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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 participatory 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.

