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Remembering Shenandoah

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MARJORIE HOPE and JAMES YOUNG have just completed a book titled *Voices of Hope in the Struggle to Save the Planet*, from which this piece was excerpted.

With the recent death of Leon Shenandoah, the Thadodaho, or chief-of-chiefs, of the six-nation Iroquois Confederacy, a luminous presence passed from this world. During the past seven years, in the course of writing a book on the ecospiritual movement, the two of us have talked with scores of spiritual leaders and activists around the world. Some have achieved a certain fame - including Shenandoah's own nephew, Oren Lyons, who has become known as the leading spokesperson for the indigenous people of the world. But Shenandoah was unique.

He was a leader in the revival among the Haudenosaunee (the Iroquois) of their traditionalist Longhouse religion: a synthesis of ancient shamanic practices and agricultural ceremonies, and the revelations of nineteenth century prophet-reformer Genediyo (Handsome Lake).

Some Native Americans (whom Shenandoah always referred to as Indians) have compromised on issues of development or gambling; even some Iroquois have welcomed them. Under his leadership, his own nation, the Onondaga, continued to say "No!" and resistance was strengthened among other Iroquois.

In 1992 he participated in the World Conference of Indigenous Peoples at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. He also foresaw how destructive to native economies and spiritualities NAFTA would prove to be.

No one we have ever known has expressed with such quiet simplicity, the feeling of being of the Earth.

This is the story of our first meeting with Shenandoah.

As you drive south from Syracuse, New York, an interstate highway sign points to the "Onondaga Nation." No flags, no uniformed officers, no customs barriers mark the approach to this 7000-acre nation. Instead, a diner and a somewhat forlorn-looking store dealing in beer, cigarettes, Indian souvenirs, and sundries stand near the beginning of the road through the territory. As you near the village, on either side of the road lie dumps and abandoned cars. Most of the dwellings are rundown trailers. Here and there, however, stand neat, new-looking log cabins, and a few ranch-style houses. In the yards, some families are gathered in circles, eating, smoking, talking quietly and staring at visitors' cars. Beside the road stand several "Onondaga Mission" churches with well-kept cemeteries. And in the hazy distance rise low round hills still thickly wooded with tall trees and nurtured by streams, a reminder of the distant past and a fading way of life.

Leon Shenandoah greeted us with a certain reserve. A white-haired man in

his seventies, still slender and vigorous-looking, he motioned us to a seat in his smoky living-room, and regarded us with intent, watchful eyes. Although a new-looking television set stood against one wall, most of the furniture was worn, and the only heat came from an electric heater. We remembered that it was a tradition among families from which chiefs were chosen that they should not be ostentatious; indifference to money and belongings was a sign of superiority. In the next room an infant grandson played on the floor under a calendar with a photo of an Indian chief sitting on a horse in full regalia.

The chief listened somewhat impassively as we explained that we were writing a book on the new alliance between faith and ecology, and had a special interest in the Iroquois. After a moment of reflection, he nodded.

"Our way of life is what our religion is all about. It was given to us by the Father Creator. We do not even use the word "religion," except to help the white man understand. It is more like giving thanks. The way we think, Mother Earth is our mother. We get our nourishment from her. It is a duty to work in harmony with her. All our ceremonies are related to Mother Earth."

"Can you tell us more about them?"

"Well, a little," he said slowly. "We do not allow visitors at the ceremonies. Some Indians do, but we don't. Our children, though, they come. That's how they learn. All of us, we carry on from the elders. It's continuing. We have a ceremony for every season, and two others between seasons. We can tell you about them, but you cannot attend if you are not Iroquois." He paused, as if to be certain we understood the full import of his message.

"This is a nation," he went on. "We Iroquois insist on that."

"Other tribes refer to themselves as nations, too."

"That's true," he said, a little impatiently. "But we insist on being treated that way. Like we have our own passports, saying 'Onondaga Nation' or whatever. The Iroquois and the Hopi out West are the only ones with their own passports. We tell the United states we never have been American citizens, and never will be. Other Indians, they're supposed to have that right, but they don't fight for it. Another thing, most of our disputes are settled by the elders, and the police are not supposed to come in here. They keep trying, sure. And we have fights. But we win."

The phone rang, and he moved to the dining-room. "Yes, you can come tomorrow," we could hear. "I'll be here all morning."

He sat down again. "The whites, they come to us now, to learn," he continued. "They've already learned a lot. Their constitution was copied from our Confederacy. Right here in Onondaga stood the Tree of the Great Peace, the white pine that was uprooted so our nations could throw their weapons into the pit

before putting the tree back. That's where white people get the phrase 'burying the hatchet.' They never got to practicing it, though."

We remembered that according to oral history, the Confederacy was founded perhaps a thousand years ago, perhaps more, by a Mohawk named Deganwidah, the Great Peacemaker. Many U.S. founding fathers saw in the Confederacy's constitution, the Great Law of Peace, a model for their new nation. Some features, such as debate and compromise, two houses of legislature, and uniting several sovereign units into one government, were adopted, but many other ideas, such as reaching agreement through consensus, were never included. Friedrich Engels lauded the Iroquois as exemplars of primitive communism. In traditional Iroquois society, status depended more on moral qualities and leadership skills than on lineage or wealth.

"Can you tell us more about how you choose your leaders?"

"Okay. Every Iroquois nation has several clans, with names like beaver or wolf or turtle, and every clan has a clan mother. There are two leaders for each clan, the main one and his partner, working together for the people. And it's the women, the clan mothers, who choose the men. The clan mothers, they've seen the children growing up, so they can study the person to see if he has the right qualities, like truthfulness with the people. So the clan mother talks it over with the other women and then chooses. All the clan mothers together choose the chief Statesman for their Nation. Those chiefs approve the Thadodaho, the chief-of-chiefs for the Confederacy. He comes from the Onondaga Nation because the first Thadodaho was an Onondaga. The Onondagas are the Firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee. So he shares that trust with his cousins, the other thirteen Onondaga clan chiefs.

"Today I'm chief-of-chiefs. But what I learned, I learned from the heart. Not from the book. Today - the children all go to school here. It's run by the state. They get brainwashed." He sighed. We told Shenandoah that we had just visited the school. With its corridors and classrooms adorned with Indian craftwork, poetry, and student paintings, it had seemed a bright, cheerful place. Although the principal - a man who spoke with great admiration for Indian culture - was white, most of the teachers were Indian.

"Yes, there are Indian teachers, but they're brainwashed too," he said impatiently. "The children learn Indian culture and language up to eighth grade, but then they go out to the high school, and there are no Indian teachers. That's what the government wants, that we lose our traditions." His lips tightened.

"Did you have much formal schooling?"

"A little. I went to a Quaker school a few years. It was all right. When I was sixteen, I went into the Longhouse and I said to myself, 'This is where I belong. This is our way of life.' So I worked on the land. All day we ploughed

with a horse. We worked hard but we were close to the land. it was natural. Then things got harder and harder, and I had to go out to work. I went into construction. Today the people can't make a living here, they go out, and a lot do construction. White people look for Indians to work on high steel, like bridges, because they're agile and aren't afraid of high places. So a lot of our people live in cities. Then they come back. Some of them do."

Modern education - it took away from common sense, he told us bitterly. Take water - if it was polluted then it only made sense not to drink it, then do everything possible to prevent pollution. But the white man made everything complicated.

"The Christian God doesn't believe in Mother Earth-" He shook his head. "We were given Christianity by the Europeans. Before the white man came, we could drink from any stream. Pretty soon we won't be able to drink any place. But these white ministers say their way is better than mine."

The infant grandson crawled into the living room, and up to his grandfather. Stroking the child's head, Shenandoah spoke slowly. "I have a heavy heart. Children like Michael - what is their future? Bad air, bad water, bad earth..." His voice trailed off.

"I think about our young people," he went on. "Some get into drunkenness, because they're all mixed up and haven't had good education. Some of them, they want casino gambling. We don't allow it here. We go by the Creator. Later a lot of them begin to think about that, and then go into deeper thought. They need to come back home to find themselves. Only the ones who are ready for that can survive. Those sucked into the almighty dollar, they're beyond saving.

"It's hard to get away from the dollar, even here. They've approached us to let industry in, because we have no taxes. But we just say 'no.' We get calls from all over, from companies that want to dump wastes - all kinds, even nuclear - on our land. Nobody wants it. They think of us, the poor Indian. We could make two million dollars easy. But it's not worth it. You are selling the children's life away if you give in. You know our saying: 'We have a responsibility unto the seventh generation.'"

The phone rang again. After returning from a long conversation in Onondagan, he seemed absorbed in thought. At last he spoke. "Oil, it's part of Mother Earth's intestines. The whites are drawing the oil out of her. Then they burn it up into poisons, and put them back in the ground, and the air. Mother Earth now, she's nothing but webs of roads around her body, and they're strangling her to death." He sighed. "I'm afraid it's done, it's too late. I know what's coming."

"A wasteland?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Still, some white people are concerned. I do what I can. Like I

talked in Kentucky at a high school last month, and had them in tears. I just got back from Mexico. We talked with the Maya in the mountains about how their traditions are disappearing. I've been to England three times, Switzerland two times, Holland once. Over there they're really interested in the Indians. I spoke about human rights at the United Nations in Geneva. And next month I'm going to Australia to a conference about the environment and I'll meet the aboriginal people and talk about what's happening to their rights. I'm going with my nephew, Oren Lyons. He is an educated professor. I'm a traditional professor. He goes to the ceremonies, too, but we're different. He doesn't see what I see."

"Yet you do seem to have a bit of hope."

"Well, some. As things get tougher, more of our young people begin seeking, and then come back to the old way. They will get their strength back if they continue in this direction. Some white people are seeking, too."

"If you could sum it up in a few words, what would you say is the answer?"

For the first time he smiled a little. "Live in a simple way."

Notes

Article excerpted from (or about themes in) *Voices of Hope in the Struggle to Save the Planet*.

1 *Holy Ground: A Resource on Faith and the Environment* (a study guide by the editors of *Sojourners* for small groups and classrooms) includes our article "In Awe and Wonder" (Washington D.C., 1997).

2 "Keeping the Sacred Fire," *EarthLight*, Summer 1996.

3 "In Awe and Wonder: Creation's Reliable Testimony," *Sojourners*, September, 1995. A portrait of Calvin De Witt and the Au Sable Institute.

4 "Islam + Vatican," an excerpt in *Islam in America*, Fall 1995.

5 "Kids for the Earth," *Creation Spirituality*, Summer 1995.

A portrait of Sister Pat Monahan and her environmental organization.

6 "Keeping the Sacred Fire," *Resurgence*, May/June 1995.

A portrait of Chief Oren Lyons of the Onondaga Nation.

7 "Contrasting Perspectives: Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Thomas Berry," *Earth-Light*, Winter 1995.

- 8 "Islam + Vatican = Bad Medicine," *As-Salamu 'Alaykum* (Journal of the Muslim Peace Fellowship), October 1994.
- 9 "Islam Will Not Ally with the Vatican," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 3, 1994.
- 10 "Islam and Ecology," *Cross Currents: Journal of Religion and Intellectual Life*, Summer 1994.
- 11 "A Prophetic Voice: Thomas Berry," *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy*, Winter 1994.
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- 14 "Student Ecologists Stir Things Up to Ease the Earth," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 9, 1993.
- 15 "Water Disputes Trouble the Middle East," *Christian Century*, June 3-10, 1992.
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- 17 "The Struggle is About Water," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, January 10, 1992.
- 18 "Environmental Concerns and Actions of Six Faith Groups," *Sequoia*, March/April, 1991.
- 19 "Voices for the Earth - Around the Earth," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, April 27, 1990.
- 20 "Thomas Berry and a New Creation Story," *Christian Century*, June 3-10, 1989.

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