

Our World

According to Osennontion and Skonaganleh:rá

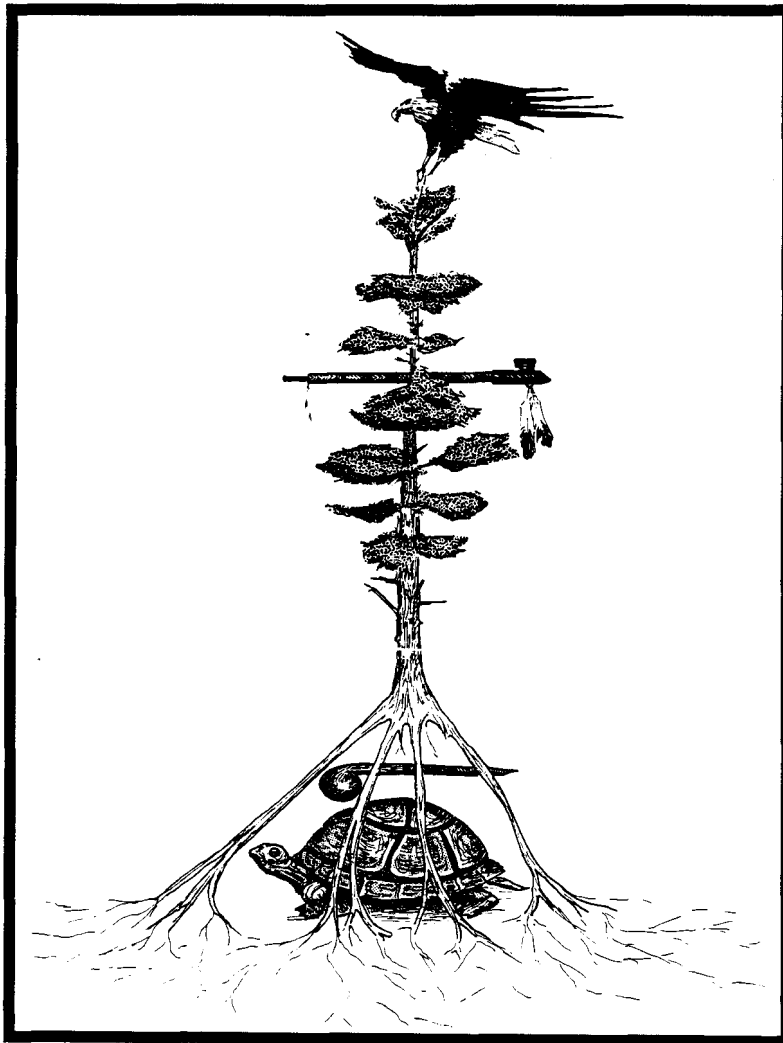
We found ourselves on April 4, 1989, still without the article we had promised to submit for this special edition of *Canadian Woman Studies*. Being Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) women, and therefore notorious for "talking," we decided to record a conversation between ourselves. We spoke of everything from our initial apprehension to contribute to a so-called "feminist" journal and our views on "feminism," to our very deep beliefs of who we are and where we want to go. What follows is our significantly condensed and revised (to say the least!) version of our spoken words. It is our sincere hope that these words will provide our readers an opportunity to begin to recognize, to understand, and to respect the aboriginal woman for who she is.

Our contribution to *Canadian Woman Studies*

S: Frankly, I'm very *tired* of having other women interpret for us, other women empathize for us, other women sympathize with us. I'm interested in articulating our own directions, our own aspirations, our own past, *in our own words*. I saw the opportunity, through this journal, to do this — to communicate to the women who teach women's studies and their students. At the same time I want to tell our own young women that we don't need to grow up wanting to be like "Dick and Jane." I want them to know that it's not only all right,

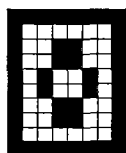
it's *necessary*, for us to grow up in a way that we have articulated ourselves: we don't need governments, laws, or legislative frameworks to articulate the whole concept of self-government and self-direction. When I pulled all these things together, I decided, given some discomfort with the concepts around a feminist journal, that I was prepared to become involved.

O: Not considering myself to be "feminist" necessarily, nor a "writer," I had some difficulty deciding whether this was a good thing to do. I was also not sure about what I would submit, and then you suggested a co-authorship. I am most concerned with how we can best affect the readership — how we can get the message across to them that *we are absolutely different!* If the educators are going to teach anybody, and if their students are going to learn anything, then we have to try as much as possible to get them to at least *realize* that they are going to have to twist their minds a little bit (or a lot) to try to get into the same frame of mind as us, or to try to get on the same wave-length. They must realize that their own thinking cannot be applied to what we are going to say, so that what we say "fits" — there seems to be a tendency for that to happen. We must somehow get them to empty their heads of what they may think they know about us, so that they are prepared to begin to learn the truth.



S: It's important for me to say a few things about why I suggested a co-authorship. I want to show that it's possible to work together and to co-operate. While you and I share common views on self-government, and the direction in which aboriginal people are going (and aboriginal women are being dragged), these are not always shared 100%. However, it is possible to disagree, *and* to still work together. This is, unfortunately, something that we don't see in our community often enough. We see cliques and little power circles form, but we rarely see genuine co-operation. It seemed to me that we could be an example to the women who read the journal, and to our own women.

Who We Are/Who We Are Not



S: We must begin by explaining who we are. We are both Kanien'kehá:ka, and we both believe in the Haudenosaunee (the Five Nation Iroquois Confederacy) having been created and operating long before anyone came here. In that context of who we are, we believe that woman came first — that the first one, the first being to come amongst our relatives, came from a sky world, a world that we cannot define in nice anthropological terms, as some would have us do, but nevertheless, for us, there is no doubt in our minds. This first woman who came carried a child, and this first-born was a woman. We must remind ourselves and the Grandfathers, Fathers, Uncles, Brothers, Husbands, and Sons amongst us, that they borrowed and adopted "other" ways and that those other ways of looking at us are just not acceptable.

O: I want to emphasize that we *believe* our Creation Story — that we don't need any other explanations nor does there need to be any great analysis or any great scientific substantiation for it, because we believe it! You are right when you say that we know it to be the truth, and so if someone believes otherwise, then let that one prove to us that it is *not* the truth.

S: The Elders and Traditional People, with whom I have spoken, talk about when peoples of all colours came here and how we came to be and how everybody had her/his own medicine wheel. In

that medicine wheel, irrespective of colour, was everything that s/he needed. Inside those medicine wheels were the values and beliefs, and social mores, about how we were to get along. It was only as time went on that certain of these colours of peoples forgot what was in their medicine wheels and by forgetting what was in them and forgetting to honour them, they created a whole false society. This society rooted itself in what we consider to be this falseness. The people who came here to co-exist on Turtle Island have not done so very successfully — co-existed that is.

O: We are taught that we have a relationship to the natural world and so we are natural human beings. We have names, very descriptive names of who we are (Kanien'kehá:ka are people of the flint) and how we differ. Our own languages enable us to do that, generally in a respectful way. You speak often of the young ones whom you are responsible for, how they have their own "Indian" names by which they are known, and how important these names are. One of the very small girls understands at three years old, the teaching of the sweetgrass braid — how weak one strand is, how easy it is to break it up, and it's gone. She knows, however, that many strands, braided together, cannot be torn apart. She carries that name and is being taught the responsibilities that go along with her name.

S: She is being taught, as are the small boys, to understand respect, to respect all of her relations, and to understand and respect the role she has to play with regards to those relations. We want to ensure that she can honour her name — that she is prepared to accept the responsibility to see that we are braided together, that we do not stand alone as a single blade of grass.

I think a few words should also be said about *who we are not*. One of the big social phenomena of the time that we live in centres around definitions like "Indian" and Metis. Perhaps too many of our people very passionately want to be the label that has been ascribed to them. We must remember that those labels are not ours. Those who believe the story that "Indians" are called Indian because the lost ones thought they had

reached India when they arrived here, are surely grateful that some other place, which might have suggested a less flattering name, was not the target. I'm not sure about Metis. I appreciate that it reflects the concept of mixed blood, but a self-defined Metis person who considers that s/he is aboriginal, is only that because s/he has an origin that comes from the Onkwehonwe, Anishinabe, or one of the other natural beings. If we put our minds, particularly the women, more to acting like good natural human beings and less to pursuing these political labels that come from foreign governments, we might find ourselves easier able to get along with some of the other groups. When we use *their* words and *their* weapons, *their* issues around law and behaviour and expectations, we can't ever expect to measure up.

Self-Determination

O: The term "self-government" has become a universal buzz-word, widely used throughout the world, when the issues of aboriginal/indigenous peoples are discussed. I have difficulty with the word, myself, and with what it represents. Just as other Nations of peoples, like those who call themselves Canadians, have their own system of government, so do we. Presumably, Canadians consider that their government is such that it allows them to govern their affairs — to govern themselves. Of course, we know that they go far beyond that and impose their system on others like us, but to make the point — their government is a self-governing one,

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only they do not describe it as such. I guess the concept that we might have our own government, which also allows us to govern ourselves, is just too much to take, so the "others" refer to us as wanting "self-government." It should be said that when we were given our own ways to live, we were never given a government for any others *but* our-



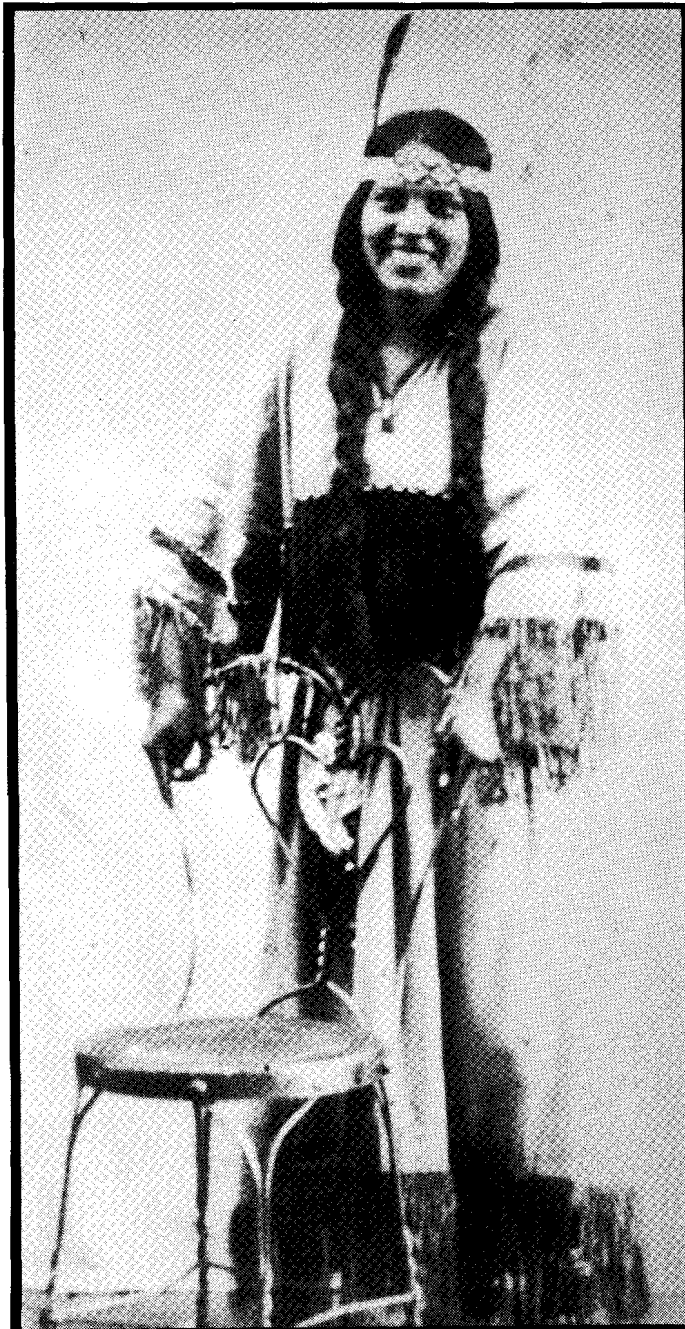
selves, and to this day, *we* maintain our end of the original agreement to co-exist, not to impose our ways on others.

Naturally, our own people, as continues to happen time and time again, have wholeheartedly embraced the buzz-word. Of course, the word itself is not the culprit; what it means to people, how it is interpreted, or misinterpreted, and how it comes about are causes for debate and dissension. When the Feds talk of recognizing "self-government," they mean delegated authority to "Indians," for example, to govern their affairs on the reserves wherein they were displaced, and this is accomplished through *their* legislation. When an aboriginal person, who knows what s/he is talking about, speaks of "self-government," s/he means the particular system of government that was given to the people when they were placed in their territory on Turtle Island. This government needs no sanction through legislation or otherwise; rather, the "others" need only honour the original agreements to co-exist, and through their actions, show respect for our ways. However, because so many of our people don't know our ways, they have become involved in processes whereby they have attempted to gain recognition of our "right to self-government," instead of working on finding ways to effectively assert and exercise our own governments. Before I knew better, I myself supported and took part in some of those processes — this was before I knew what things like "Nationhood" and "Sovereignty" *really* meant. I came to realize *my* mistakes; I am praying for others to do the same before any more damage is done on behalf of "the people."

If we are going to use the English language, I prefer the term "self-determination," as it better describes, for me, the action that needs to be taken. The establishment, exercise and enforcement of government, is only one aspect of "self-determination." In our own language, we have a word that, of course, even better

describes what we have been instructed to do. TEWATATHA:WI best translates into "we carry ourselves" — a rather simple concept, some might say, but *I* think it says it all.

S: In our community, we want to define ourselves and not in somebody else's context (which is what we see the "feminist" definition to be, for example). We want to define ourselves in our own context, and I'm not convinced that in that self-definition which is where self-government comes from — exploring one's self — we are going to find terms that can be shared with and understood by the



"others." Ours are going to be very different. The object of the self-government exercise seems to be to permit all of the voices to articulate themselves in very different ways, with very different aspirations, and yet to be able to co-exist in the houses that we built — be those political, economic, social or cultural houses. We are not going to find that outside, because we see "them" as tending to define themselves collectively — be they women or men, adult or child. We have a problem with that, with the way that they seem to want to "box" us. A lot of times when we try to interact with other women's groups, particularly groups that call themselves "feminist" groups, they come to the table with equally as passionate, as strong, opinions about that "box" that we don't want to be in. They try to make it more palatable because, after all, we have this universal sisterhood; we know that this does not exist. We protest the notion that the "box" is good, and we deny the attempts to have us attracted to it.

Somehow there seems to be this attitude that there is one answer for all aboriginal people in Canada, or all aboriginal peoples on Turtle Island. There isn't. Just as our creation stories all differ, our clans or totems all differ. So does the answer to how we will re-assume responsibility for our own affairs; the care and protection of our own people are going to be different. Yet we have followed a path that says somehow there is going to be one great lodge and in that lodge we are all going to come to an understanding that things are going to be done a certain way. Certainly when we go to meetings, we see that. We see people trying to do things that probably would have been traditional, like trying to come to one good mind — one good mind! However "one good mind" had always meant in the context of *our own relationships*. It hadn't meant that we were going to go from our territorial homeland out to what's now

called British Columbia, and say “there is the way that you have to do things,” although this might work there, since our peoples are close in that they have long-houses where women play very primary roles. However, to take the same issue to the Plains Cree, Southern United States, or where Inuit or Inuvialuit people live, would likely not work. Yet this whole nature of Confederation— of somehow people banding together and affiliating, giving them some sense of protection, direction, ownership, and community — that we’ve adopted is not necessarily the best answer or resolution for our communities. At least *I’m* not convinced it is.

O: There were a number of processes that still exist in the long-houses today where you try to get people to come to a good mind. Where you can’t have everybody agree to see a good mind, then you wait, and you set the decision aside, and you talk about it — the women talk about it, and the men talk about it, and the clans talk about it and then you all talk about it again. If there still is no good mind, well you set it aside again. However, outside of the long-house, somehow there is a sense of chasing ourselves, that we’re in a big hurry to do something, that it has to be resolved right now.

S: We have a law that came from the creator and in that law was *absolutely* everything that we needed! Kanien’kehá:ka call it the KAIANERE’KO:WA. Some people call it the Great Law, or the Great Law of Peace, and it is. This law, our law, does not define “rights;” nor does it defend “rights.” In our ways, there are no “rights,” only responsibilities: to observe the clans, to bring honour, trust, friendship and respect; to be kind; honest; share and have strength; to maintain a relationship with all of the natural world.

With those things that we were given, came strength. In very modern times, strength is perceived as force, as something

external. In our ways, strength is perceived as internal. It was always represented by the rock, who doesn’t change whether you speak softly or lovingly to it, or if you are standing there yelling at it. The rock is the rock — it is the Grandmother/Grandfather. That’s the way it is; it doesn’t change.

Our relationship with the natural world has all but been forgotten. We pursue strength as force, either as a political movement as we see some of the big powers in the world doing, or force in the way of personal relationships between men and women. We see a very downside of a

syndrome, when the nature of strength is really a very internal issue. I have been taught that I am strong enough and have the wherewithal to be the very best human being I can be — not the strongest, not the most aggressive, not the biggest, not the one whose dogma and dicta says, because they’re the best, they must be followed by all the people. In the context of the whole world around me, I understand those things given by the Great Mystery. I understand the code, the law, that I am to follow. I understand that I have the strength of my relationships to honour the smallest plant and the smallest child and the most sacred of ceremonies. In the context of all that, I don’t have to change myself. I don’t need a big stick, a loud voice, a women’s group to represent me. I must not let my ego get in the way.

O: Talking about what woman was and certainly what we want her to be again, is not negating anybody else’s role in creation. It is honouring, respecting, saying that there is a relationship — that we all need to get along. We all need to get along now, whether we are whatever. Right now we need to get along, because the Mother is getting sicker, the world is getting smaller, there are more and more people who are less and less careful. It is fine for the so-called leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States to say this is the way things are going to be in the world. However, frankly, if we don’t honour our relationships with the natural world, *they* are going to tell us how it is going to be — nobody else is going to! Not one of us, female or male, complete or not, young or old, is going to be able to do anything about that and that is something that, I think, our young people have to soon start putting their minds to.

Relationships

O: Our relationship to the natural world and our observance of



our laws began to change with the coming of the “others” — the “visitors,” the “boat-people.” Different relationships and happenings in other peoples’ times and countries and environments discredited a number of things. Women were looked upon as possessions by the “others,” and children were to be seen and not heard; in our own ways, women were looked upon as sacred and, in our councils, even the smallest child had a voice. The whole “discovery” theory had an impact on our people. The “boat-people” neglected to recognize that *they* were sick and lost offshore and that if *we* had not “discovered” *them* perhaps we would have been able to delay what happened here, by a few decades, if not centuries. Historical impacts bastardized relationships in the family, and in the community, with the lack of recognition of clans. In a political context, we were forced into a relationship with the Crown, through the Indian Act, and we found out that not everyone was an “Indian.” With the introduction of alcohol (and then later, drugs and other addictive substances), our people established a relationship with the bottle, a relationship that has escalated over the ages.

In the last one or two decades, we have begun to rethink those relationships. We want to be healthy again, to re-assert, to re-discover, to re-whatever — to do again the kinds of things that we were instructed to do. We have begun to talk about government as *we* understood it — in the form of *responsibility*: that we have responsibilities for the earth, for the water, for all of our relatives, on and in it, and equally, they have responsibilities, and if they don’t observe one of their responsibilities, then we die!

If we continue to forget our responsibilities and find ourselves in situations where there is still a wholesale destruction of aboriginal people, all around the globe — be it the cutting down of the rainforests; be it marching in what is now known as Central or Southern America under some popular movement as a political initiative and Indian people are being killed; be it the outright starving and destruction of aboriginal peoples’ self-image; or be it the wholesale attempt at massive assimilation, as is occurring in what is known as the United States and here — then, how can we endure as the peoples that we are? For these and a multitude of other reasons,

we have had to come to new decisions. With the disruption of our ways, came racism. I remember listening to an Elder talk about racism — ‘If you truly want to conquer a people, you withdraw, but you leave your education system behind, and you won’t have to do anything to them. By using the tool, the very important and powerful tool they left behind, you’ll do it to yourselves! While we may want ‘Indian Control over Indian Education’ — educating our own to guarantee our own future — we’re not even doing *that* yet with our own resources.’ People don’t know the original law, and have been raised in such a way that denies the existence of our ways, particularly the men who are the elected “Chiefs” and other so-called “leaders.” So they define our future in a context that results exactly in what those people — “the boat-people,” the “visitors” — wanted us to do. They do it in the context of foreign law. They look to the *Indian Act* for “self-government” enactment — there *is* no sense of self. We are then left to ask ourselves, particularly the women, what we have to do to look at raising our heads and dealing with our children and making sure there *is* a future!

Woman’s Role and Responsibilities

S: In our community, the woman was defined as nourisher, and the man, protector, and as protector, he had the role of helper. He only reacted; she acted. She was responsible for the establishment of all of the norms — whether they were political, economic, social, or spiritual. She lived in a very co-operative environment, where power needed not be lorded over.

O: She did not have to compete with her partner in the running of the home and the caring of the family. She had her specific responsibilities to creation which were different, but certainly no less important, than his. In fact, if anything, with the gifts given her, woman was perhaps *more* important.

S: There was an understanding that the woman in many respects, certainly *spiritually*, was more powerful and complete and this because she had a direct relationship to Mother Earth, Grandmother Moon,

and to the female elements of the waters, all of which we cannot live without. The men understood that gifts were given them by the Great Mystery — ceremonies and teachings — and that there were things they had to do to be able to walk the same road beside her, because she had been given the responsibility for completing creation, something that she still carries, even now. She shared a true partnership with her man. Two halves, with very different elements and very different responsibilities, make up the medicine wheel, and both halves have to be there to make it complete.

Woman has had a traditional role as Centre, maintaining the fire — the fire which is at the centre of our beliefs. She is the Keeper of the Culture. She has been able to play that role, even in a home divided. She has maintained that role even though church dogma has suggested that our families need be structured in a different way; that we teach “Dick and Jane;” that there are certain aspirations that young boys should have, and differing and somehow lesser ones that young girls should have. She has maintained her role despite intermarriage which caused her to be cut off from her roots, both legislatively and sometimes physically. Her home has been divided as a result of education. A wholesale taking away of our children to schools diminished her role and her 100% right to teach her children, by imposing laws which require her to hand over that child, who comes home and checks everything her mother says in the context of what the teacher said, and this, when teachers are poorly equipped to deal, from our perspective — an aboriginal perspective —

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with what the children *should* be taught.

Her home is divided as well, as a result of economics. If he works, he may or may not be able to work in their home community; in the communities where we come from, many, many of the men are gone from late Sunday night to late Friday

night and there is a substantial number of women left to be the heads of the household during the week, while the men work away in high steel, auto plants, or wherever they can get a job. In more traditional environments, because of the requirements for schooling, women end up staying at home, while the men are out hunting and trapping; under other circumstances, that would have been a family initiative and children would have been taught in that manner. So her home is very much divided as a result of that.

Her home has been divided because of the whole nature of family. She traditionally was able to rely on her mother, her grandmother, her older aunts to help her — to help her in the norms around raising a young family and around how a home got run. She participated in getting information, of being schooled through women getting together to quilt, to do crafts, or to do a variety of other things that just are not around anymore. So her home has been divided and sub-divided again, and they have attacked her sacred space from a number of perspectives. Families don't do things together now — little boys go to hockey; little girls go over there and do this thing; young people go and hang out at the drop-in centre; *he* has *his* activities and *she* has *hers*, so there's no longer that traditional nature of interaction there. There are obviously education issues that are very different, right to the point where informal education systems, people are divided physically — one doesn't even interact with other age groups and sometimes males go off to auto shop and girls are sent to home economics. It's still a divisive issue. We're finding more and more as we go places, and people attempt to return to tradition, that there are things that we are not sharing with each other because, oh, those are women's responsibilities, and those are men's responsibilities; women's ceremonies and men's ceremonies; women's teachings and men's teachings, women's circles and... so you can't share that. Men are beginning to follow that and while we had those, it was merely to learn and understand our own role so that when we went out and interacted, we would do so in an appropriate manner.

Certainly there are issues around economics. Despite all of the wonderful heartfelt feelings of sisterhood in the world, our women are still the poorest, still have the poorest health, and still have the shortest life expectancy. In those contexts, I don't know how many more ways you can divide her house and she'll continue to maintain that fire — *but she will!*

O: In addition to all of the responsibilities already talked about, perhaps the most daunting for woman, is her responsibility for the men — how they conduct themselves, how they behave, how they treat her. She has to remind them of *their* responsibilities and she has to know when and how to correct them when they stray from those.

At the beginning, when the "others" first came here, we held our rightful positions in our societies, and held the re-



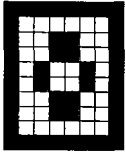
(top) Osenntonion/Marlyn Kane

(centre) Osenntonion/Marlyn Kane (left) and Jean Gleason, president of the Yukon Indian Women's Association, at the Inuit Women's Association Circumpolar Conference, Pond Inlet, 1988

(bottom) Osenntonion/Marlyn Kane staffing conference desk

spect due us by the men, because that's the way things were then, when we were following our ways. At that time, the European woman was considered an appendage to her husband, his possession. Contact with that European male and the imposition of his ways on our people, resulted in our being assimilated into those ways. We forgot our women's responsibilities and the men forgot theirs.

Because the woman is still the one who bears the children, she has not moved all



that far from her original instructions, despite great adversity. The man, on the other hand, is oftentimes virtually helpless in even

attempting to carry out his role as protector/helper, because *his* connection to the natural world has all but been severed. The environment is no longer the same, the lands and its resources are not necessarily there for him anymore. So our men are hurting, they are suffering because they're physically removed, they are locked out; their self-image issues around fulfilling their role cannot be met. The environment in which they have come to exist has caused them to turn to ways that are not particularly appropriate in terms of "helping" forces, alcohol and drugs being the worst of them — the biggest and worst cause of wholesale destruction of our culture that could happen. The woman is responsible for picking that man up and bringing him back to health.

In our Nation, while there is no question that the woman is the central figure in the scheme of things, our official government leaders are still men. That is how our government was given to us, and that is what is in our KAIANERE'KO:WA (great law). They are called ROTIANE, the best translation being "good men." So our leaders, who are more often referred to as "Chiefs," are to be good, upright, men. At this time, only a few of our Nation's nine ROTIANER positions are filled. This is a sign that all is not well in KANIEN'KEHÁ:KA territory, and this too becomes the responsibility of the women, for we have to select and groom the men for these positions. Once they are there, we are also responsible for making sure that they *are* "good men," that they remember that they are to serve the people, and not exercise their responsibilities in

the same manner as those leaders of the "others." A ROTIANER is considered to have been given great and serious *responsibilities* when he assumes the position; he is not considered to be at the top of an hierarchy with authority that is subject to abuse, as on the outside. Again, the women must ensure that her ROTIANER are carrying out their responsibilities or they will see to them being reprimanded and ultimately removed, when necessary.

These positions cannot be confused with the elected "Chiefs" positions as prescribed by the *Indian Act*. Too often we hear men protesting women's attempts to gain these positions by reminding us that, in our ways, the "Chiefs" are men. I, for one, have promoted women becoming involved in the Band Council system, not because I think it is a good one that should be perpetuated, and not because I think there should be "equal" representation of women to men. Rather I believe that women have a responsibility to make sure that we don't lose any more, that we don't do any more damage, while we work on getting our original government system back in good working order.

So, our women have massive responsibilities and therefore a great deal of work to do. Along with that comes the necessity for women to "learn." We must be properly educated in *our ways*, so that we know what we must do, and so we will have the strength to do it.

Feminism and the Feminist Movement

O: Earlier I stated that I did not necessarily consider myself to be a feminist. I feel this way mainly because I have had many occasions to observe the "feminists" at work, and decided that I did not really identify with the behaviours demonstrated, did not like what I saw, and so did not want to be one.

While, in what I now refer to as my past life, I was very actively involved in our movement — the aboriginal women's movement — and so was a fervent advocate for our women, I could never separate my gender from my origin. That is, I never and still do not see myself as strictly

woman. That is because I am a KANIEN'KEHÁ:KA woman. In my experiences, many of our women have been expected to make the separation. We are expected to believe that because we are women, we can automatically share in the sisterhood with other women, regardless of the fact that we may have almost nothing else in common. We are not the only ones who suffer with this expectation. At almost any gathering of women from many origins, one can first notice that there tends to be very, very, few women who are not white. The next thing that one can notice is that these few women tend to gravitate toward each other and tend to make similar statements on the issues at hand.

We attempt to get the "others" to understand that we encounter problems and obstacles that oftentimes go far beyond those that are referred to as "women's issues." We often talk about the rampant racism that continues to flourish in this country and become extremely aware that racism is a very dirty word, especially in Canada, which basks in its international lily-white reputation as the most human and activist of human rights activists. We have found ourselves considered difficult because too many times for the "others" liking, we just could not "go along;" we just could not believe in and uphold the slogan that "Sisterhood is Global." We have even, in some fora, because we actually have stated *our own* positions on *Indian Act* amendments, for instance, been publically confronted by mainstream women's organizations who do not share our views. This *has* happened despite the fact that these "others" claimed to want to

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support us "in the struggle." It has been particularly distasteful to endure such treatment from other women, because they *are* women! We didn't *expect* better from men, so it is not too surprising that *they* perpetuate a paternalistic attitude and approach. On the other hand, we oftentimes cannot distinguish the "female" view from the

“male,” and so we find ourselves having to deal with maternalism, as well as paternalism. In Nairobi, at the Women’s Forum, I was especially appalled with the behaviour of women toward other women, and this at a world event commemorating the U.N. Decade of Women. I left there wondering how far anyone had progressed in ensuring better conditions for women and our families!

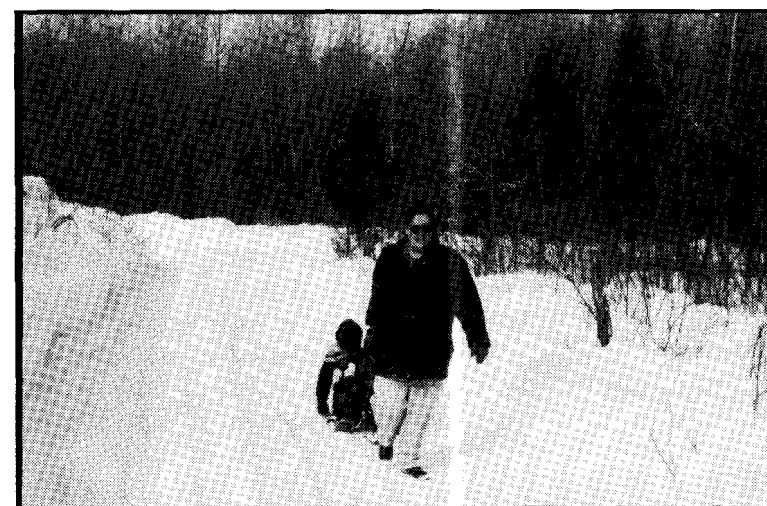
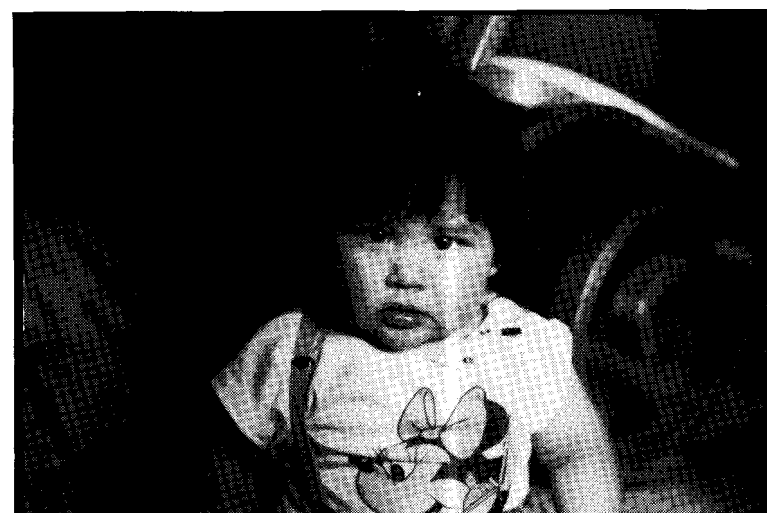
S: I agree we had a hard time with this thing called “feminism” and writing for a “feminist” journal. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* tells me that “feminism” is “advocacy, extended recognition, of the claims of women.” *The New Lexicon Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language*, tells me that it is “the policy, practice or advocacy of political, economic, and social equality for women,” and that a “feminist” is “an advocate of feminism.” While I can read these definitions and comprehend them, I don’t really understand. I understand the nature of being defined as a “feminist,” and wanting some sense of equality, but frankly, I don’t want equality. I want to go back to where women, in aboriginal communities, were complete, where they were beautiful, where they were treated as more than equal — where man was helper and woman was the centre of that environment, that community. So, while I suppose equality is a nice thing and while I suppose we can never go back all the way, I want to make an effort at going back to at least respecting the role that women played in communities.

O: I would at least like to see us have our rightful place back. To me, when these women, who call themselves “feminist” or get called “feminist,” talk about equality, they mean sameness. They appear to want to be the *same* as a man. They want to be treated the same as a man, make the same money as a man... and, they consider all women, regardless of origin, to be the same, to share the same concerns. I, for one, maintain that aboriginal women are *different*, as are the women who are burdened with such labels as immigrant women, or visible minority women. I certainly do not want to be a “man!”

S: The “others” have to start to think differently and they have to look in their own mirror, at their own selves, and their own baggage that they’re carrying and where that came from. They should not look at a universal sisterhood, so much as we should be looking at creating a situation where all people of many colours can peacefully exist. I agree that we all have certain goals that we want out of life, one of which is peace in all of our relationships. However, we cannot have peace in our relationships if we don’t have peace inside ourselves. We can’t have peace inside ourselves if there is no credence or credibility given to the way that we define ourselves.

Leadership

O: In the absence of our *real* leaders, or in too many cases due to ignorance about, or worse, lack of recognition of, our *real* leaders, too many of our people have again gone

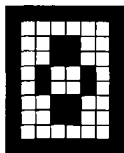


(top) Kanieleason (Erin)

(centre) Sksongénéáho (Lisa)

(bottom) Skonaganleh:rá (Sylvia Maracle) pulling nieces and nephews on toboggan

the way of the "whiteman" and opt for and participate in systems that allow for elected leadership. These "leaders" are the ones who get recognized as the official spokespersons for our people and these are the ones who represent us in so-called "negotiations" with the Federal and Provincial/Territorial Governments, for example.



S: There *are* a lot of people who go out into that system, particularly the elected system, and females and males alike, because of the pressures that are there, because of the shiny objects that government is waving all the time, because of the blown-up image the "Indian" organizations have created for themselves, then end up perpetuating the system. They may come in with wonderful motivation to change things, and instead become part of the system. It is a phenomenon that happens anywhere. It's one that is particularly troublesome to us in the whole context of the way that we are evolving; "self-government" has become one's image of oneself being defined in somebody else's context.

O: I think the major problem with the representation that we have is that the so-called "leaders" do not have an understanding of what "self-determination," or "sovereignty," or "Nationhood" mean. Either they don't have knowledgeable people around to tell them, or they haven't looked, or they *have had* the opportunity to learn, but didn't like what they were told and so chose to ignore it. I suppose the other possibility is that teachings have been misinterpreted and therefore have not been put into practice, *or* have they just *not* understood!

I have great difficulty with all of this, because the teachers that *I* have had the good fortune to meet have passed on rather simple and uncomplicated messages about how things should be done and that they *have* to be done. We have basically been told to get back to our ways before any more is lost. The existing "leadership" does a lot of talking about our peoples' origins and philosophies and laws, but has yet to put these into practice. The existing organizations, from the community Band Councils to national bodies, may have names which suggest that they are "self-

determining," but really they operate in mimicry of the outside organization, which in turn legitimizes them by recognizing them as the "voice of the people."

As far as I am concerned, too often an aboriginal spokesperson or organization is extended recognition and prominence, because it is ultimately convenient to the "others" to do so. This is especially true of the male-dominated organizations, which have always had more funding and they believe more power, but are apparently more easily led into the hands of the foreign governments. For instance, because they have been led to believe that they are a force to contend with: our people enter, totally in good faith most times, I would say, let down their guards, and forget that they are facing an enemy who will agree only to something that is in that enemy's best interests. I remain to be convinced that an outside government system, even with substantial aboriginal representation, *can* and *will* ever do anything that is ultimately in the best interests of *our people*. I think we are seriously kidding ourselves if we believe that this is possible.

Instead, I would feel better if I knew for sure that they were doing these things only as part of a plan or a strategy to foil the enemy while, behind the "front," they were living and working *our ways*, which is the *only* way to go. I know this *not* to be the case. I am not discounting those who have tried, through reorganization or constitutional changes, to conduct themselves in a more appropriate manner. While it is a start and a good one, I have observed that these kinds of changes alone do not necessarily reflect the behaviours of the people involved. We have lots and lots of "members" and "leaders" who are obviously *lost* when it comes to our ways, even though they may be active participants in organizations that espouse the promotion of original values and beliefs.

I am highly critical of organizations that establish Elders Councils or invite Elders to provide guidance and direction to them in the running of their affairs, but then use them to do opening and closing prayers, and that's all. I have witnessed too many

occasions where invited guests have not been taken care of. I have met an Elder in an airport who was not sure where to go and had to rely on an organizational representative, who had had too much to drink on the same flight, to take him to the hotel. I often wondered how these people who invite Elders to their meetings, treat guests to their homes. However, the absolute worst abuse that I have witnessed, is the deliberate attempt by "leaders" to use Elders to get their way.

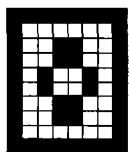
I will never forget my first national meeting, as a delegate, where avowed traditional men and women fed information to the Elders present with the intent to have us, the delegates, adopt their proposals. Because we have been taught to listen to our Elders, the plan would have succeeded, but too many of the Elders and delegates saw through the plan and so it failed, *that time*.

S: I think some of it, though, is also an issue of timing. It's been about twenty-five years that I've been trying, *and only trying*, to find the traditional road, that good red road, that sweetgrass path. It's taken active trying, and it's taken changes that must occur—first, inside the individual: changes in attitude, in the way one presents oneself, even in the way one thinks and feels. There are some things which are given sunlight, and grow, and are legitimized, and there are things that we had to do away with. There have been experiences in both of our short-lived political lives which suggest "window-

"I REMAIN TO BE CONVINCED THAT AN OUTSIDE GOVERNMENT SYSTEM, EVEN WITH SUBSTANTIAL ABORIGINAL REPRESENTATION, CAN AND WILL EVER DO ANYTHING THAT IS ULTIMATELY IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF OUR PEOPLE."

dressing." People are saying "we are changing," and yet we hear the same stories, the same criticisms; we don't hear the kind words. We hear lots about honesty—everyone wants to go out and be honest, but they forget the four directions, the first teachings. Then we are to share, and through the sharing, we will have strength.

It took four hundred years for us to get to the point where we are now. Changes that *you* would like to see cannot have happened this quickly. We, I think, are both very eager to admit that we are young, very young, in our learning, but we've gone to at least look. However, there are people who sit in some circles that we had, or talked about it one time, who suddenly *know*. They added water, mixed, put it into a micro-wave, and now culture can be served. This is not the way it is. This everyday good living that we are looking for starts with the individual, then it goes to the family, then to the clan, and finally it goes to the Nation.



Nowadays, even when we talk, we have other ways that it must go, because we have certain concepts of communities. The political organizations have decided that our communities are "First Nations." There is only one KANIEN'KEHÁ:KA Nation, spread out over seven communities, yet many of those communities now call themselves "First Nations of such and such." So they, too, contribute to dividing our house even further. No longer is there a sense, even amongst our women, KANIEN'KEHÁ:KA women, that we could have a sisterhood, in one community or another. No, we have to have it only within that "First Nation" context, essentially defined by our so-called "leadership," or the organizations, which you have suggested are at the convenience of, and are playing into the hands of, the foreign governments. If we are going to do anything about it, we have to return to "grassroots."

"THE MORE AND MORE THAT WE BUY INTO THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMING AND SERVICING, THE MORE AND MORE WE CONTRIBUTE TO DIVIDING OUR HOUSE."

Best as I know "grassroots" is very clean, very shiny, very humble, it is connected to the earth, it accepts its responsibilities — it's not airport people, airport politicians.

The Future Direction

S: We have got to begin in this process of "self-identification," and again, the only

place we can look is in our past. We can't do that if the woman doesn't go back and pick up those things that were left behind, if the men don't protect us while we're doing that journey, and if everything is being given away in the context of negotiations. The way it has been is that "Indian" people, aboriginal people, "negotiated" and governments "consulted." I think now is the time for aboriginal peoples to "consult" with each other and for governments to begin to "negotiate." In "negotiating," a focus should be "consultation" — true "consultation" — not a giving-away, not a "some win, some lose, some compromise situation." Recognition must be given to the prophecy which says that the ones who would visit here would come to a time when their life was dying and their life was falling apart around them, and they would recognize the wisdom of our ways and our words.

I want to be *awake* when that time comes. I want to be able to remember what is. When they come and knock on our door and say: "we are killing the earth, help us," how can we help? There *are* some helpers, the fire continues to be passed; I see children in my travels throughout Turtle Island who are raised this way. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all the children were growing that way? For them we would be able to turn the time around rather quickly. The reality, I suppose, is that we are becoming very urban, even those who live on the reserves; those in northern and isolated communities have southern and satellite influence and have forgotten to be natural.

That is not to say that we have to turn back the clock and that we can no longer learn from our brothers and sisters across the country. If we are going to learn from them though, if we are going to adopt their ways too, we still have to answer the question, individually, of *who I am*. We still have to make sure our own houses are in order, and if you want to know who is a true traditional person of all of the people who are out there, our Elders and Traditional People have told us that the proof is in the pudding. You look at their family and how they behave; you look at their grandchildren and how they behave; you don't look at what they say, you look at

how they are. Very recently, a Seneca Grandmother told us: "you watch their body, because their body, that 'non-verbal,' doesn't lie; you *do* question what comes out of their mouth."

We've also been told to quit using our heads to think, to start feeling, because when we feel, when we think with our hearts, which was what we were first instructed to do, we tend to at least think about being kind first — not how much money will this cost, can we do it? — but what good will it do? If it will do good, then all of the water, all of the trees, all of the rocks, and all of the earth energy that needs to be applied for that good to come up, *will*. But if we say: "how much does it cost and who has the power, and so-and-so got more than I did," we might as well cover it all with concrete, because what will grow out of there will not be something that will help all of the people.

We have to begin, as aboriginal women, to think about all of our relations, not just ourselves and getting ahead, but all of our relations! How do we do that in the context of there being benefit, there being good, there being this ripple effect of the water, that helps everybody? The more and more that we buy into the government programming and servicing, the more and more we contribute to dividing our house. If we keep letting them divide us so that we have to have an alcohol and drug organization, social service organization, a cultural organization, political organization, etc.... etc..., then we are contributing now to dividing our house.

If we continue to take that approach, that attitude, what will we leave the seventh generation? Through our thoughts, our actions, our words, *today*, we're supposed to be thinking about their well-being. I hope everyone knows, whether they are female or male, that this time that we have, these resources that we have, we are only borrowing from our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren; that they're not ours. We are not motivated the same way as perhaps others are here, to work really, really hard in order to leave a whole bunch of money and vast holdings in property to our children, because we are only borrowing this time that we live in, this place that we live in, from those seven generations who sit

and who watch us and upon whom our thoughts and deeds and actions impact. If in seven generations, they are sitting in council, as children, as young people, as women and men, as Elders and Grandparents, and they're saying: "why did they do this to us, why did they hurry, why did they rush along?" we will be held responsible for not having made the best decisions when we had the chance. Meeting processes do not permit people to stop and wonder: "What am I doing to my children, what am I leaving them?"

I've had conversations with my parents and with my aunts and uncles about why they made decisions they made around our language, around our education, the church, around Children's Aid, around letting people come into our communities to do what they did. They say, *now*, as they are aging: "We thought we were helping, we thought there wasn't anything left. There was no language, there weren't going to be any ceremonies, there weren't going to be all of the things that go into culture — every day good living — and there were other things that we had to do." Most of them seriously regret their decisions now — now that their grandchildren are here. If they had just held on a little longer, perhaps our communities might not be as sick as they are — *and they are sick* — and it seems to me that when somebody is sick in our family, it's usually the woman, it's usually the mother who goes and does the administering to that issue. It seems to me that while we need to be very respectful of the role that everybody plays in the community and we need to be very respectful, in particular, of those responsibilities of men, at the same point in time, we have to get ourselves in gear and start to do some kind of healing. There's a need for aboriginal women to understand that they have to get going — that they are the ones who always have the responsibility when people are sick

in a house, and even when they're not sick. If your children are sick or if your partner is sick, you have got to keep going and it seems to me, that if there's this unhealthiness in our communities, that responsibility also rests with us.

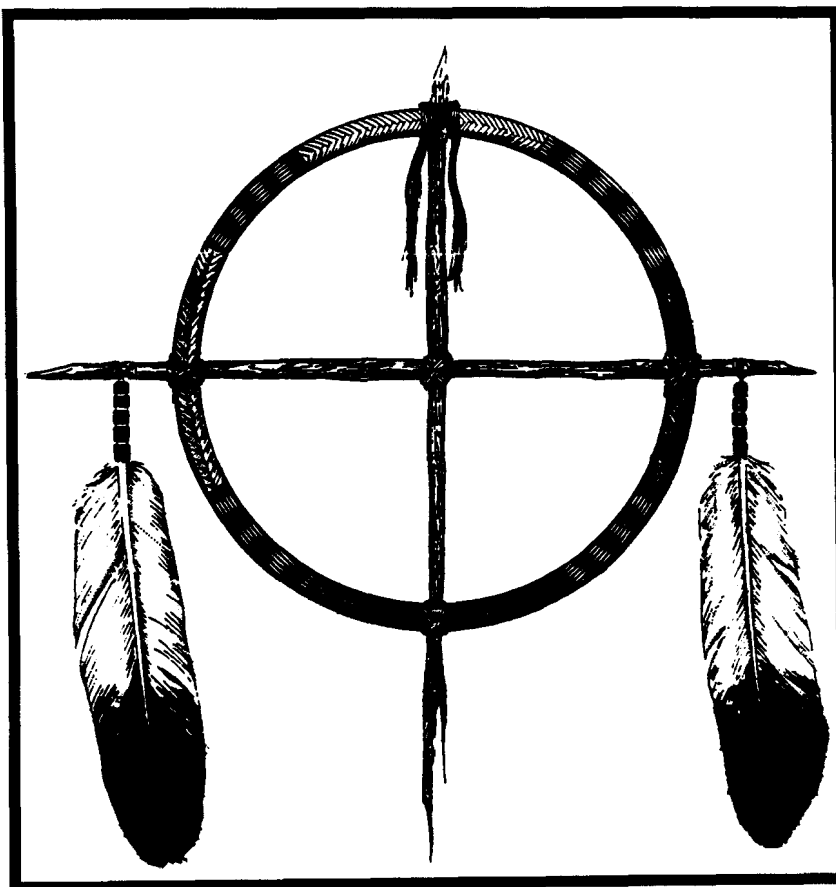
It is necessary for all of us, from the very youngest to the very oldest, in our communities, to recognize the truth that was provided us by the Great Mystery when we were lowered here to Turtle Island. In that medicine wheel, that way of life we were given, that good life, that good mind, is everything we need. Some of it needs to be interpreted into modern concepts, but in interpretation, we must not lose the truth, we must not find ourselves glibly quoting from other dogmas, because those are good words and they seem to fit into the context. We have to remember the truth. We have to go and find it. We have to go and wake up our Elders and our Traditional People, our true teachers, whether they are young or old, and not be so much on our high horse and our ego, so busy pursuing our *per dia*, running off to this meeting, and sitting on that inter-ministerial committee, and having this heavy, heavy title of Grand Chief, leader of all, "don't question me." We have to go to

those people and say: "Tell us, because I've lost my age of learning, my true wisdom of the medicine wheel, and I have come to my time of adoption and borrowing — this from those people and that from that society — and I don't know what's my own anymore."

I can't go and I can not speak with a good mind, in a heartfelt way for the people, if I don't know who I am. We have been taught by Elders and Traditional People that one cannot answer the question who I am? until one knows where s/he comes from, and one can not find where s/he comes from in books, policy/position papers, Robert's Rules of Order. You have to go out and be with your first teacher, your mother, the earth. You have to take off those other clothes, those other glasses that you put on to present yourself to the "other" world, and see what it is that we had.

There are things that are going to change. We are not advocating that things don't change, but we are advocating that we think them through, twice; that we "double understand" as one beloved Elder tells us, before we are going to go in a certain direction. Before we go off to those meetings where our minds get changed, we need to be very firmly rooted in all of the peoples' opinions, not in a democratic process of 50% + 1, but in the minds of all of our people. And if we have to talk about it for five years or ten years before we come to a common mind themselves, then so be it. The quicker we run now, the further apart the moccasin tracks (if there are any left), the further the space for the ones who will come after, and the more we give away.

There need to be councils created where the children, the young people, the men, the women, the Elders, the seniors, the Traditional People in communities, can come together. When they



come together, when you've dropped that rock into that water and the message has been sent out, then we are going to have something to talk about. We will have something — very, very strong seeds that will have been planted, that will make it even harder for the next round of threat and attack in our community, on our society. It will be harder to uproot those as we make them stronger, but it's going to be very easy for that wind of change to blow through if we are planting them in the sky, if we're planting them by typing them on paper — if our relationships are not firmly rooted in where we've come from.

O: What can I add to the teaching that you've just given, but to say that we recognize what the aboriginal woman has done in the face of adversity, and we congratulate her and we encourage her to continue — we don't do this often enough. We must remember that despite all that has happened to us and our people, you and I can still sit here in 1989 and talk about our ways, and about the problems, and about how we would like to see things and that, as far as we are concerned, the solution is to learn our ways: that's where the answers are because we were given it all. We may have screwed up along the way, but we said: "Okay, no more!" We have heard the truth and it is our responsibility to make sure that that truth is not twisted any more; that, in fact, it is shined up, and we had better start relaying that truth. We can't lie any more and we can't hide what we know for the sake of appearances, or to spare people's feelings — we have to tell the truth!

O & S: In closing, we want to say that we realize that perhaps we have given you, the readers, too much; or is it that we haven't given you enough? Either way, we apologize. We trust that we have been able to convey to you that the aboriginal woman has begun to add fuel to the fire that she keeps so that other people can see that fire and can

come themselves to get warm and to get nourished. She sees, too, those "other" fires where she can go for help. We need to look at these things and we need to encourage our own women when they are trying to look at getting healthy in their communities, when they are trying to attack the issues of alcohol and drugs, lack of employment opportunities, lack of real and appropriate education opportunities, and lack of community support mechanisms that had existed prior to us adopting this modern approach to living that has resulted.

We wish to tell all the women to use all of the senses that you have, to keep your eyes open, your ears open, and to not be afraid to touch things in a good way and to embrace new ideas, as well as people who are in need of help. Don't be afraid to speak what you have to say, and to speak from the heart. Use this physical vessel that we were given to really do the work of the people in doing so, maybe there will come a time when we can truly find peace in all of our relationships.

TANETHÓ (We have spoken).



Osenntonion was born and raised in Kahnawake, where she is now living. She is a granddaughter to one remaining grandfather, her parents' eldest and only daughter, the older sister to five brothers, and an aunt to a niece and three nephews, and a relative to many, many others.

In her past life, she has been a student at Bishop's University, an employee of Parks Canada and Indian and Inuit Affairs, a staff-member of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), and an active "mover" in the aboriginal women's movement, from the Ottawa Local of the Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) to the NWAC.

She left that whole scene in the Fall of 1987 and moved "home," where she has become a community activist of sorts. She is a "beginner" when it comes to learning her language and her ways, but she is a strong believer, her entering colour and sacred space being red, which is the colour of faith.

Skonaganleh:rá was born and raised (mostly) at Tyendinaga. She is a granddaughter, daughter, sister, auntie, friend and relative to many. Skonaganleh:rá is a Kaniienkehá:ka woman and was born into the Wolf Clan.

Skonaganleh:rá is a student — of traditional ways: Wolf Clan teachings, medicine wheels, colour teachings and life. She has been involved with the Friendship Centre movement for fifteen years. Skonaganleh:rá has provided advice and support over the years to a number of Native women's organizations. Her work brings her into contact with most spheres of society. She is a reformed and recovering politician.

She is currently employed at the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres as Executive Director.

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