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Oren Lyons The Faithkeeper with Bill Moyers

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Oren Lyons The Faithkeeper

Chief OREN LYONS, Onondaga Nation: We can't afford now to have these national borders. We can't afford to have racism. We can't afford apartheid. We can't—it's one of those luxuries that we can't have anymore as human beings. We've got to think now, in real terms, for that seventh generation and we've got to move in concert. We've got to sing the same song. We've got to have the same ceremony. We've got to get back to the spiritual law if we are to survive.

BILL MOYERS, Host: *[voice-over]* In this hour, a visit with Oren Lyons, the Faithkeeper. I'm Bill Moyers.

When *Dances With Wolves* won the Academy Award for the best picture of the year, the recognition confirmed a turning point in the perception of the American Indian. The film was free of those clichés of the Old West created in the earliest days of Hollywood. These Native Americans spoke in their own language. They expressed human emotions and humor and they appeared as neither victims nor savages, but as real people living in real time, in touch with the land. The movie has been widely praised by Indians as an immense breakthrough in the perception of native peoples. For Native Americans like Oren Lyons, that breakthrough was a long time coming.

Chief Lyons is the Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Onondaga Nation and has devoted his life to preserving the experiences and wisdom of his people and interpreting them to the dominant American culture. He serves now as Director of Native American Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo, but he also plays an active and peripatetic role in representing the Iroquois and other native peoples on issues ranging from the environment to land claims and the restoration of sacred symbols.

One of his mandates as Faithkeeper of his tribe is to keep alive the legend and stories of his people's traditions.

[interviewing] You're an artist and this is your drawing, isn't it?

Chief LYONS: Yeah, it's a painting. It's a depiction of the Great Tree of Peace and the two individuals who had the most to do with it, the Great Peacemaker, who is on the left as we look at it, and Heowenta, who was his supporter. The Tree of Peace, of course, is the great spiritual law and it sits on the back of the turtle, which is our metaphor for this island. We call North America the Great Turtle Island.

Interspersed and intertwined among the leaves of the tree and around the tree, gathered around it, are the great clans—the Deer Clan. And the deer is recognized as the leader of animals. The hawk who sits in the tree, the bear who is another powerful, mysterious entity, and the wolf who is our spiritual brother in this life. He's recognized by native people around the world as a very powerful entity. And over on the left, on the neck of the turtle is a snipe, which is a clan, a huge family.

MOYERS: Every part of that painting is a symbol.

Chief LYONS: Yes, and then, when the Peacemaker had planted the Tree of Peace, he placed the eagle in the top. And the eagle would belong to everyone and the eagle would sit there in vigilance and watch and would scream when things were coming towards the tree. And he said that there will come a time when this tree will be attacked. And we can look at that at this time or we could have looked at it in 1776 or we could have looked at it in 1620, you know, when it has come under attack. And today, it's still here. The tree is still standing and we, the chiefs of the Long House, are dedicated to its continuance and to its future.

MOYERS: When you say the tree is still here, you mean spiritually?

Chief LYONS: Spiritually, yes. It was a spiritual tree to begin with. You know, because people—you know, again, people are so literal, you know. It's hard at times to have a discussion with people who think in linear terms, you know, because they say, "We come to see the tree." And I say, "It's a great tree. It reaches to the heavens. You can't see it." "You can't see it? We can see it." But it's there and it's very real. And again, as we're told, sometimes the most real things you can't see.

MOYERS: [voice-over] Oren Lyons was an All-American Lacrosse player at Syracuse University and in 1983 helped found a team called the Iroquois Nationals. In 1990, they traveled to Australia for the Lacrosse World Championship games, the first time in over 100 years that the Iroquois carried their own flag and performed their own anthem in international competition. He says Lacrosse is as native to the Indians as they are to the landscape.

[inter-viewing] We watched the children playing Lacrosse yesterday. Does it teach them something or is it just for the heck of it?

Chief LYONS: No. I think Lacrosse and Iroquois are synonymous with life. I think, or synonymous with continuation of community. Everybody's involved. The children's involved, the parents are involved. Our greatest fans, the greatest Lacrosse fans are the women. Women love the game and it's more than a game, has been.

MOYERS: What do you mean, more than a game? You were a star goalie back in the '50s. Wasn't it just a game to you then?

Chief LYONS: No. You could have called me a ringer because I had been playing Lacrosse for so long by the time that I got to the university that I had, you know, a great deal of experience because our people do it, you know, from these little fellows on up. And my grandfather was a Lacrosse player. My father was a well-known goalkeeper. It goes back, you know. It's not only us. Some of the great leaders—you know, Tecumseh was a great Lacrosse player.

MOYERS: No, I didn't know that.

Chief LYONS: Oh, yeah. These people, you know—Osceola was noted for his Lacrosse playing.

MOYERS: Is Lacrosse ceremony? Is it ritual?

Chief LYONS: Yes, it is. Oh, yes.

MOYERS: As I look at it, what am I seeing?

Chief LYONS: Well, first of all, it's a spiritual game. Its origin—it's called the Creator's Game.

MOYERS: Lacrosse?

Chief LYONS: Lacrosse is the Creator's Game and he loves to have the contest and the vitality of the contest. And so, the harder you play—you're supposed to play it as hard as you can and—but don't cheat, you know, and you do things fair. Everything's always fair, always fair. Do things fair.

MOYERS: This game was here as long as your memory takes you back?

Chief LYONS: As long as we can remember. And I think an important point to make at this time was that this was a team sport. This was a sport and it was played by teams of people. And that's a comment on a society. Where our technology—we have great technology. It's too bad I don't have a snow snake here to show you.

MOYERS: A what?

Chief LYONS: A snow snake. It's a game that we invented that—a long, slender wood which is carved to a real fine finish and it's shelled and it's varnished and it's waxed and it can be thrown a mile in the snow, in the track. Now, that's technology. That's real technology, but we put it into a game. We didn't develop the F-16, we didn't develop—we didn't go in that direction. We were people who sat under a tree for a long time, talking about things, talked about society, talk about the importance of community, talk about law, talk about rules. Indian country, this Onondaga, has got a lot of rules here. Mohawks have a lot of rules—how do you live there, how you live—none of it written.

MOYERS: [voice-over] Oren Lyons was a successful commercial artist in New York City before returning to his people to take up his duties as Faithkeeper. He lives on native land near Syracuse and we met in his cabin there for this conversation.

[inter-viewing] Why did you come back here to live on the reservation? You gave up a successful career as a commercial artist in New York City.

Chief LYONS: Well, there are several reasons. First of all, I believe I learned all I needed to learn about New York City, probably stayed two or three years too long. The other, of course, was to come back and get back into harness, so to speak here, more directly with the people. And 1967, I was condoled as one of the faithkeepers.

MOYERS: Condoled?

Chief LYONS: Yes. That's a process of raising leadership in the Haudenosaunee. It's—you know, people ask the question all the time, "How did you become a chief?" And it goes back to the roots of democracy.

MOYERS: Were you chosen by a vote of the people?

Chief LYONS: No. No. It doesn't work that way. A long time ago, when we first began the process of our governance and we were given this government, the Peacemaker—we call him the Great Peacemaker—came amongst us, brought peace amongst the Mohawk and the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga and the Seneca—and he laid down the rules at that time, we don't know how long ago. Maybe a thousand years ago, maybe two.

MOYERS: Maybe more.

Chief LYONS: It may be more. It doesn't matter.

MOYERS: This is the legend that's come down.

Chief LYONS: Yeah, this is the story.

MOYERS: The Peacemaker was a visitor?

Chief LYONS: He was a spiritual being. He was a messenger, we would say, the best we could say. He brought a message, the Great Peace, and it was a long process of how he changed the minds of all of these men who, at that time, were leaders by strength and by force. Then, he stepped in there and changed that whole process to deliberation and thought. And he convinced these warriors at that time, who were the leaders, to join with him and he changed their minds.

And he moved from the Mohawk first, to the Oneida and then he moved to the Onondaga. He couldn't deal with the leader of the Onondaga, the Thadodaho, so he went on to the Cayuga and the Seneca and they all came back. And when they came back, they had the support of their minds. They had agreed. These men had changed and so, he—

MOYERS: Because they had listened to the Peacemaker?

Chief LYONS: They had listened to the Peacemaker and his message. Now—but he had to bring the Onondagas in and he did, you know.

MOYERS: You were a stubborn people?

Chief LYONS: Very stubborn—well, in particular, the man, the leader at the time, the Thadodaho, was fierce. He was a man with snakes in his hair. He was a man who was twisted and deformed and fierce and a cannibal. He was so powerful that people feared him and he just stayed in the woods, hard to reach. And so, they were given help, their spiritual help in terms of a song from a bird and this song was what they learned and what they came to him with. And as they approached—all these leaders, all these people singing this song—with the Peacemaker and Heowenta in front—whom some people call Hiawatha—

MOYERS: Hiawatha.

Chief LYONS: Heowenta and the Peacemaker worked together on this great work. And they approached him and as they approached him with this and they convinced him and they said that if he agreed to join this Great Law, this Great Peace, that Onondaga would be the central fire, would be the Firekeepers, the Onondaga Haudausannee would be the Firekeepers of the Haudausannee and the French call Iroquois and who the English call Six Nations—and so the Haudausannee came about and he agreed. And he became the spiritual leader.

And they said all of those 50 original men from those nations, their names became offices and when one passed on, then a ceremony was performed, a condolence of replacement. So then, this was the peaceful replacement of authority. It was a very simple process. What he had established in our laws was that each of those leaders was a leader of a family and his family was a clan and clan were given designations of a wolf, of a turtle, of a deer, of a bear, of a snipe, of an eel, of a beaver, of a heron, all of these designations.

And so, then there would be, in each of these clans, five leaders. There would be a Clan Mother, whose purpose was to choose the Chief.

MOYERS: Why? Why the mother? Why did that go to the woman?

Chief LYONS: Well, because, in his first encounter as he landed on the eastern shores of what is now called Lake Ontario, he stopped overnight at a lodge of a woman. And this woman took him in and said that this was a place where people could stop and could refresh themselves and could eat and it was neutral place. And even though it was warpath that it was on, everybody that came there recognized that this was a neutral place for peace and they'd spend the night here and—

MOYERS: They'd leave their weapons outside?

Chief LYONS: Outside and they passed that particular time together. So, when he told her of his mission and what he was about, she said, "That's wonderful. I agree with that." And so, her name was Jigonsahseh, a Seneca or of the Cat Nation, the Erie. And so, he went on about his business and then, he discovered this other man by the name of Heowenta, who was an Onondaga by birth and who was adopted by the Mohawk in the process, so he established the process of adoption during all of this—at any rate, the two worked together and so, it was they who were in the lead of the group of men that were approaching Thadodaho with a song. And as they approached him, he transformed and agreed to this Great Peace—

MOYERS: You mean, the people approaching him, singing the sound of the bird—

Chief LYONS: Of the bird—

MOYERS:—and this creature with wild hair and twisted body, as you say, he responded?

Chief LYONS: He responded. He agreed.

MOYERS: He changed?

Chief LYONS: He changed. And there was a law, there was a lesson there for everyone. And that lesson was, no matter how bad a person is, he can change to be the very best.

MOYERS: He can be born again?

Chief LYONS: It was actually—it was—I hesitate to use that word because it has such a different connotation today, but really—

MOYERS: A spiritual conversion—that's the metaphor, isn't it?

Chief LYONS: Yes, it was a spiritual conversion.

MOYERS: And the woman—that custom still prevails that the woman who greeted the Peacemaker chooses the next chief?

Chief LYONS: Oh, yes—well, at that time, as we moved along, you know, in his process of when he set down, he said, "The society will follow—" because the woman—the woman was the first to recognize this and the society will follow the woman's side, become a matrilineal society—matrilineal society. Also, what that did very clearly was it established the nationhood, any child was born was born with an identity. He had a nation, he had the clan and whatever his gender or her—and so we had—if it was a boy, we had a Lacrosse player and if it was a girl, we had someone who inherited—

MOYERS: The power—

Chief LYONS: The power.

MOYERS:—of choice. Who chose you?

Chief LYONS: Well, my Clan Mother at that time.

MOYERS: What clan?

Chief LYONS: Turtle. I was a Turtle, although I am a Wolf. I am a Wolf and I was borrowed into the Turtle Clan at that time. A wonderful woman who raised many generations of children, she carried, at some point here at Onondaga Nation, four clanships in her hand because of the inability to find a Clan Mother for those clans, so she carried all that extra work. And so, she was about getting these things parceled out and getting them done and she asked me whether I would consider that and I—

MOYERS: Consider becoming the—

Chief LYONS: Becoming one of the representatives of the Turtle Clan in Council. And I said, "Well—" you know, your first reaction is you don't want to do that because the chiefs are always busy, they're always working, they're never home, they're always in meetings and it seemed to be quite a load. But she said, "Well, don't answer," she said, "Don't answer now. Think about it." And the only word she ever said to me was, "Think of what you can do for your people." So, finally, I said, "Well, I'll try." She said, "That's good. That's all I want to hear."

MOYERS: Was it a hard choice to bring your kids back from New York to live here?

Chief LYONS: No. No, it was, I think, probably the best thing I could have done for them.

MOYERS: Where do they belong, here or out in that other world?

Chief LYONS: Everybody belongs here. All Onondagas belong here, whether they live there or not. It's the same as if you had a U.S. citizenship and you were living in Paris. You know, you always go back to America, right?

MOYERS: Right.

Chief LYONS: It's the same. So if you're an Onondaga and you're living in Boston, which they are, and if you're living in New York, which they are, your home is here.

MOYERS: The conflict, it seems to me, is that you're talking—you just outlined a wonderful story of a consciousness from another time and another mentality and they're facing all the time, your children, the technology of the modern world which seduces them away from the intuitive thinking.

Chief LYONS: Oh, yeah, no doubt. There's an attrition. Sure. Every generation has faced an attrition, but on the other hand, there's also a distillation and a distillation of these ideas, of these thoughts here and the society itself, the importance of the leadership and the Chiefs and the Clan Mothers and the message that they have is extraordinarily important in these times and the teachings that are there. We had—I mentioned the second message, which was the Great Peace. Now, we had a third message. The third message came around 1799 and if you go back in history, this was directly after the Revolutionary War and you're looking at the turmoil that was in Indian country, particularly Six Nation country during that time.

We had a third message in from Ganeediyoo, who people call Handsome Lake. Handsome Lake was taken on a journey, shall we say, for four days and during that time, he was shown the future of what was going to happen and he was given instructions on how to deal with the white man.

MOYERS: Instructions by?

Chief LYONS: By the four protectors, by the spiritual side of our life. And so, they told him what was coming. And this summer, that story will be told again here in this long house as it's told every year in every long house across the Six Nations.

MOYERS: What did he say was coming? What will you observe? What will you think about this—

Chief LYONS: Well, it goes on and on, you know, four days of it.

MOYERS: Is there a central message?

Chief LYONS: Yeah. The central message is there is going to be a deterioration and a falling away of life as we know it. There is going to be destruction. There's—well, for instance, how these things were told and I have to be quite careful about how I do this because we're on national television. I don't have the authority and the right to begin discussing things at large without the consent of the Nation or the people. You see, I'm not free to do that.

But it's clear enough and people have known enough. For instance, for water, talked about water, he was shown things in vignettes and he said they would ask him, "What do you see?" he said, "Well, I see a river." And they said, "Well, pick up the water to drink." And he reached his hands in and picked the water up and he said, "I can't. It's filthy." They said, "Well, we think what you say is correct and at some time, the water is going to be that way."

MOYERS: And he was anticipating the environmental degradation that we—it's not a legend.

Chief LYONS: Uh-huh. And at one time, he was shown a field of corn—a field. It wasn't corn, it was a garden and someone was working in the garden. And then, he described that and they said, "Observe." And at one point, the man reached down and pulled up the plant, you know, to see what was on the roots and there was nothing on the root. They said, "What do you see?" He says, "He's pulled the plant and there's nothing there."

MOYERS: So, what do you make of that?

Chief LYONS: What they were told—you know, he saw—or as he was told a lot about these things that were coming, well, he'd say, "What is the hope?" "Well," they said, "It's certain that this will happen," they said, "but that's up to each generation to see that it doesn't happen in your generation."

MOYERS: So that the lesson, the vision he received, the chief received was that destruction—environmental destruction, physical destruction—could come in every generation, but each generation is charged not to let it happen?

Chief LYONS: Yeah. And so, actually, you know, the hope lies in the intensity of the life of that generation. You can only live one day at a time, regardless.

MOYERS: And yet, the publication that you produce, *Daybreak*, is

