one another.

Whether he was a spiritual being born of a virgin mother, or a troubled man who had a vision of a new way to live, or a pairing of the two, history indicates that there was a Peacemaker, a wise charismatic man who brought the Five Nations together in peace, with a vision to extend that peace not just to those nations, but to all others who wished to join under the Great Tree.

The Great Law and the Founding Fathers

Under the Great Law the indigenous peoples believed that no one was superior to any one else, and all lived as equal members of their societies, including the women. The sachems who acted as spokesmen and sat at the Great Council were selected by the clan mothers. Before going to the council fire these sachems met with members of the tribe to discuss the issues that would be decided. Everyone had a voice. If the sachems did not act in the interest of their tribe, they would be spoken to by the clan mothers and, if they persisted in being out of line, their antlers—the sign of authority—would be taken away and another chosen to wear them.

Though the number of sachems varied from eight to fourteen, each nation had only one vote in the Great Council, so they had to reach agreement as a tribe. When an issue was before the council it would be discussed between the sachems of the Mohawk and Seneca. They would agree on a possible solution and pass it on to the Oneida and Cayuga. If those two nations agreed it was put before the Onondaga and their leader Tadodaho. If the Onondaga sachems also agreed, it was settled, but if not, the matter went back to be discussed again by the Mohawk and Seneca sachems. All decisions were thus made by consensus.

On matters not pertaining to all five nations—six when the Tuscarora joined in 1717 after being driven out of Carolina—the individual tribes made their own laws. When the Europeans came to America, the League used the same process in making treaties with them, which kind of drove the Europeans crazy because they brought whole tribes to the councils so they could be consulted before making any agreement.

Scholars dispute the amount of influence the style of government of the natives, the Iroquois League in particular, had on those who drafted the U.S. Constitution, but having read some of the arguments, I am convinced that it had to be considerable. Bruce Johansen explores the relationship extensively in *Forgotten Founders*, and along with Donald Grinde, in *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy*.

On July 4, 1744 at the conclusion of a council between the League and representatives of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia to establish an Anglo-Iroquois alliance, Canassatego, an eloquent and respected spokesperson for the Onondaga

said, *“Our wise forefathers established union and amity between the five nations. This has made us formidable. This has given us great weight and authority with our neighboring nations. We are a powerful Confederacy, and by your observing the same methods our wise forefathers have taken you will acquire much strength and power; therefore, whatever befalls you, do not fall out with one another.”*

Benjamin Franklin was impressed enough to print a record of the proceedings, even sending several hundred copies to London where he thought it might be of interest.

Cadwallader Colden, first colonial representative to the Iroquois Confederacy, wrote in 1747, *[The Indians have] “a social and political system so old that the immigrant Europeans knew nothing of its origins—a federal union of five (and later six) Indian nations that had put into practice concepts of popular participation and natural rights that the European savants had thus far only theorized. The Iroquoian system, expressed through its constitution “The Great Law of Peace,” rested on assumptions foreign to monarchies of Europe: it regarded leaders as servants of the people, rather than their masters and made provision for their leaders’ impeachment for errant behavior. The Iroquois’ law and custom upheld freedom of expression in political and religious matters and it forbade the unauthorized entry of homes. It provided for political participation by women and relatively equitable distribution of wealth.”*

Some colonial leaders, including Franklin and Archibald Kennedy of New York began to think, along with the Haudenosaunee, that a union of the colonies for the common defense was a good idea. One problem was the French, and another was unscrupulous traders whose dealings with the natives took unfair advantage of them, which the natives rightfully resented. Kennedy wrote that the traders "have . . . abused, defrauded and deceived those poor, innocent, well-meaning people." He advocated a single Indian commissioner and common military force, proportionally provided by each of the colonies, to enforce the agreements made in the treaties with the Indians, a system which would be welcomed by the Haudenosaunee.

After reading Kennedy’s proposal Franklin wrote, *“It would be a very strange thing if Six Nations of Ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such an*

Union and be able to execute it in such a manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble, and yet a like Union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies.”

He also said, having been Indian commissioner of Pennsylvania, *“Happiness is more generally and equally diffus’d among Savages than in civilized societies. No European who has tasted savage life can afterwards bear to live in our societies.”*

In 1754 Colonial commissioners and Haudenosaunee sachems convened in Albany with two purposes; to cement the alliance against the French and to formulate and ratify a plan of union for the colonies. Haudenosaunee spokesman Hendrick, or Tyanoga as he was called, accepted a wampum chain belt from the colonists, promising to add as many links as they could on the Haudenosaunee side and asking that the colonists also bring as many into the covenant chain as possible. (Adding links to the chain or polishing the chain is a metaphor used frequently by the Haudenosaunee in councils.)

Franklin had come prepared and headed a committee that drafted the Albany Plan of Union, providing for the colonies to be united under a president-general to be appointed by the British Crown. Each colony would retain control over internal affairs, sending representatives to a Grand Council—the same name used by the Haudensaunee—which would raise and pay soldiers, build forts and equip vessels for the common defense. The Grand Council would also handle any treaties and regulations of Indian affairs. Like the Iroquois Great Law, the plan said that *all* states must agree on any course of action. The congress at Albany agreed to the plan unanimously, but the idea was rejected by the Crown, which thought it much too democratic, and by the state legislatures who were unwilling to concede any power or independence to a central government.

Twenty-years later the colonists were ready to declare their independence from Britain and, newly united, sent representatives to Philadelphia for the Continental Congress. Again the Haudenosaunee were summoned, this time in an effort to secure an alliance, or at least neutrality, in the coming war with Britain. In August 1775, commissioners recalled the words of Canassatego three decades earlier, and then said,

“Brothers, our forefathers rejoiced to hear Canassatego speak . . . [His words] sunk deep into our hearts. The advice was good. It was kind. They said to one another: “The Six Nations are a wise people, let us hearken to them, and take their counsel; and teach our children to follow it.” Our old men have done so. They have frequently taken a single arrow and said, Children, see how easily it is broken. Then they have taken and tied twelve arrows together with a strong string or cord and our strongest men could not break them. See, said they, this is what the Six Nations mean. Divided, a single man may destroy you; United, you are a match for the whole world. We thank the great God that we have twelve provinces . . . These provinces have lighted a great council fire at Philadelphia and sent sixty-five counselors to speak and act in the name of the whole, and to consult for the common good of the people . . .”

The great seal of the United States includes the American eagle, a traditional symbol of the Haudenosaunee, clutching a bundle of thirteen arrows. Other symbols were adopted from the natives as well, indicating that the colonists felt a connection, that these symbols represented their own ideals. One of the earliest flags of the U.S. was the Pine Tree Flag, with similarities to the Great White Pine of the peacemaker legend, with its roots reaching north, east, south and west, encompassing all people who would choose to “sit in its shade”.

Franklin’s Albany plan became the basis for the Articles of Confederation. The Articles had no power to tax, thus could not manage financially and proved too weak to deal with competition among the states. It was replaced in 1789 by the much stronger Constitution. Though less similar to the Great Law of Peace, the Constitution and its Bill of Rights incorporate many of the same ideas and ideals. Key similarities are that people are represented by states, and that they choose those who will represent them. Both the Great law and the Constitution have a form of checks and balances so that all the power is not in the hands of any one person or body, and many of the freedoms guaranteed in the Bill of rights are common to both.

Some differences between the two are that we have two houses of Congress, following the British example, and decisions are made by majority vote rather than

consensus. Another difference *was* that in the Great Law women had power equal to men, while in the Constitution women were not given the right to vote until the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920.

The heritage from the natives who lived on this land before people from other continents came to make it their home, involves much more than just the form of our government and laws. By the time the Founding Fathers were forming the government of the United States the colonists had had almost two hundred years of living with the natives; trading, fighting against the French, making treaties, even intermarriage. From the natives they learned to grow and eat corn, potatoes, squash, turkey, apples and tomatoes. They learned to make snowshoes, moccasins and canoes.

John Adams wrote of visiting with Indian neighbors as a boy and of the native men who were frequent visitors in his father's house. Thomas Jefferson, too, listened as his father talked with the Cherokee chief, Ontassette, late into the evenings. Many, including Colden, were adopted by the natives, learning the language and moving back and forth, spreading knowledge from one culture to the other.

Thomas Jefferson wrote, *"I am safe in affirming that the proofs of genius given by the Indians place them on a level with the whites...I have seen some thousands myself, and conversed much with them...I believe the Indian to be in body and mind equal to the white man."* (1785)

Just as many of the foods, useful items, and words were adopted, so too were ideas. Leading philosophers, such as Locke, Rousseau and Thomas Paine, whose works were often referenced as the source of democratic ideals on which our government was formed, used the natives as examples of lives lived in liberty and equality. The independent minded colonists shared the native's aversion of concentrating power in the hands of one or a few people. Decisions were to be shared, with everyone having a voice. One man was not better than another and even a sachem, or chief, had no right to tell another how to live. The councilor's job was to serve the people, making life better for the group. Very different than the monarchies in Europe where the position into which you were born, nobleman or peasant, was one in

which you were most certainly destined to stay. In America every person is free to be, to become. Our senses of freedom, of independence—key aspects to our way of life—were largely modeled for us by these first Americans.

Surely, Thomas Jefferson was influenced by exposure to the native ideas of liberty and equality when wrote, *“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”*

This idea that it is not the rulers who grant rights to the people, but the people who consent to be governed in their own best interest, was born in this land, spread from the ways of the original people to the colonists.

The Constitution begins with the preamble,

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

It’s quite true, that to these white men equality and liberty did not extend to women, any race other than Caucasian, or in some states, to those who did not own property. Still, the ideas are there, woven into the fabric of our laws, and more similar to the native law than those of Europe at the time. It can even be said, that those ideas spread from America to other nations, other continents, and are still spreading today.

In 1988 Congress passed House Concurrent Resolution 331, which states in part:

To acknowledge the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations to the development of the United States Constitution and to reaffirm the continuing government-to-government relationship between Indian tribes and the United States established Constitution.

Whereas the original framers of the Constitution, including most notably, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, are known to have greatly admired the concepts of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy;

Whereas the confederation of the original Thirteen Colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself:

..... [several paragraphs pertaining to other Indian Nations]

Now, therefore be it resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate Concurring), That, the Congress on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution, acknowledges the contribution made by the Iroquois Confederacy and other Indian Nations to the formation and development of the United States.

I had heard of the League of the Iroquois, but until last year, knew nothing of the legend of the Peacemaker, or the influence of the League and native laws and customs on the formation of the U.S. Constitution. I knew the immigrants had learned from the natives about many new foods, that many words and items in everyday life have their roots in this land, but I had no clue that our very form of government was so influenced by the indigenous people. Why wasn't I taught these things? Why isn't this part of the curriculum of every school?

The answer is probably because to justify the stealing of the lands, the broken treaties, all the cruelties done to the native peoples, they had to be dehumanized. If we recognized their great contributions to the ideas, ideals and fabric of this nation, how could we have treated them so abominably? I am so sorry. Sorry for the mistreatment, and sorry that I have not known of this wonderful contribution to these aspects of government that I have been raised to honor and appreciate.

The Great Law of the Haudensaunee is the legacy and heritage of the native peoples, but I feel strongly that it is my heritage, too, part of the fabric from which the laws of this country were woven. My traceable ancestors have been on this land for as many as ten generations, so it is quite likely that somewhere along the line I have some

Indian blood, but even if I don't, I am of this land where the roots of peace were planted so long ago. All who choose to be citizens, to live by these ideals are "of this land".

The vision of the Peacemaker began with Five Nations, but it was expressly open to other nations, to any who would agree the Great Law. It is not just a vision for the Haudensaunee, not just a vision for the United States of America, or this continent, but for the world. I don't want to steal this legend, but while honoring those with whom it was born, I want to share in it, to spread it to all who will hear.

Recalling the legend, perhaps it is now time to call into the bushes, that we may complete the vision of the Peacemaker, spreading it to every corner of the world, that all may sit under the Great Tree of Peace, and make this *our* story.

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Note: Parker is the grand-nephew of Ely S. Parker who collaborated with Lewis Henry Morgan (father of American ethnology) to write *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee* or *Iroquois*, 1851. Harriet Converse (below) read and was inspired by this work and knew Ely. S. Parker

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