

Huston Smith

IN CONVERSATION WITH NATIVE AMERICANS
ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



A Seat at the Table

Edited and with a Preface by **PHIL COUSINEAU**

"A valuable and insightful book
about a too-long-overlooked topic."

BONNIE RAITT

**NATIVE LANGUAGE,
NATIVE SPIRITUALITY**
FROM CRISIS TO CHALLENGE



Douglas George-Kanentio, 2000. Photograph by Joanne Shenandoah. Used by permission of Joanne Shenandoah.

Douglas George-Kanentiio, Mohawk-Iroquois, was born and raised as one of seventeen brothers and sisters in the Akwesasne Mohawk Territory and is a member of the Bear Clan. He is vigorously involved in many issues surrounding the survival of the Six Nations, including sovereignty, the environment, social problems, land claims, and the revival of tribal languages. He is co-founder of radio CKON, the only native-licensed broadcasting station in North America, co-founder of the Native American Journalists Association, and a member of the board of trustees of the National Museum of the American Indian. George is co-author, with his wife, Joanne Shenandoah, of *Skywoman: Legends of the Iroquois* and author of *Iroquois Culture and Commentary*. They now live in Oneida Territory, in New York.

In the fifth dialogue at the Parliament, Douglas George and his former professor Huston Smith discussed the often bittersweet topic of native languages. As *Whole Earth* magazine reported in spring 2000, “Languages are going extinct twice as fast as mammals; four times as fast as birds.”¹ At the current rate, somewhere in the world a language dies every two weeks. In an issue devoted to vanishing languages *Civilization* magazine reported, “In the 19th century, there were more than 1,000 Indian languages in Brazil, many spoken in small, isolated villages in the rain forest; today there are a mere 200, most of which have never been written down or recorded.”² In 1996 Red Thunder Cloud, the last living fluent speaker of Catawba, a Siouan language, died. There remains only one living speaker of Quileute, eighty-seven-year-old Lillian Pullen, of La Push, Washington. “Of the 6,000 languages still on earth, 90 percent could be gone by 2100,” wrote Rosemarie Ostler in *The Futurist*.³

While some observers regard language loss as inevitable, even desirable, if it lessens ethnic tensions and promotes global communication, most indigenous people view it as a crisis that must be transformed. There must be a collective will to preserve and revitalize the traditional languages. To community activists like Douglas George, language is a symbol of the tribe’s group identity, and the threat to its vitality is a diversity and a human rights issue, as well as a spiritual one. He believes

language to be a spiritual gift, which means its loss can trigger a spiritual crisis in the community. He makes the case that the great web of life is not only biological but also verbal and cultural. To George, rescuing the endangered languages of the world's indigenous peoples is akin to saving their spirit. As George carefully relates, the preservation of the "mother tongues, the languages of the earth," is essential not only for educational purposes but for the very survival of indigenous people.

For Professor Smith, the crisis in languages is directly related to the crisis in religious and political freedom. What all three situations share is the need for minority groups to speak freely. The preservation of one's inherited language, he observes here, is especially key in oral traditions because it is the very safeguard of the community and "increases the capacity to experience the sacred through nonverbal means." Without language, the ability to express or experience one's spiritual life is diminished, so language is a profound religious issue.

We wait in the darkness!
 Come, all ye who listen,
 Help in our night journey:
 Now no sun is shining;
 Now no star is glowing;
 Come show us the pathway:
 The night is not friendly;
 She closes her eyelids;
 The moon has forgot us,
 We wait in the darkness!

**FROM "DARKNESS SONG,"
 AN IROQUOIS INITIATION SONG**

HUSTON SMITH: I cannot be more overjoyed at the prospect of this conversation, because you play a unique role in my life. Before we turn to our topic of native languages, I want to tell the audience what that role is. In my five decades of teaching at Syracuse, you were the only Native American student I have ever had. Never could I have anticipated at that first class meeting what would happen of enduring importance in the course of that semester.

The story, as you may remember, is that during that semester my older brother, Walter, died. One morning at 6:00 A.M., I received a phone call

from my remaining brother informing me that the previous evening Walter had keeled over from a blood clot in his brain. Our class was to meet at 10:00, and I debated about whether to have the departmental secretary go to the classroom and tell the students that the class was canceled. Finally, I decided to hold the class but be up-front about what had happened and ask the students to understand if at times my attention wandered. I wanted them to understand and excuse me if I was a little less coherent than usual.

For the next hour I taught as well as possible and made it through. As I was gathering up my notes I noticed that you were lingering. Without saying a word, you fell in step with me, and we walked together with downcast eyes for about ten minutes. When we arrived at my office you came in. I closed the door. Then you said, "Professor Smith, when something like this happens among our people, we sit together. I'm sorry it happened." With those simple words, you proceeded to sit for twenty minutes with me in my office without saying a word. Then you rose and left the office, closing the door quietly behind you.

I don't have to tell you the impact of your action. It was an experience I shall never forget, and I thank you again for that. So it sent a thrill through me when I discovered we were going to have another hour of learning together.

Turning now to the topic of this hour, native languages, let's begin by your giving us an overview of what the language situation is among the Iroquois.

DOUGLAS GEORGE: I was born in 1955 in a time of great transition within Iroquois society. I was actually raised on the Canadian side of what is the only reservation in North America that actually straddles the border. [The Blackfeet Reservation, in Montana, also shares an American and Canadian border.] In our history we have experienced times when the very foundations of our lives have been shaken. The 1950s were one of those times.

Specifically, I was born in those times and was raised among the Mohawk people. Mohawk is one of the Six Nations that also include the Onondagas, the Tuscaroras, the Oneidas, the Senecas, and the Cayugas. Our homeland is what is now central New York State. At time of contact, in the year 1492, we estimate there were a quarter million Iroquois living on those native lands. Currently there are around 80,000 Iroquois people, the majority of whom live on the Canadian side of the border. That is because after the American Revolution, many of our people felt

they owed a deep allegiance to the British Crown. They were somewhat apprehensive about the reaction of the Americans to the victory and elected to fulfill their treaty obligations and live close to the British.

When I was born, there was virtually complete knowledge and fluency of the Mohawk language among the adult population. After the Second World War there was a move by the Iroquois to become wage earners. They were displaced from their aboriginal territories, especially the Mohawks. With the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway and various other capital works projects by the state of New York and the U.S. federal government, our people were displaced from the land. When that happened the adult population realized that their children had to be prepared to earn a wage, whereas formerly we could exist by extracting natural resources from the land and the river. That was no longer the case. Their children had to be prepared to compete in a job market, in a capitalistic system. A conscious decision was made by the adult population that their children would be educated, instructed, and taught to think in the English language. The Mohawk language was by and large abandoned, and we experienced a great break among the generations, a break we are still feeling the effects of. You could almost say to a given year when that break happened. For us it has created a tremendous amount of internal trauma.

SMITH: So within one generation you have endured a slippage from virtually 100 percent knowledge of your language to 25 percent. My, oh, my, what a tragic loss for any period of time, but to think that it happened in one generation—

GEORGE: Yes, the estimate among the Mohawks is that fluent Mohawk speakers make up approximately one-quarter of our population. Among the Iroquois, we have the most Iroquois speakers existing in the Mohawk nation. In other Iroquois nations the situation is even graver than that in our communities.

I think what needs to be emphasized is that at the time of contact with the Europeans there were upward of roughly six hundred languages spoken in North America by 30 million people. A hundred years ago the native population of North America had dwindled to about 170,000. As for the current situation, I believe we have about 157 languages that are still spoken. However, the majority of those languages are spoken by people entering their elder years. There have been moves by native communities to restore language. There has been legislation passed on a national level in the United States to make funds and resources available

to help us recover from former government mistakes when they outlawed languages, to make means available to those native groups who still want to retain their language. That is a most admirable thing.⁴

There is one Mohawk teacher who has had an international impact because she designed a curriculum under which some Mohawk students are currently learning about the world through Mohawk eyes. Her name is Dorothy Lazar, a former nun in a Catholic tradition, who put aside her orders and now devotes all her time to teaching ways to retain Mohawk language. She is a remarkable person. A very humble, very nice, wonderful person. That curriculum is being replicated among the Maori in New Zealand and among the native Hawaiians in Hawaii. There are tangible, creative responses to the situation we are in. But I cannot emphasize enough that the teaching of our elders, passed on to each one of us and delivered here now, is that if native people lose their connection with the natural world, then the world itself is lost. That is the situation we are faced with now.

SMITH: You indicated the cause of the tragic loss of language among your people. Now, what do you see as the cost of losing that particular world?

GEORGE: My own experience is the best way to tell it. When I was a fairly young boy I was taken away from the reservation. The Canadian government decided that I was going to be their ward. Like literally thousands of other native children I was put into an institution, a very sterile institution where the very last vestiges of native language were eradicated from the minds of the children. That was probably the most odious and reprehensible act that the government engaged in, the actual displacement of our children.⁵

These children were taken away from the nurturing and loving atmosphere of their own communities and put in these institutions, where they were overseen by people who were, if nothing else, rigid and brutal. You will see that among native people, time and time again. They will give you heartrending testimony of what happened to them when they were taken away from their families, even when those families might have been in a state of crisis, and put into these institutions.

If there was one act initiated by the United States and Canada that was meant to finally eradicate native people by destroying their spirit, that was it. This singular act of removing children by design, by federal policy, from their homes to institutions that were nothing short of penal colonies, laid them wide open to substance abuse.

That is one of the things I went through. If there is anything that

stamped out the last vestiges of pride in our ancestry, it was the way our children were put into these schools. This is not an exaggeration. It's a highly emotional issue for Indians who have gone through this. The removal of our children was the primary cause of the destruction of our native language.

SMITH: You have written that the learning of your mother tongue was actually discouraged by the elders for a time because they thought that it might interfere with their assimilation. That's a heartbreaking story. How do people recover from such a cultural calamity as convincing parents that it is in their children's interest to be raised in a whole other tradition?

GEORGE: One of the most amazing, most beautiful, and most heartening things about the Iroquois people is how much we have retained when it comes to our ancestral values, when it comes to our ancient ceremonial activities. We still practice an elaborate set of rituals that follow the lunar phases of the moon. We are pleased to say that among all native peoples in North America, despite the enormous loss of language, our people are still holding on to those things that make us indigenous people.

SMITH: And in those rituals is the language native?

GEORGE: Yes. It has to be. We are taught that native language, the Iroquois language, was developed and born in the land in which we find ourselves. We are taught that it is the language of the Earth. It is the language in which we communicate with the natural world. When our spiritual leaders, our political leaders—they are one and the same—when they gather together, regardless of whether it is a social event, a national meeting, or a ceremony, they have to speak very specific words of thanksgiving. It's called the opening address, or "Thanksgiving Prayer." During the course of this prayer they acknowledge the different elements of Creation, beginning with Mother Earth and going on to the waters, the insects, the plants, the trees, the winds, our grandmother moon, the human

THE SACRED WORD

A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred.

N. SCOTT MOMADAY, *THE WAY TO RAINY MOUNTAIN*, 1969

A THANKSGIVING PRAYER FROM THE IROQUOIS (SENECA) PEOPLE

Gwa! Gwa!
Now the time has come!
Hear us, Lord of the Sky!
We are here to speak the truth,
For you do not hear lies.
We are your children, Lord of the Sky.

Now begins the Gayant gogwus.
This sacred fire and sacred tobacco
And through this smoke
We offer our prayers.
We are your children, Lord of the Sky.

Now in the beginning of all things
You provided that we inherit your creation.
You said: I shall make the earth
On which the people shall live.
And they shall look to the earth as their mother.
And they shall say, "It is she who supports us."
You said that we should always be thankful
For our earth and for each other.
So it is that we are gathered here.
We are your children, Lord of the Sky.

Now again the smoke rises
And again we offer prayers
You said that food should be placed beside us
And it should be ours in exchange for our labor.
You thought that ours should be a world
Where green grass of many kinds should grow
You said that some should be medicines
And that one should be Ona'ō
The sacred food, our sister corn
You gave to her two clinging sisters
Beautiful Oa'geta, our sister beans
And bountiful Nyo'sowane, our sister squash
The three sacred sisters, they who sustain us.

This is what you thought, Lord of the Sky.
Thus did you think to provide for us
And you ordered that when the warm season comes
That we should see the return of life
And remember you, and be thankful,
And gather here by the sacred fire.
So now again the smoke arises
We the people offer our prayers
We speak to you the rising smoke
We are thankful, Lord of the Sky.

leaders, our elders. They go through this in order to put our minds into a kind of collective spiritual state, and they have to do this in a native language, because we are told that is the means by which we can effectively communicate with the natural world. If we don't have that language, then we can no longer talk to the elements. We no longer can address the winds. We no longer can address the natural world, the animal species. If we fail to do that, if there is some time in our history when we lose that ability, then the balance is upset between humans and nature, and there will be an attendant and possibly a violent reaction.

SMITH: I'll put on my historian of religions cap for a moment. I'm thinking of a parallel in Islam. You mentioned that in your rituals the native language has to be used. So too in the *Sala*, the prayers, even though most Muslims do not know Arabic, those prayers must be said in Arabic, so everybody knows those. That's the similarity. But the difference is that Muslims relate to the language as the language of the divine, of Allah, so the language brings them closer to God. Whereas for you your language is related to the elements of the Earth, and you cannot be effectively bonded, or thoroughly bonded, without that.

GEORGE: We are taught that language is essential in the spiritual world as well as the physical world. The Iroquois believe this is one of an infinite number of spiritual dimensions, and we are meant to extract certain lessons from our time on this Earth. When our time is completed, we are sent on a journey back to the Creator, and the shell of who we are returns to Mother Earth because it was a gift from Mother Earth. But the spirit—the *spark of our being*—goes on a journey back to the Creator escorted by our relatives.

Now, one of the reasons that the Iroquois are greatly apprehensive about the loss of our language is that when we make that transition, when we die on this level, our spirit goes to the next level of existence. We have to be greeted by our relatives, our ancestors, and if they can't speak to us, if we don't know their language, then we are going to be trapped between two worlds, and if that happens it is going to be a great despair for our people.

BEYOND THE CRISIS

SMITH: What can be done, what is being done, about the crisis in native languages? Have you passed the point of no return, or are there ways to turn the situation around?

GEORGE: What I like about being a member of the Six Nations Confederacy, especially the Mohawks, is that whenever there is a crisis we respond by organizing. We will meet the challenge. Many things have weakened us as a people, but we still hold on to those things that define us before the eyes of the Creator and the natural world. This threat of losing our language was one such challenge.

We who belong to the generation born after the Second World War were confronted by this break when we no longer could hear the words as they had been passed down over thousands of years. That's when we decided we would take firm and decisive steps to try to counter the loss of language.

It is, of course, very difficult. In my home community there are nine thousand residents. Of that population, which is expanding very quickly, I would say that at least half is of the age to obtain formal education. Our people decided to respond to this acculturation to educational systems that are not of our own design by designing and creating our own school system. We decided to design our own curriculums in four of our communities, and those curriculums would be taught in a Mohawk language. We would go even further than that. We would offer complete immersion in the Mohawk language from kindergarten to grade six.

SMITH: It is thrilling to hear of your attempts to revive your language for reasons that supersede the requirements of state education. In my understanding the oral tradition safeguards the community. Tribally speaking, the maintenance of one's inherited language increases the capacity to experience the sacred through nonverbal means. To do that, though, you need to maintain control of your very means of communication, which is your language.

GEORGE: One characteristic of Iroquois leaders, from when our confederacy was formed to the present, is our love of communication. We are instructed to carry our experiences as individuals and as representatives of our respective nations throughout the world, and we have done that aggressively. We are not comfortable being passive victims of any situation; we like to take charge. A generation ago the Mohawk people realized the overwhelming power of the media, the printed media and the visual and audio media, in creating impressions that people had of who we were. Those impressions were easily and readily converted into political action, so we decided we would start our own newspaper. Rather than relying on outside media, we would take over that

thing in accordance with our traditional beliefs, and we would become journalists.

Our radio station does not have an American or Canadian license the way all broadcast stations are supposed to. It was meant to tell people, “This is who we are as Mohawks, we are communicating with you,” and also to provide the listeners with various forms of native entertainment.

So the media is a mixed blessing for us. We do try to tailor it to fit our specific needs. Just this past October in Canada, several of our nations banded together and formed the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. We just decided, okay, the media is here. We have to deal with it, so let’s do it in a creative way, a way that enhances who we are as a people, and at the same time communicates the best of who we are to our neighbors. That is the guiding philosophy of the Iroquois. We try to find tangible ways by which we may live in peace and harmony with all that is around us. So we went into the media deliberately; we did so because we realized that is the basis on which people make decisions regarding our future, either internally or externally.

SMITH: Isn’t that happening among the Onondaga? Aren’t you trying to encourage the learning of the spiritual dimension of language?

GEORGE: Yes, the Onondaga are beginning to do that. One of the problems we have experienced in implementing these creative responses to this crisis is that there has been an endless series of political problems with the Iroquois as we try to aggressively defend our rights as independent peoples. We are not Americans, and we are not Canadians. So as we try to expand our internal economies we meet resistance either from the federal governments or the state agencies, or in some cases our own

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE FIVE NATIONS

In all your deliberations in the Council, in your efforts at lawmaking, in all your official acts, self-interest shall be cast into oblivion. Cast not away the warnings of any others, if they should chide you for any error or wrong you may do, but return to the way of the Great Law, which is just and right. Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the earth—the unborn of the future Nation.

FROM THE CONSTITUTION OF THE FIVE NATIONS,
OR THE IROQUOIS BOOK OF THE GREAT LAW, 1916

people, who have recently developed different opinions about the direction of the Iroquois society. Whenever we stray into this crisis mode we have to put out the fires directly in front of us. Every year that we are involved in these political struggles is another year when another elder has passed on.

That's another reason that our children have not had access to their language when they have needed it to live in harmony with themselves, needed it to maintain and perpetuate the best of who they are. But we are trying. We do offer these schools that are designed with a curriculum to state Iroquois philosophy. We have something called an opening prayer in which we address Mother Earth. We designed a curriculum, again totally in Mohawk, to follow that circular type of spiritual value. The children learn science in the context of the opening prayer. They learn mathematics; they learn contemporary issues. They learn grammar in Mohawk. The hope is that at the conclusion of their term they will think in Mohawk, and they will be able to address, once again, their elders and the natural world in the language they should have been born into.

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF LANGUAGE

SMITH: A distinctive and very important feature of the oral tradition and of song is that the feeling among native peoples that sacred teachings are really too precious to be committed to impersonal, frozen, static writing. Religious education should come from the older generation telling the myths and the stories. Is that the case with the Iroquois? I'm thinking about your fundamental philosophy about the relationship between religion and language. But I'm still a little perplexed about how the loss of language, no matter how tragic, is a *religious* dilemma.

GEORGE: Certainly. One of the things that the first visitors from the East would remark on is the manner in which our children were taught. We didn't have a formal education system, meaning that our children were not pooled together in a rigid classroom structure. They learned by emulating their elders, by being with their elders. When it comes to things that were essential to our *collective* well-being, like music, education was associated with being with the person who knew that song, and then learning that song simply by memory. We were always told that our oral traditions are collective memories that are passed down by certain people who have the gift of retention. These are people who can mem-

orize things to a most amazing degree. This is an absolute truth in Iroquois society, because these people cannot misinterpret, they cannot lie, they cannot willfully tell us something that simply isn't true.

This is why there is a complete reliance by the Iroquois on the stories, the experiences of our elders as passed on over generations. I'll give you one example. Around eight hundred years ago, a governing set of rules was given to the Iroquois by a prophet we call "Skennenrarwarring," which means "the Peacemaker" or "He is making peace." He established a confederacy as the world's first truly democratic institution that recognized the inherent rights of people to govern themselves. He also acknowledged the biological right of women to take an active role in the determination of public affairs.

The Creator made it to be this way. An old woman shall be as a child again and her grandchildren shall care for her. For only because she is, they are.

HANDSOME LAKE (SENECA), CA. 1735–1815

SMITH: Now, is he different from Handsome Lake?

GEORGE: Yes, he is the predecessor to Handsome Lake, the Seneca chief who received what we call the "Great Law of Peace" from the Peacemaker. That tradition, the intricacy of this great law, was given to people who had the intellectual capacity to memorize that very elaborate structure, and they passed it on over the generations for eight hundred years in an unbroken line to the present.

TRADITIONAL INDIAN LAW

Among the Indians there have been no written laws. Customs handed down from generation to generation have been the only laws to guide them. Every one might act different from what was considered right did he choose to do so, but such acts would bring upon him the censure of the Nation. . . . This fear of the Nation's censure acted as a mighty band, binding all in one social, honorable compact.

GEORGE COPWAY (KAH-GE-GA-BOWH), OJIBWAY CHIEF, 1818–1863

That original law, the Great Law of Peace, was meant for all humankind. It was supplemented, in 1799, by “Skananiateriio,” which translates to “Good Water,” “Nice Lake,” or “Handsome Lake.” He came to us and gave us a set of moral codes in a time of great stress, similar to what we are experiencing now.

Those moral codes were to guide us through the treacherous period when we would have to live next to and sometimes be overwhelmed by our European guests. That tradition is passed on. Both these sets of rules that define Iroquois society are given every year at certain times when people gather together and are able to hear these things from our speakers.

SMITH: This entire conversation is about the relationship between language and meaning. You came very close to making that link when you said that language determines how you think. The question for linguists is whether you can think the same thoughts if you are using different languages. I happened to be a colleague at MIT of Noam Chomsky. I asked him about this, and he said he did not think that there is any thought in one language that cannot be translated into another, though it may take longer to say it in the other language. I am not sure I believe him because of this intimate relationship between language and thought. I happen to have grown up in China, so I had a problem similar to yours. I will share it because it’s really a way to pave the way for you to give an example of a thought that you really can’t put into English. My example was when the American, President Nance, of Soochow University (now Suzho) was away on business, and the Chinese dean of the university had to chair a faculty meeting.

Well, while the cat is away the mice will play. The absence of President Nance gave the faculty an opportunity to air their complaints about the president, and this put the dean in the luckless position of having to defend him against their complaints. My father (who was teaching English at the university while he was learning Chinese) told me that there came a point in the meeting when the dean said that the president was not “devious,” which is “*dyao be*” in Chinese. But *dyao be* has a subtlety that I don’t find in English. As a gesture to the faculty, he conceded that he was a little. . . . He paused as he searched for the Chinese word for the quality he was trying to describe, finally gave up, and asked my father for the Chinese equivalent of *bullheaded*. My father thought for a moment or two and then said, “There isn’t any.”

Speaking for myself now, there just isn’t a word in Chinese for that de-

gree of confrontational stubbornness that is impounded in the word *bull-headed*. You can search the length and the breadth of Chinese, and you will not get a word that has that sense of challenge and defiance. This is my prelude, Doug, to asking you if you can think of an equivalent in your language in which meaning is tied this tightly to native language.

GEORGE: During our times of recent crisis in a couple of our Mohawk communities, there was a group of people that decided they were going to apply the best of our spiritual disciplines to try to secure peace. They formed a group and called themselves a “Mohawk *Kanekenriio*,” which roughly in English means “a good mind.” But it means more than that. I don’t think there is an English translation for the word. To the Mohawks, it means a person who is dedicated to using the best of who they are to reach that state of peace that would allow them to secure and restore tranquility to a community. To them that meant the best of who the Iroquois people were, not passive people, but people who actively use the powers of persuasion, patience, tolerance, and love to restore harmony to the community.

SMITH: That’s a beautiful example.

THE GENIUS OF THE ORAL TRADITIONS

SMITH: Let’s get back to this whole idea of a tradition that is transmitted exclusively through oral means. Our culture considers that a limitation, a handicap.

GEORGE: Yes, it is difficult for you to grasp our thoughts on this matter. We are told repeatedly by our elders that perhaps more should have been done to retain our language. I think they realize, in retrospect, that had we done so, we might have less of a break between the generations, and that we have to act quickly in order to recover from this.

The Iroquois starts by respecting and abiding by what our ancestors did and what your ancestors did, meaning upholding the treaties. That is the essence of respect. Abide by your constitution. Abide by the words of your ancestors. If we can do that, then I think reconciliation is possible. But without the acknowledgment that you have that agreement, that in fact it is a supreme law of your country, everything else is secondary and almost without power. For the Iroquois it starts with respecting and honoring your treaty commitments with the native peoples.

**There was a time when words were like magic.
 The human mind had mysterious powers.
 A word spoken by chance
 Might have strange consequences . . .
 Nobody could explain this:
 That's the way it was.**

INUIT SAYING

Within our longhouse, we dissuade people from using the written language. We feel that if people are writing it down, then they are retaining it in their heads, not in their hearts. So within the traditional teachings, the way we pass on traditional values is by memory. We are very reluctant to put things in writing because then it is subject to misinterpretation, and it doesn't have the same spirit, the same enthusiasm, the same emotion and passion as it does when you are learning directly from someone who has committed it to memory. There is a lot written about the Iroquois, probably more so than about any other native group in North America. But to get the true essence of who we are, you would have to spend a considerable amount of time listening to the rhythms of speech, to our teachers.

THE GREAT CULTURAL DIVIDE

SMITH: I think of Hebrew and how much the Jews identify their religion with their language. Hebrew, with its canonical prayers, is to them a sacred language. Christianity has no canonical language, although it used to have the liturgical language of Latin. That's gone, and now you can pray in any language you want. But that's not so for the Arabs, or the Jews, for whom the canonical prayers must be said in Hebrew. Now you have a similar situation to yours in the State of Israel, where it's more under their autonomy and they have revived Hebrew as a living language. That is your objective but under more difficult circumstances.

GEORGE: I understand exactly what you are saying. Here is the *fundamental division* between the Iroquois and the Christians. It is that we believe the Creator speaks through all the natural elements. We don't worship the different forms of Creation. We realize that the Creator speaks through those elements of Creation. We realize that life is fundamentally good, that we are given all the blessings to enjoy this Cre-

ation, and that we have to act as custodians. We believe in an infinite number of Creators, not just a singular God, that when we return to our spiritual world, it is not a time of trauma for us but one of great release. Our primary role on this Earth as human beings is to act as custodians and to extract whatever beauty from this world will enable us to return to the Creator in peace and harmony. That is our fundamental philosophy. But along with that is the question of whether or not we can actually call ourselves spiritual without access to language.

When I said that the Iroquois language is the language of the Earth I meant that it is essential to the physical well-being of our people. We rely on a whole series of plants and herbs to effect good health for our people. We are told that when you approach that plant to release its healing powers you have to do it in a native language, in an Iroquois language. The plant responds to that language and releases its healing power. Can you actually maintain these elaborate ceremonies without Iroquois language? My personal belief is that you can't. You have to be able to speak to the spiritual beings when you ask them to join us, and when they do join us during these collective rituals, you have to be able to speak the language. And if you have our spiritual beings entering into our ceremonial building and trying to dance with us, trying to speak to us through dreams, and trying to eat with us, but we can't communicate with them, then the power of that ritual is negated. That is a situation we are confronted with right now.

SMITH: We are having this conversation during the Parliament of World Religions, and part of our responsibility is to face some mistakes, some sins of the past. Has the Christian community, I'm thinking of missionaries, made your problem more difficult?

GEORGE: Oddly enough, within our community, there has been a real distinction between the Protestant and Catholic sects of Christianity. By and large the Protestants were the most in favor of integration, the people who put their language and their culture first.

SMITH: You can say that out loud. I'm a Protestant, and I have witnessed that very much. But first let me just complete this thought. Years ago, I went to Alaska and came to know the tribes up there, the Eskimo or Inuit, who were converted by the Russian Orthodox missionaries. But when the Protestant missionaries came, their treatment was in marked contrast to that of the Russian Orthodox—who adapted and enfolded the native traditions and *included* the native religions within their

Christianity—whereas the Methodists put them in business suits and ties and things like that.

GEORGE: That's true. You can actually see the physical distinction between the Catholic Mohawks and the Protestant Mohawks. The Protestant Mohawks were more capitalist oriented and more attuned to the styles of the day, and the Catholics were just a little more frayed around the edges. I was actually raised a Roman Catholic, and in the church that I went to—I lived within the shadow of the Roman Catholic Church—was a Jesuit mission. Until recently, it was one of the only Jesuit missions left in North America, and they still—even after three hundred years—have not given up the idea that they are going to convert the Mohawks. Our people seem to have a particular fascination with the Jesuits. Our experience initially in the early 1600s was less than pleasant, and we wound up executing a few of them, and they never quite forgave us for that. So when I went to church, what the Catholics did is rather than

THE NATIVE AMERICAN PROPHECY

Being asked to sing at the opening of the Parliament of World Religions was indeed an honor. I was there representing other native people across America, but also to bring the beautiful message of our “prophecy.” That song says we are to awake and stand up and be counted, for we are being recognized in the spiritual world. Certainly all religions have that in common.

Looking back at the Parliament and my experiences in South Africa, I think about the beauty of the land, the beauty in the souls that we met, and the beauty of the messages, which were so simple but profound. Especially when it came to comparing cultures and religions, ah, there were so many similarities.

One of my favorite memories was being on the hillside listening to the Dalai Lama talk about how we are responsible for ourselves and for our families and for our nations. It made me think that's what that song was all about. To hear that in such a simple and beautiful way just verified for me that we were on the right path, we were thinking along the same lines. And not necessarily just for me, but all the native peoples of America.

It's a beautiful message that no matter where we come from, no matter what age or race or religion, we all have a right and responsibility on this Earth. To do that through music is a very beautiful thing for me. It's like the birds have their responsibility to sing, and the stars and the moon and the sun, they shine; the wind blows, everyone has been given a special gift. Singing is mine.

JOANNE SHENANDOAH, GRAMMY AWARD-NOMINATED
SINGER, WIFE OF DOUGLAS GEORGE-KANENTIIIO, 2001

overwhelming the Mohawk culture by preaching, or using their enormous powers of persuasion that we know the Jesuits have to convert us to speaking French, they learned Mohawk.

They adapted to a considerable degree to the norms of society. When I was a child, there were only two languages spoken in our Catholic Church. I was an altar boy. We would speak Latin during the mass, and the priest, who was a Mohawk and a Jesuit, a very fine orator, would speak in Mohawk and would be very adamant in his condemnation of the traditional practices, the longhouse rituals. But nonetheless he kept up that language within the church. It was the church that kept this really amazing set of records in the Mohawk language that our people now turn to when they want to follow the trail of their ancestors or find the names that were used when our children were brought into the world.

So in an odd way the church can help us recover some of our ancestral beliefs. To me that is an amazing thing. But certainly the Catholic Church has been a kind of mixed blessing for us.

THE SPIRITUAL TEACHING OF CHILDREN

SMITH: I would like to speak about the religious life of children. I might begin by describing something that happened when we took our trip to Robben Island, outside Cape Town, and were shown the prison cell where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated for seventeen years, out of his total of twenty-seven years in prison. Our guide, Mr. Kathrada, who was imprisoned with him for about sixteen of those years, told us that what he missed most was *children*. He said that they never saw them because children were not even permitted to come in. The spouses were allowed to visit, maybe twice a year, but children never. Now, when we speak of children, of course language is so integral to their growth. Have you any thoughts about the relation of the language issue to the raising of children?

GEORGE: Yes, of course. The primary means of transferring cultural information, history, and communal norms, within Iroquois society, does not happen necessarily between the child and the child's biological parents. It happens because we are a collective. When a child is born into a clan, he or she is born into an extended family. That child learns primarily from the elders, and it's the elders who are entrusted with actually giving the children instructions. They are the ones to pass on the information that is vital to the well-being of our people.

When that connection is broken, as it has been over the last forty years,

then we experience a great deal of internal trauma. That child is left to its own devices, at the mercy of the Western media, which in our communities is overwhelmingly powerful in teaching them how to dress, how to act, and how to be. That's one of the great traumas that the Iroquois people are facing today. We need to find and reestablish that connection between the elders and the children when our children are brought into this world. We consider every child a gift from the Creator. When they are given a name before the people, the name is taken from the clan, and that name might very well be two or three thousand years old.

SMITH: I have known you now for some three decades, but I must confess I do not know your Iroquois name. Can you tell us?

GEORGE: My Iroquois name is "Gunadeo." The name comes from the Mohawk Bear Clan. The Mohawks have three clans: the bears, the wolves, and the turtles. Whenever a person has a name that is associated with water, he's a turtle. Whenever they have a name associated with the sky world, the stars, or the sun, that's the Wolf Clan. And because the nature of the bear in the natural world is that of a creator that moves about in plants and digs in trees, anything to do with plants and trees are Bear Clan names.

When our children are brought before the people within the longhouse, they are carried to the center of the floor. There is a song that goes with them as the chief and the clan mother bring that child before the people. They go in a circle, counterclockwise—the way the Earth moves—and they present that child to the spiritual world, and to all the people who are assembled, and they give that child their clan name. That child will carry that name from that time until they leave the world, at which time that name reverts back to the clan.

SMITH: I respect your philosophy of moving, through sheer willpower, from crisis to challenge.

GEORGE: With the Iroquois we are trying to do things like have retreats that would allow the children to be removed from the demands and pressures of reservation life. Reservation life is not something that is idealistic by any means. It can be a very bitter experience for a lot of children, but to have places where people can actually physically remove to can effect some kind of healing. We have initiated some very creative approaches to childhood trauma as a result of language displacement. We have psychological training programs, we have people who are cer-

tified counselors in our Iroquois tradition, to respond to the needs of the children, but it can't be just the children. The children are just an extension of the experiences of their community.

So the community needs healing, and one of the serious problems we have had is that the outside world won't leave us alone long enough for us to heal. The Iroquois are always being challenged by external forces that want to tear us apart. These forces don't want an identifiable, secure, strong native community in their midst. This battle is going on now in the state of New York. We have the federal government and various other public groups that are demanding an end to this thing called the Iroquois. It is very dangerous, and it could become an actual physical threat to our survival. That is the situation we are in now. What we need most is something that I have never known in my life, and that is, a few years when we don't have to deal with crisis, when we can just devote ourselves to responding to the needs of our children and healing those wounds.

SMITH: Douglas, what has been the greatest benefit, for Native Americans, that has emerged out of the Parliament?

GEORGE: One of the most important things to come out of the Parliament is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission organized by Bishop Tutu and President Mandela. It shows us how we can apply that profound act of forgiveness in our own Iroquois territory, because we have experienced things that are similar to the trauma South Africa went through. We have had a difficult time reconciling the different elements within our society.

In our Iroquois Confederacy we are trying to find appropriate ways to reach forgiveness. One of the most important aspects of our spirituality is the collective act of forgiveness.

I personally have a great deal of hope for the Iroquois, because we are a very creative people. Although we might be diminished in terms of our language and other aspects of our culture, I've seen the dawn of a new century in which people are pooling their resources. There are so many lights of hope; there's still a tenaciousness, almost beyond reason. That's why I have every reason to believe that our Iroquois people will survive and prevail as distinct political and cultural entities.

SMITH: As you know, I have been working on a book about why religion matters in the modern world. I believe it matters because only religion provides us with a sense of meaning and purpose and allows us access to transcendence, the loss of which is a terrible blow to the modern

world. So let me ask you, Douglas, why does it still matter to you, to the Iroquois?

GEORGE: Religion matters because it's religion that connects us to the divine. As Iroquois people we are taught that we live in a world that is but one part of an infinite number of dimensions. It is our spiritual disciplines, our collective rituals, our thanksgiving rituals that allow us to live in a state of peace and harmony on this dimension and that prepare us for that journey along the stars when we leave the Earth and return to the Creator. It's our sense of spirituality that I think is essential to our survival, because it establishes a certain and very important relationship between the human species and the other forms of life on this planet. It's through our spiritual values that we are sympathetic and have some degree of understanding of our place in the world. Religion gives us a sense of direction, a sense of being. It gives us morals and values. In an ideal sense it establishes the principles on which we govern ourselves, and so it is one of the miracles of Iroquois society.

Finally, I think that when everything else begins to retreat in a state of chaos, as has been foretold by our elders, it will be religion and our spiritual values that will provide us with the stability that we will need to survive.

SMITH: Of course, I don't know you well enough to say this with any confidence, but as you were describing the characteristics of the Bear Clan I could see you, Douglas, as having fit into that mode. We wish you the best.