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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.

**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.

[interviewing] 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.

[interviewing] 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 Ganeodiyo, 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

dedicated to the seventh generation unborn.

**Chief LYONS:** Yeah. That was the instructions that were given as a Chief. When we were given these instructions, among many of them, one was that when you in sit in council for the welfare of the people, you counsel for the welfare of that seventh generation to come. They should be foremost in your mind—not even your generation, not even yourself, but those that are unborn so that when their time comes here, they may enjoy the same thing that you are enjoying now.

**MOYERS:** Is there kind of a moral obligation to that?

**Chief LYONS:** Well, I believe, you know, that all of this discussion between human beings is one of morality. I think that everyone has to deal with the emotions that are in each individual. And we understand that we have both good and bad in us and that you must strike a balance at all times. And this spiritual center, then, is what the Great Tree of Peace is. It's a spiritual center. It's a spiritual law.

**MOYERS:** The Peacemaker, when he came, planted a Tree of Peace?

**Chief LYONS:** A Tree of Peace, a Great Peace, a great law. It's a spiritual law. He said, "When you become afraid or when you become weak or when you become not able to carry," he says, "It's the spiritual law that will stiffen your spine." He said, "That's where your strength is, so you must make your laws in accordance with those spiritual laws and then, you will survive."

So, he called that council a Council of the Good Minds. He said the Hoyáne—that's what it means, the all-good, the good, peacemakers. So that's what he set up and when he—he uprooted this great tree and he asked the Nations to come forward and cast their weapons of war, he says, "We now do away with the warriors and we do away with the war chiefs and in their place, we plant the Council of the Good Minds who will now counsel for the welfare of the people." And he said, "I shall not leave you defenseless," and he gave us a spiritual strength, Oyenkwanwe, the Great Tobacco." He said, "This will be your medium for communication, directly."

**MOYERS:** With the Great Tobacco?

**Chief LYONS:** Yeah. We have sacred tobacco. He said, "This is your spiritual strength."

**MOYERS:** The peace pipe, then, is a metaphor as well as a physical—

**Chief LYONS:** Actually.

**MOYERS:**—object, a material object.

**Chief LYONS:** Actually. And that's why, you know, this peace is so foremost in our minds. And so he said, "Now, we will—the three principles will be peace, equity and justice and the power of the Good Minds. So everyone must think that way and when your people think that way and everyone has the same position and the same mind of being of one mind, which is the greatest power there is, and so that's what we're instructed, to have that mind."

**MOYERS:** But, you know, the history of your people since the Peacemaker came millennia ago, has been one like of other people about enmity and conflict and competition. The Great Teachings

were wise and wonderful, philosophy breached so often and had been breached so often in the fact, in our behavior.

**Chief LYONS:** Yeah. It's—visionaries, you know, in talking or understanding Black Elk's vision—

**MOYERS:** Black Elk of the Dakotas.

**Chief LYONS:**—in the Dakotas, yeah, the great Dakota people, Lakota. his vision was very much along with ours. And then, when we hear the stories of other nations, of how they came to be, when we hear how the Hopis talk about the Spider Woman, and coming from the Earth and the fourth world that they've experienced, the fourth failure of man, again try—how they come forward and try again. We hear the walkabout songs of the aboriginal people in Australia, when they talk about singing into existence these beings of—you know, all the entities of the world, as far as they are concerned, has a song. And we say, "That's wonderful. We agree. We say yes. Now, hear our story, this is how we came." And they listen to us and they say, "That's wonderful. We believe that."

**MOYERS:** But your story—look what the gun, the church, the dollar and the bottle did to your story. You got run over.

**Chief LYONS:** Well, you pretty much put 'em all down. This is what they talked about at the time. We did and we didn't. We're still here. We're not through. The story's not over. You're still talking to a chief. You're still talking and you're sitting here in the Onondaga Nation, the center of the Haudenosaunee. The tree is still here. The roots are still out and if anything, I see the roots growing at this point.

**MOYERS:** What do you mean? What's evidence that—

**Chief LYONS:** Well, as I watch, you know, especially in the eastern bloc of Europe, you know, how these people are clamoring for freedom and for democracy and how they're looking, you know, towards the Americas for democracy and how the Chinese were using the symbol of the Statue of Liberty as democracy and they were saying, "This is great, this is coming from America." But America got it from the Indians. America got the ideas of democracy and freedom and peace here.

**MOYERS:** Do you subscribe to the opinion that some of what we call founding fathers were affected directly by what Indians were doing and thinking in the shaping of government?

**Chief LYONS:** They were impacted very directly, you know. When the Wampanoags met the Pilgrims, there was a great leader by the name of Massasoit and Massasoit saw to it that there was peace between the two and now, we see it as our grandfathers talked to Benjamin Franklin and talked to those people and explained—

**MOYERS:** They talked to Franklin?

**Chief LYONS:** They did talk to Franklin. They explained very directly, you know, in this meeting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1744—

**MOYERS:** Franklin was there?

**Chief LYONS:** Franklin was taking—recording. He was the Recording Secretary at the time. He was quite a young man, you know, and of course, they were talking to, I think it was, the Gov-

ernor of Delaware, New York and Pennsylvania at the time.

**MOYERS:** The chiefs were?

**Chief LYONS:** The Six Nation chiefs were talking and they advised them then to join in a union like the Haudenosaunee and be like us they said because, "There's a great power in being together of one mind and we have unity," as the Peacemaker bound, you know, those arrows. When he was illustrating to the chiefs, he took one arrow. He said, "This is a nation," and he snapped the arrow. And then, he took the five nations and five arrows and he bound it with the sinew of the deer. And then, he said, "You can't break this unity." He says, "This is your symbol, unity. You must be united. You must be of one mind."

**MOYERS:** Is there any indication that Ben Franklin was influenced by what he heard and recorded?

**Chief LYONS:** Oh, I think there's a lot of evidence. One of the things that he did—I think he's the one who was listening. The other three—the three politicians, shall we say—were not listening, but Benjamin Franklin was, I would say, the visionary. He saw the nation. He saw a free nation. He said, "Why, if these—" I think the quote was something like, "If this group of ignorant savages can build something that looks indissoluble," he says, "why can we not, who have all of the same needs, do the same," more or less.

So he called a meeting in 1754 in Albany, New York, called the Albany Plan of Union. And at that time, he had asked the chiefs of Six Nation and other Indians to come forward and talk about the process of governance and the process of representation in government and the process of the peaceful transference of power from one generation to the next, two houses, a discussion, power of the people in the hands of the people. And all of this really intrigued him. And of course, the King of England wasn't too happy with all of this and kind of put a stop to it rather quickly, but it was on its way.

And just on the eve of the Revolution, in 1775, delegates from the Continental Congress met with the Six Nation chiefs and said, at the time, that, "Your grandfathers advised us in 1744 in Lancaster to make a union such as yours and now, we're going to take your advice and we're going to plant a Tree of Peace in Philadelphia that will reach to the sky and people can come under it." And they used our metaphors and they used all of—and the chiefs said, "That's wonderful, good. We like to hear that." And they said, "We want neutrality in the coming war." Then, that's what the chiefs said. "It's a fight between a father and son. We love you both and we know you both and we agree that we should be neutral."

So a treaty was struck then, in 1776, in Fort Pitt and it was—delegates from the Continental Congress came and brought a great belt, a Peace Belt with 13 diamonds in it and not the diamonds that you wear on your finger, but a design of 13 diamonds representing the 13 colonies. And this belt was taken by the Six Nations and they agreed to this peace and which is really expunged from your history.

**MOYERS:** How does it affect you when you go back and look at the record, despite the sympathetic signals that went back and forth between some of the first Americans, your people, and some of the new Americans, the Franklins and the Jeffersons and others—how, in

time, one treaty after another was broken, slavery was practiced by these very men who wrote, "We, the people," your own people shunted aside to reservations, today decimated by alcohol, despair? You yourself have talked to colleagues of mine about the drug use among young people, the rise of crime. I mean, what—

**Chief LYONS:** Well, it's interesting because I think, in looking—stepping back from the world and looking at it from a distance and looking at it from the time, you would say that in North America at that time, they took an ember, they took a light from our fire and they carried that over and they lighted their own fire and they made their own nation. They lighted this great fire and that was a great light at that time of peace because that's what they said they were following. And that came about, you know. In 1776, there was this great light and this Earth, if you saw the Earth from back, you would see this brilliance. And then, as time went on, the brilliance died down, it began to die down.

And what happened? And the question that you asked was, first of all, they refused to deal with the history of slavery right at the time. That light started to die immediately. They refused to use spirituality as part of their nation. It died a little bit more. We said, "You're going to have trouble." Our advice to you was a spiritual center and you say, "You separate the church from the state," but you already had conflict. So they separated them and we said, "Problem coming."

And so then, what was beginning to happen, the things that were brought from across the sea began to reassert themselves once they established their position and became strong and the light diminished more. And so, when you came through the 19th century, the 19th century is a terrible page in the history of America, what happened to Indians. It's a terrible page and many, many millions of people were killed and died. And so, this process died. And suddenly, at the end of the century, the turn of the century, the 20th century, the word was to carry a big stick and to talk softly.

**MOYERS:** Theodore Roosevelt.

**Chief LYONS:** But what was that? That was imperialism, again, an expansion of power over—dominion over. It was not agreeing with. And so, we are now facing another situation. Can we get this light, can we get this great light to come again? And that's up to this generation. That's up to, really—we're elders, you and I now. I mean, we can say, you know, from our older position, "It looks like a lost cause." But if you were to speak to the young man, the young person, the young woman, she'd say, "No. This is my life. I shall survive. You can't tell me that it's lost. That's my determination." She will say—and he will say that and they are saying it.

So we can say, "Well, it looks bad from here." And from there, they say, "Well, it's looks tough, but it isn't lost." And that's the law that they were talking about from Ganeodiyo, when he said, "Don't let it be your generation." And the law prevails, what we call the Great Law, the common law, the natural law.

**MOYERS:** And the law says?

**Chief LYONS:** The law says if you poison your water, you'll die. The law says that if you poison the air, you'll suffer. The law says if



you degrade where you live, you'll suffer. The law says all of this and if you don't learn that, then you can only suffer. There's no discussion with this law.

**MOYERS:** There's no mercy in nature. You can't get down on your knees and ask forgiveness, can you? Nature takes back what you've done to it.

**Chief LYONS:** Yes, that's—

**MOYERS:** That's the spiritual law?

**Chief LYONS:** That's really a spiritual law. That's a very important thing for people to understand, that when you transgress, there's a time—see, people don't operate in the world time or, say, the time of the mountain. They operate in the time of the human being and that's probably not a good idea because the time of the human being is rather short. And yet, when you're dealing in the time of an oak tree or a time of one of the great Sequoias and you kill that tree — you know, with your technology today, and you can take a chainsaw and in 10 minutes kill a tree that's 400 years old — there's no way that you can make that tree grow. You'll have to wait another 400 years for it to get to that position.

And so, the technology has kind of overtaken the common sense of human beings and the understanding of time. And just as the time of the ant is very, very short, the time of the mountain is very long, the rivers, and the time of the human being sort of has to be passed along. And if you don't have a reference point, if you don't have a good understanding of what this time is, then you can get yourself and your people and your generation into a whole lot of trouble and I think that's where we are right now.

**MOYERS:** What kind of trouble do you mean? You're talking about environmental trouble?

**Chief LYONS:** Yes, indeed. I'm talking about making payment now. When—well, as long as I can remember and as long as, I guess, in the memory of our people, we've had celebrations for the thundering voices, our grandfathers, the rainmakers, the people that bring the rain and bring the fresh water. They refresh the springs and the lakes.

**MOYERS:** Doesn't your language refer to the rain as "Grandfather"?

**Chief LYONS:** As the grandfathers.

**MOYERS:**—and the sun as "Uncle"?

**Chief LYONS:** Yes, they do, indeed. But now, you know, suddenly, you know, the rain that we celebrate and the rain that we pray for and the rain that we thanksgiving for begins to kill. What is that? What happens when your grandfathers begin to turn on you and your great brother, the Elder Brother, the Sun—when suddenly, people begin to suffer from cancer from the sun? So, what are people going to do when these life-giving forces — that you've depended on, that you've prayed to, that you've recognized, give thanksgiving to — suddenly turn on you? What happens?

**MOYERS:** Exactly what do indigenous people, Indians, have to offer in this regard to the rest of us?

**Chief LYONS:** First, of all, we have a long perspective. We've been

in one place a long time — we've seen the sun come up in the same place many, many hundreds, thousands of years — and so, we have a familiarity with the Earth itself, the elements. We know about them and we know what it is to enjoy that. And so, the ceremonies, which are as ancient as we are, carry forward this respect. Our people were always spiritual people, religious people. They always had ceremonies. You know, this was our first instruction was the ceremony, how to carry that on. And the ceremonies were our thanksgivings, every one of them.

So we had these extraordinary rounds of thanksgiving every year, so all the same songs again at certain time, all the same dances at a certain time are very familiar. Again, you know, if you go down and watch the Pueblos, you know, as they do their Deer Dance, as they do their Bean Dance and watch the Hopis as they do their Snake Dance, these are old, ancient ceremonies. Everybody knows them and everybody participates in them and you continue because they are what you are instructed to do, which is to give thanks.

**MOYERS:** For what?

**Chief LYONS:** For what is given to you here. The Pilgrims got a hold of it and they called it Thanksgiving. Well, that's only one—that's only the harvest part of it. They don't go all the way around the whole clock, you know. Children are not sat down and taught about what's good and what's wrong. What they see is they see their grandfathers or they see their fathers or their mothers, their grandmothers going to ceremonies, and they say, "So that must be the right thing to do." The old people do it, everybody does it, that's good, so they do it and so, they learn, in the process, that thanksgiving, what is it for. Well, this one is for the maple, the Chief of the Trees. We're giving a thanksgiving for the maple. Good. Must respect the tree. Let's respect all the trees. So respect is learned through ceremony, as a process. It's an old one. And so, thanksgiving comes as a natural way, as a being. It's part of life. It's not something that you do occasionally. It's something you do all the time. And that's how the process has been passed down.

And so, we have these wellsprings of knowledge about places that only aboriginal people would know because they have lived there. They have intimate knowledge of what's there. And when people are destroyed and languages are destroyed, you destroy that knowledge along with it. And so, what you're saying, what do they have to offer? Indigenous people, I think, may have the long-term thinking required for proper context.

**MOYERS:** Context being?

**Chief LYONS:** Being life, as it functions in the cycles, in the great cycles of life, you know, as we do our cycle of being born and going back to the Earth again, as a tree is a sapling and grows to full being and then falls as it goes back to the Earth again, as the spring comes and the fall and the winter and it comes again—it's endless, the cycle, as long as you protect the cycle, as long as you participate in the cycle, as long as you honor it and respect it, then it will continue, but it doesn't have to.

**MOYERS:** Do you think it's a given that human beings are a permanent feature of this natural world? I mean, does the world need



us that much?

**Chief LYONS:** Oh, the world doesn't need us at all. I think it's probably better off, where the world is concerned—you know, what we call the wilderness—which is, again, an English term. Indians didn't even have a word for "wild." They didn't know what that meant. So out there in this pristine, shall we say, land where everybody wants to go and see and be for a little while, that's the beauty of a place and sometimes, there's people there who are so unintrusive that you don't even see them. They've acclimated to the place. They live there with it as part of it. And that's the people who have a knowledge.

**MOYERS:** More and more people are turning to natives, to Indians and saying, "Share your knowledge with us." But don't you think—honestly, now, practically—it is too late? For how many years have we had the dominant note, the clarion trumpet of "conquer the Earth," you have dominion over the Earth. We're building cities to create habitats far-removed from this. Our mentality is a part of that "civilization" now and what you're talking about is wonderful and wise, the stories are profound and instructive and yet irrelevant—

**Chief LYONS:** Well, maybe.

**MOYERS:**—to this modern world.

**Chief LYONS:** It may be irrelevant at the moment. We don't preach here, in this, our country, you know. We don't proselytize. We try to—as a matter of fact, we try to protect what we have from intrusion. And yet, at a meeting that was held in Hopi back in 1969, when we sat there with many Indian leaders from around the country, spiritual leaders, and they talked about these young people who were sitting on our doorsteps every day when we got up and they had come from all over the country and they were coming to be an Indian or they were coming to learn something about us. And we said, "This is a very strange phenomenon, you know, that our white brother's children are now coming to our doorstep and wanting to be part of us. What do we do with this?" You know, and so one of the Hopi elders said, "Well, we have a prophecy about that." And he said that there was going to come a time when they're going to come and ask for direction. Maybe this is what's happening.

So it came under discussion and it was agreed upon at that time that perhaps this may be true and if it is, then we should be more responsive, then, to the questions and we should maybe try to help, to see what we can do, to pass on whatever we can however we can. And so, it was agreed upon at that time that we would work more directly, then, and we have been, much more directly since that time.

How much can be imparted is hard to say, but the "isms" of this world—Communism, capitalism, all of these "isms"—are really quite bereft of a spiritual side to it. And what we were told when we made our laws, when the Great Law was put down, was to have the spiritual center of it, you know, the center of the law to be spiritual, the Great Law. And so, when we see people who don't deal with this entirely, then we say, "Well, it's only going to be a matter of time when it's going to come to a problem."

**MOYERS:** The reality of human beings keeps intruding on the stories and the philosophy, the instructions.

**Chief LYONS:** Well, it's an ongoing discussion which each generation has to learn. What Indians are about, I think, first of all is community. They're about mutual support, they're about sharing, they're about understanding what's common land, common air, common water, common and for all. They're about freedom.

**MOYERS:** But they're divided and separated on the reservations. Many of those who come into the larger world perish psychologically, emotionally, spiritually.

**Chief LYONS:** And on the reservations as well, but this is an intrusion again by our white brother. He has made these reservations. He has controlled that. You know, we've gone from a great power to a small power. Now, Chief Seattle said, "As the waves come, one behind the other," he said, "so nations come. And as the waves disappear, so nations disappear. So perhaps," he said, "this is what will happen to us."

**MOYERS:** Don't your people call yourselves "the real people"?

**Chief LYONS:** Yeah, the real people.

**MOYERS:** That's the real people in the sense of—not exclusion. That's not meant, as I understand it, in the exclusionary sense. It means "We are here, material people."

**Chief LYONS:** Yes.

**MOYERS:** "We are part of this physical Earth."

**Chief LYONS:** We are now. We are now. Now is us. We're the seventh generation. I'm sitting here as the seventh generation because seven generations ago, those people were looking out for me. Seven generations from now, someone will be here, I know. And so, each generation makes sure that seven generations is coming all the time.

**MOYERS:** And that's accountability, right?

**Chief LYONS:** And that's accountability. We're accountable. We, you, and I, we're accountable.

**MOYERS:** To keep it ongoing?

**Chief LYONS:** Yes, we are and they are going to call us. They're the ones that are going to say, "Why did you do this," or "Why did you not do this?"

**MOYERS:** I wish I could believe that about the human being because when I see what, you know, what this generation has been handed, our present generation's been handed quite a legacy of pollution, poisoned rivers, forests disappearing, these 500-year-old trees you talk about being cut down for the bottom-line now. I mean, I'm not sure that what you call "the seventh generation" and George Washington and Thomas Jefferson call "posterity" are getting a fair deal.

**Chief LYONS:** Oh, life isn't fair, is it? Life has never been fair. That's a hard lesson, you know, because when you're young and you're brought up and you're protected and people make sure that things are even and divided equally among the children and all of a sudden, when you're out and you find out, "No, it doesn't work that way. How come I'm sick and he isn't? How come they died or this is

going to happen here?"

But that's life and as we say, each person is born with a number of days in your hand. When you come to the end of that number, then that's your time." And some people say, "Well, they died too soon. They didn't finish." No, they finished. They finished what they were going to do. That was it.

And so, it's not fatalistic as much as reality. You know, your part and your time, the time that you're a great tree, you know. Remember the words of Red Jacket when he said, "I'm an old man." He says, "My limbs are old and there's no leaves on them and I'm ready to fall," he says, "but my heart fails me when I think of the children and what faces them." He was talking about me. Well, I'm here. I'm here. I feel pretty good and the other thing, I guess, is very important is that we shouldn't take ourselves so seriously.

**MOYERS:** Even a chief?

**Chief LYONS:** Well, especially a chief, I guess, you know. I think you're just a human being, really, and you happen to take on a responsibility anybody else could have taken on if they wanted to do it and took the commitment to do it. And you begin to see the serious side of things quite a bit, but nevertheless, in all of this, you know, there's life to be lived. I said an instruction—and the instruction was to give thanks. There was a second instruction that I didn't mention. That was to enjoy life.

**MOYERS:** What sustains you?

**Chief LYONS:** Oh, my belief in the people, my belief in the ceremonies, my belief in the Earth. And I'm really kind of optimistic, coming all down to it.

**MOYERS:** Vaclav Havel said we should leave that—that hope is not optimism. Hope is a state of the spirit, a state of the soul.

**Chief LYONS:** Yeah. I deal in reality. I deal very much in reality. In order for us to have survived up to this point, we have to deal in reality.

**MOYERS:** But you see, you have survived because you—well, have you survived? Indigenous people have lived for centuries close to nature, in harmony with this world and yet, you've been overwhelmed by the material progress of the industrial society. Have you really survived or is it just the stories that survived?

**Chief LYONS:** No, I don't think so. I think the spirit is quite there and then, I think the spirit is manifested outside as we look about here. It's all here. We are told about the long houses, about the ceremony, the power of the ceremonies and the thanksgiving that we are instructed to do. They said, "As long as there's one to sing and one to dance, one to speak and one to listen, life will go on." So as long as the instructions are being carried out, even if it's down to the last four, life will go on.

**MOYERS:** [voice-over]: From the Onondaga Nation in upstate New York, this has been a conversation with Chief Oren Lyons. I'm Bill Moyers.

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