

## O Canada! Our Home and Native Land!

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In this year when Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary is being celebrated, is it also a celebration for the Aboriginal Peoples who have lived here for over 10,000 years? To ask the question, is to answer it.

Canada has kept the Indigenous Peoples on the margins of history, has repeatedly wished for their disappearance and has made efforts along those lines.

What Can We Celebrate?

We celebrate life; we celebrate our cultures. They are many of them—a stunning diversity—and they are unique in their traditions and languages, which are unfortunately endangered throughout Canada. Yes, we also have a common history, one of colonization, but we have so many treasures to share...

Relationships and Alliances

Our history and cultures are made up of relationships and alliances. Relationships with the mineral, plant and animal worlds and alliances with other nations, for trade, for the sharing of territory, resources and exchanges.

At a very young age, I learned at my grandfather's side that life is woven of links like a spider's web and that a great invisible thread above our heads connects us to our ancestors and urges us to raise our heads to look toward the horizon.

Childhood and Enculturation

I was lucky and fortunate enough to be raised by my grandparents as was customary in many First Nations communities. I am Abenakis, proud of being Abenakis and I live in Odanak, because that is where my roots are.

My grandfather passed on to me part of the Abenakis history, traditions, and a whole universe of images. He also had a great respect for the land, since he was a horticulturist.

My grandmother communicated her wonderment at the beauty surrounding us, to gaze at with my eyes and feel with my heart. She also taught me to pray, to ask and to give thanks. She was a musician.

It was alongside them that I came to understand humility and vulnerability, when old age settles in with its griefs and its fragilities. I grew up with respect for the elders; one must first listen to them and then love them.

Alongside them, I also understood that humour was a key to remaining healthy, and an essential asset for communicating one's ideas and emotions.

Education and Openness to the World

As you can understand, I did not experience the uprooting caused by the residential schools. Yes, because that was the sought-after goal, to uproot the "Indians" from their culture and the harmful influence of their parents, to educate them in order to make them

“real Canadians.” It must be noted that the goal was never achieved, but it has left scars, traumas to generations of Indigenous people and their descendants.

As early as 1898, the Abenaki of Odanak had their own school, run by the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa. They taught three generations of Abenakis there until 1959, the year they left. The same year that I was starting in the Quebec school system with its share of taunting and meanness too. However, the family ties were intact; my parents were always involved in my studies, right up to college.

It was at CEGEP that I opened up to the world and its realities and, at the same time, to the reality experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada: the creation of reserves, the Indian Act and injustice against native women. This was the beginning of my activism in defending the rights of native women. I have been a militant activist on these matters for thirteen times thirteen moons.

#### Involvement with, and Promotion of, Culture

When I returned to my community and my three children, I devoted myself wholeheartedly to enhancing our culture, keeping it alive, honouring the memory of our ancestors, and I committed myself to passing it on to the younger generations. I also worked to combat the prejudices and stereotypes present in Quebec society by visiting hundreds of schools throughout the Mauricie and the Centre-of-Quebec region.

#### Two Events and a Turning Point

In 2007, the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples gave me wings of hope and gave me a glimpse of a promising future for the world's Indigenous Peoples, even if it does not mean the end of the fighting and struggles for justice, and despite the fact that Canada waited until November 2010 to sign it.

In any event, the second event was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that crossed Canada from west to east. It has moved and shaken Indigenous peoples, of course, but also many Canadians who became acquainted with the story for the first time.

Establishing the truth to achieve reconciliation—that is an agenda that has took shape in a report with 94 Calls to Action, addressed to the State, to institutions and to citizens. It is a dynamic process that will take whatever time is needed, in order to uphold respectful relationships.

Last September 13, I attended the tenth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Montreal. There, Mayor Denis Coderre inaugurated the new city flag, which now sports a white pine to recognize the Indigenous presence within the city. That would have been unthinkable 10 years ago. Institutions are challenging us to collaborate in decolonizing our relations. Quebeckers are showing more interest and open-mindedness, and this is encouraging me to continue to participate in this decolonization process. All this is a sign of hope in our troubled world.

I still have the sacred fire and I imagine a better future for my grandchildren.