

Sharing the River of Life: a report on the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign Enactment

1200 wds

Liseli Haines with Buffy Curtis, Mohawk Valley Meeting

I hadn't used the inkle loom ever before. Now I threaded it with white and purple. White and purple the colors of the quahog shells, the colors of the beads made by Native Americans, the colors of the original wampum belt. Three lines of white: Peace, Friendship, Forever. Two lines of purple: One line the canoes of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois, as they were named by the French) carrying all their laws, customs, and beliefs. The second line the boats of the new people from across the seas, the Europeans, with their laws, customs, and beliefs. Both boats traveling down the river of life together into the future side by side; equals.

The Two Row Wampum Belt was created to commemorate the first treaty between the Haudenosaunee and the Dutch in about 1613 as the Dutch sailed up the Hudson River, known to the Haudenosaunee as The River that Flows Both Ways (because the Hudson is a tidal river up to the falls in Troy). To hear the Haudenosaunee tell it, they saw the new people come and realized that they were not going away and held long discussions with their confederacy on how to live with their new neighbors. The Two Row Wampum Treaty was their plan. Each culture would be independent and equal, neither would be dominant. They would call each other brother. And the Haudenosaunee would teach the Europeans how to live in this new land with its animals, herbs, and plants that both depended on for life.

The Haudenosaunee kept their part of the agreement. They have lived on the land of their ancestors, trying to keep their ways. The newcomers have not kept their side of the agreement. The Doctrine of Discovery, the papal bull created in 1455 by Pope Nicholas V, told the Europeans that any land that was not inhabited by Christians was considered uninhabited and could be taken in the name of the ruler. This "Doctrine of Discovery" led to the idea of Manifest Destiny that we all learned about in school. The Europeans felt it was their "Destiny" to continue to push west on Turtle Island, as it was known by the Haudenosaunee, "discovering" and claiming all the lands they came to. Many treaties were broken along the way.

The Onondaga and Neighbors of the Onondaga had worked for years to educate and reach out to people of the Syracuse area about the string of broken treaties and the concerns of the Onondaga about the Rights of the Land. They decided to dedicate 2013, approximately 400 years after the first treaty, to a massive education and outreach campaign about the Two Row Wampum. It came to be known as the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign, a campaign to polish the covenant chain of treaties between the Haudenosaunee and the Europeans, to educate people about the importance of the treaties and the importance of Mother Earth in all of our lives, how to honor both the treaties and the Earth.

The centerpiece of this campaign was a symbolic enactment of the Two Row: a group of Natives and a group of allies in two lines traveling down the River that Flows Both Ways from Albany, NY to New York City. One hundred fifty three miles; twelve days; camping every night in a different site along the river; a nomadic community supported by a team to transport our gear, a traveling band of cooks, peacemakers, a media team, and a medic crew who accompanied us the entire way.

As paddlers our job was to paddle—nine miles, fifteen miles, however long it took to get to the lunch spot or our camping spot for the night; with the wind behind us, or the wind in our faces pushing us up river, in the sun and in the rain, mostly with the tide, sometimes against the tide as it flows north from the ocean as far as Albany.

Every day started with a reminder, a reminder of our purpose, the Words that Come Before All Else, sometimes in the language of the Haudenosaunee, sometimes in English, bringing our minds together in agreement on our responsibility to give thanks to the other nations of the world: the waters, trees, animals, the sun, the moon, and more. This is one of the important issues for the Two Row, the responsibility we have to the Rights of the Land. How we live, how we think, how we consume, and how we fulfill our responsibilities by giving thanks.

We lived together creating a community. We ate on the grass together, sometimes our suppers in the dark, we broke down our tents, we paddled, we set up our tents. In the evening we listened to speakers and to drumming and participated in Haudenosaunee social dancing, shared in a sharing circle, sat around a fire, learned knots and tree climbing, talked to many, many people, and made many, many friendships. The faces of those people are with me now. I sometimes wonder what is that person doing now, what are they seeing? Are they remembering the swells of the river, like breathing? Are they looking at a bird flying over and remembering the eagles? I miss them.

Often, in the morning or in the evening, we would be reminded of The Good Mind. How the Peacemaker who came to this area 1000 years ago taught the various warring nations to live together in peace and become the Five Nations (later six with the acceptance of the Tuscarora). Since all is for the good of the community, each person's actions and thoughts affect the community. That hit me hard. Yes my actions are usually good and for the good of all, but my thoughts? Have my thoughts been wandering into negativity? Has that been affecting those around me? And I see that it can. I see where I have work to do.

Along the river we were met by chiefs of the local nations through which we paddled. We arrived in New York City to a delegation that included the Dutch vice consul. We marched to the United Nations building and sat in the celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples in the UN chambers and were commended by the Secretary General of the UN. I am told we brought life to the UN and to that proceeding.

I didn't want it to end. I don't want it to end. I want to go on and on in that community, continuing down the River of Life side by side in our canoes and kayaks, in Peace and Friendship Forever.

So I was weaving bracelets for the Two Row—four hundred-plus bracelets. If I did it right each bracelet would be imbued with my hopes and dreams for the wearer of the bracelet, that they would dedicate their lives to living in the Way of the Two Row. Honor the Treaties. Protect the Earth.

Liseli and Buffy would be glad to share their experiences and insights on this currently relevant issue with Quaker meetings. If your meeting or group is interested, contact Liseli (315-982-1653, liselih@juno.com) or Buffy (508-566-6639, havehelpinghands@gmail.com)