

Two Row Wampum Renewal Thoughts

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In 1613 (400 years ago) two sets of peoples made an agreement to travel down the “river of life, side by side, each in their own boats—as long as the sun rises in the east, the grass is green, and the river flows downhill.” It was called the Two Row Wampum Treaty, the original treaty that stands as the benchmark for all the treaties to come. Made between the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and Dutch traders / settlers, it rose out of the need for these two cultures to insure that they could live together in unity, caring for the land and its resources for the benefit of all. One of these nations has honored this treaty all this time.

400 years later, two sets of peoples, two cultures made a plan to travel down the “river that flows both ways” to honor the Two Row Wampum Treaty. The physical embodiment of that original treaty was a spark that continued to grow through two years of planning, outreach, and educational events by both First Nations and their Allies working together. What emerged was a plan for a 150-mile journey down the Hudson River by canoe and kayak, from Albany to New York City, arriving at the United Nations for the International Indigenous Peoples Day. At its peak, this voyage would be represented by over 500 paddlers and ground crew and many enthusiastic volunteers who helped to carry gear, move supplies, and to feed this moving representation of unity and the “Good Mind.” For 12 full days, we laughed, sang, danced, tended blisters, ate together, shared stories, set up and broke down camp, and paddled for hours and hours in community.

Mother Nature treated us to every type of weather from day one. Rain, heat, sunshine, cool, and lots of waves and wet. The river was a generous, yet firm task master. We learned how water can be calm and heavy, rolling and roaring, swelling and choppy—a friend—and *yet indifferent to our insignificance in size to its immensity.*

The container through which it flows was ever changing. The ugliness of humanity’s encroachment, beginning with the Port of Albany, gave way to trees and rolling hills down to riverbanks, then moved into ever-growing heights on sloping bends and ridges culminating with the towering, overwhelming Palisade walls of weather-chiseled stone. The ending transition from this natural upward thrusting to humanity’s mayhem of architectural landscaping was both peculiar and eerily imperceptible. In one day we moved through the most spectacular of the river’s views to the most spectacular of humanity’s engineering and architecture—while being held in the constant energy and challenge of the river’s magic.

Our days were directed by the rising and setting of the water and daylight. We camped on some of the finest spots along the way—woke to a sunrise river view each day after watching sunset paintings of the sky and water that have inspired

artists for centuries. We lived and breathed the full scope of summer's beauty and variety. We were serenaded by bird song and river song. We sang in response with our voices of joy, prayer, gratitude, and humility. Eagles, heron, and osprey were our daily companions. We were awed, thrilled, exhausted, and inspired. We moved into a whole different time frame—Nature's time—Creator's/God's time . . . *. A new beginning each day . . . A new adventure each day . . . Another stretch of river each day . . .*

We were accompanied by the spirits of those who had come before—the travelers of this land and river, in canoes and small ships, of centuries past. As we passed through the narrow passage at Cold Spring it felt as though the Ancestors were watching from the ridge-tops—and smiling. Yet the next morning, we rounded the bend where the West Point military fortress stands, towering/glowing down upon us as we moved by in our two rows. Songs of Peace were raised . . . *lay down my sword and shield; down by the riverside . . .*

These contrasts of humanity and nature were evident daily—from immense barge-tugs and freighters passing, huge abandoned cement plants, the port docks and power plants spewing seen and unseen by-products into the waters and air, floating dead fish and condoms in waters as warm as a bath tub. *We did not swim in that part of the river . . .*

These were constant reminders of our purpose and mission for the journey, this voyage of a lifetime. We paddled through time-lines—human, geologic, historic and environmental. We welcomed each other and joined together as many peoples, cultures, faiths, and callings. We paddled through raw nature to small towns and on to one of the largest cities on Earth. We camped in small up-river towns, empty and abandoned from 11-foot storm surge flooding, evidence of global warming, *the power of Nature and the river untamed despite our human arrogance.*

As though stepping through a time-warp, we landed finally—more than 200 paddlers strong at Pier 96 in New York City—to the cheers and celebrating welcome of many hundreds, like homecoming heroes, like voyagers returned from long ago, like the Odyssean crews of mythology.

Family, friends, dignitaries, Peace Walkers, Unity Riders, and curiosity seekers pulled us in, lifted us up, honored and acknowledged our mission. The chants of *“Honor the Treaties! Protect the Earth!”* carried us together across a human-made jungle to the governmental symbol of international cooperation—the United Nations. We gave voice with our presence there to the continuing urgency of the work remaining to be done and the possibilities that this embodied commitment to cooperation and unity can achieve.

400 years ago a vision of unity and brotherhood was woven from the purple and white of the humble quahog shell. This wampum belt has been and continues to be held as proof of the possibilities, a tangible contract with each other for the highest good of all. The First Nations have honored this treaty, this contract with Mother Earth, to this day. It is long past due that both parties, both rows, both peoples take up this spirit and work. It is our responsibility to care for all the

Nations, both human-made and natural, to honor our—the Allies’—part of this original commitment. Our very existence depends on our ability to keep paddling together down the “*River of Life, as long as the sun rises in the east, the grass is green, and the water flows downhill*” . . .

When I close my eyes, I can see the outline of our silhouettes against the waters and sky: two rows of paddlers moving toward the horizon, toward the next bend in the river. *The journey to unity, understanding our responsibilities, and honoring the earth continues. Come join us!*