

SOME THOUGHTS FOR THE OTTAWA HERITAGE RIVER PROJECT

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By William Commanda, Algonquin Elder

MY PEOPLE ARE THE MAMIWININI; WE COMPRISE THE 84 ALGONQUIN NATIONS WHO WERE ONCE NOMADS, AND WE TRAVELLED ACROSS TURTLE ISLAND, THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTINENT, AS ITS CARETAKERS.

WE KNEW THE WATERWAYS AND LANDS AND MOUNTAINS INTIMATELY, AND THAT IS HOW WE KNEW THAT THIS WAS A TURTLE SHAPED ISLAND.

WE DREW MAPS FOR EACH OTHER ON BIRCH BARK, AND LATER, SOLDIERS COPIED THIS IDEA.

THE BIRCH TREE GAVE US MATERIALS TO BUILD OUR CANOES TO TRAVEL ACROSS THE LAND; SADLY, BECAUSE OF THE RELENTLESS CREEK CUTTING AND BECAUSE THE FEW REMAINING TREES NO LONGER GROW BIG ENOUGH WE CANNOT CONTINUE TO CREATE THE GREATEST GIFT OUR ANCESTORS OFFERED THIS NATION – THE CANOE.

WE TAUGHT THE EXPLORERS AND FUR TRADERS THE ROUTES INTO THE CONTINENT.

BUT MY ANCESTORS COULD NOT HAVE ANTICIPATED THE EXTENT OF THE ENSUING EXPLOITATION OF THE LAND AND HER PLANT, ANIMAL AND HUMAN LIFE.

WE DID NOT BELIEVE WE COULD OWN MOTHER EARTH; RATHER, WE BELONGED TO HER. SHE TAUGHT US THE VALUES OF GENEROSITY AND SHARING, AND THIS IS HOW WE RESPONDED TO THE NEW COMERS.

BUT, BECAUSE THEIR VALUES WERE SO DIFFERENT, WE WERE GRADUALLY ROBBED, IMPOVERISHED AND MADE DEPENDENT ON THE NEWCOMERS TO SURVIVE.

THE ONLY PATH TO OUR SURVIVAL WAS THROUGH THE FUR TRADE AND LOGGING.

AND WE WERE TRAPPED INTO PARTICIPATING IN DESTROYING MOTHER EARTH AND HER CREATURES.

TODAY, MOTHER EARTH IS SUFFERING AND THE SPIRIT OF MY PEOPLE IS SUFFERING.

BUT NOW THE NEWCOMERS ARE DYING TOO – DESPITE ALL THE MONEY FOR RESEARCH, CANCER IS EVERYWHERE; WE WORRY DAILY ABOUT DIABETES, OBESITY, HEALTH AND NEW DISEASES. AND SOCIETY IS INCREASINGLY MORE VIOLENT AND ANGRY.

I SEE CONNECTION IN THE SICKNESS IN THE LAND AND THE SICKNESS OF THE PEOPLE. WE HAVE TO START TO HEAL FROM THE CORE.

WE HAVE CHOKED THE LIFE IN OUR RIVERS BY CUTTING ITS FLOW, FLOODING THE LANDS AND THE HOMES OF MY PEOPLES AND THE HABITATS OF THE ANIMALS.

WHEN NO LONGER USED, DAMS REMAIN AS UGLY CONCRETE "SHOW AND TELL" EDIFICES STILL CHAINING THE RIVERS ACROSS TURTLE ISLAND.

DAMS PREVENT MOTHER EARTH FROM FLUSHING HER RIVERS CLEAN EACH YEAR, AND SENDING THE WATERS RUSHING TO THE SALT OCEANS FOR HEALING AND PURIFICATION.

DEBRIS ACCUMULATES ABOVE THE DAMS, AND EACH SUMMER WE SEE THE RESULTS OF THIS IN THE CAPITAL CITY, WHEN BRITIANNIA BEACH IS CLOSED BECAUSE OF THE FECAL CONTENT OF THE WATERS. THIS, OF COURSE, AFFECTS THE POORER FOLK MORE THAN OTHERS.

(BUT THIS CONTAMINATION OF MOTHER EARTH WILL EVENTUALLY BE THE GREAT EQUALIZER.)

THE BIG MOTORIZED WATER BOATS AND OTHER POLLUTANTS DISTURB THE PATTERNS OF LIFE, GROWTH, REPRODUCTION AND HEALTH OF THE FISH, AND THEY ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY UNEATABLE.

MOTHER EARTH NEEDS HEALING URGENTLY.

THE KITCHISSIPPI RIVER WAS LOVED AND RESPECTED BY MY ANCESTORS AND NOW IT IS CRYING OUT FOR HEALING.

ONE SYMBOL OF SUCH HEALING, EMERGING AT THE NATION'S CAPITAL AND REACHING OUT NATIONALLY AND GLOBALLY, LIES AT THE HEART OF MY VISION FOR THE HEALING AND PEACE BUILDING CENTRE AT VICTORIA ISLAND: THE EVENTUAL UNDAMMING OF THE CHAUDIERE FALLS, SO THAT THE MAGNIFICENT CIRCULAR FALLS CAN COME TO LIFE AGAIN; AND THE REFORRESTRATION OF THE CONCRETE COVERED CHAUDIERE ISLAND.

THEN INDEED VICTORIA ISLAND AND THE MIGHTY RIVER ON WHICH SHE SITS WILL BECOME A TRUE FOR SYMBOL OF HOPE FOR ALL THE RIVERS OF NORTH AMERICA, AND SERVE A TRUE REFLECTION OF OUR HERITAGE, ITS COSTS AND ITS PAIN, AS WELL AS ITS TRIUMPHS.