

Releasing the Burden: Haudenosaunee Concept of Condolence

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As you may have seen in this issue of the Eastern Door, concerned community members are organizing a community condolence ceremony for the people of Kahnawake. To my knowledge, such an act was never performed in present day Kahnawake and perhaps the time has come to greet such an intervention of the clear minded. As requested by those who are organizing the ceremony, this author will attempt to explain the purpose of the Haudenosaunee condolence ceremony and its history within the Haudenosaunee. I will do the best I can in relating the knowledge I have learnt. Some of the ancient stories relayed in this article have been shorted for reasons of brevity and continuity.

History of Haudenosaunee Condolence

Since the dawn of time, human beings have dealt with the mystery of death provoking various, and sometime conflicting, faiths surrounding the spiritual implications of death and the afterlife. What is universal around the globe is the human reaction to the death of loved ones. Regardless of race or religion, human beings have mourned the loss of loved ones and as a result feel an overwhelming sense of loss and sorrow. Sometimes, this emotional suffering will profoundly affect the thinking of the mourning; thus affecting this person's daily life and interaction with others

The people of Kahnawake are no different and react the same, however the Haudenosaunee have devised a unique way of dealing with death and other factors that disturb the functions of ka'nikonhrí:io (a good mind). Kanonhsonni'kéha, the way of life of the Long House, is bent on interdependence and the concept of autonomous responsibility, which is primarily a result of the Iroquois traditional division of labor. Indeed, the winters of the Eastern Woodlands were indeed harsh and the failure of a task could lead to starvation or worse. A consequence of individuals not fulfilling their designated responsibilities in the interdependent social structure of the Haudenosaunee would eventually result in a collective breakdown.

In the time before Tekanawí:ta brought the Kaianere'kó:wa (the Great Law of Peace) to the Haudenosaunee, the Iroquois had recognized that those who are mourning affected this interdependent social structure by unconscious neglect. Moreover, it was said that this was a time of ruthless violence, which left many dead and just as many mourning. It is important to note that in that time, mourning periods lasted a full year. With so many dead and so many obscured by sorrow, the social structure of the Iroquois was breaking down due to the numbers of people who neglected their duties and responsibilities as a result of being crippled by the sorrow of mourning. The leadership could not find a solution to this dilemma until one day a young man presented to the people and leadership; a new social organization that would resolve the epidemic. This idea was clans.

The young man, thereafter named as Ro'nikonhrowá:nen (He has great ideas), proposed a system whereby families would take identification with an element of the natural living world. The people did this and after a series of events it eventually became so that two moieties (a collection of clans)

were created and consequently separated by a river. One moiety consisted of the deer, bear, snipe and eel clans; while the other belong to the peoples of the wolf, beaver, turtle, and hawk clans. With this separation of the moieties, a relationship status of cousinship was established between the two moieties. Therefore, in the event a person of a clan within a particular moiety passes on into the next sphere of life, the people of the opposite moiety would intervene and condole the mourning that now suffer his or her loss. This was the first instance where the Iroquois invented a social system that would remove the burden of sorrow and despair from those mourning by a process of condolence.

In time, the people strayed away and eventually forgot this unique concept and thus came the emergence of the five troubled nations. This was an era of violent reproach and blood feud and with so many people dead from campaigns of carnage and vengeance; the people left behind condolence and accumulated a heavy burden of despair. Tekanawí:ta, the Peacemaker, after bringing forth the good tidings of peace and power, revitalized and refined the concept and procedure of condolence.

During the formation of the league, Aionwà:tha of the Onondagas, lost his daughters due to the evil sorcery of Atotárho and in his grief Aionwà:tha exiled himself the land of the Onondagas. On his journey he came across a riverbed where he found shells of wampum. He then collected these shells and refined them so that they could be used as beads. Aionwà:tha made three strings of wampum, and as he gazed upon them he contemplated how someone in so much grief could be consoled; what words could be said to console his troubled spirit?

Aionwà:tha resolved that if he ever encountered anyone in grief, he would take these three strings of wampum and “put consoling words into them.” Eventually, Aionwà:tha himself was consoled for the loss of his daughters by those who in time understood his desire to be consoled. With those three strings, the tears from Aionwà:tha’s eyes were wiped away so that he may see clearly again, his ears were cleared so that he may hear clearly again; and the obstruction in his throat was taken away so that he may speak from his heart again. Hope was restored to Aionwà:tha.

Soon Aionwà:tha and Tekanawí:ta met in great friendship and proceeded to unify the five troubled nations as well as compiled the laws of the Great Peace. Through the Kaianere’kó:wa the condolence ceremony became a rite of the Haudenosaunee designed to elevate the leadership and restore hope to the people. Tekanawí:ta refined and elaborated on the ancient teachings of condolence into a very concise and organized ceremony that best reflects the true righteousness and nature of the Haudenosaunee. The Kaianere’kó:wa now divides the nations of the Haudenosaunee into two moieties; the Mohawk, Onondaga, and Seneca nations would be called the Elder Brothers, while the Oneida and Cayuga nations would be known as the Younger Brothers.

Similarly to the process established among the clans, the Kaianere’kó:wa teaches us that in the event a leader of a nation of a particular moiety (either of the Elder Brothers or Younger Brothers) passes on into the next sphere of life, the leadership of the opposite moiety would intervene and condole the mourning that now suffer his or her loss. This ceremony was most recently delivered in Akwesasne with the raising of the Orenehkó:wa title last year.

Why a Community Condolence?

Let us now address the most important of questions; why a community condolence? Indeed the condolence currently being organized by community members is not a ceremony to install leadership, rather its purpose is to uplift the spirit and clear the minds of the entire community. Truly, the people of Kahnawake carry a large burden of despair, anger due to events that have accumulated over the past 285 years since the formation of this settlement. More important, there have been events that have taken place in our community and the entire world, which has shocked and horrified our people. In Kahnawake, we have lost many young people, experienced the wrath of drugs and alcohol when in Tioweró:ton (Doncaster), a contingent of intoxicated young people terrorized a Youth Center camping trip and in the most populated areas of Kahnawake; community members had to deal with urban-style gunfire. Sorrow and madness now seems to reign in Mohawk country.

Why does sorrow and madness reign? Our people carry and continue to accumulate an unhealthy burden of negative emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness; no doubt attributed to the effects of colonialism. The sociological affects of colonialism should not be underestimated as it has surely stripped us from our language, culture, integrity, and the interdependent nature of the Haudenosaunee social structure. A community condolence ceremony would act as a vehicle to deliver discipline and morale to the people; and in turn relinquish their unnecessary hold on negative feelings.

It must also be noted that the people of the world have recently suffered the tragedy of the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001. Many of our ironworkers were in New York City at the time of this disaster and many had helped with the rescue and cleanup effort. These men have witnessed and experienced an enormous calamity, which will be burdening them with the ill feelings for some time to come. The need becomes apparent to condole our troubled spirits and restore hope to everyone in Kahnawake.

A condolence ceremony is not exclusive to the raising of leaders, but is for anyone who is in the state of psychological and emotional suffering. It is a process performed by the clear minded designed to remove from those who are in a state of shock or emotional distress; any unnecessary burdens of negativity. Many aspects of Kanonhsonni'kéha revolve around this concept. Even during the Haudenosaunee funeral address, the concept of condolence is reflected into the proceedings.

In the case of a community condolence, whereby no leaders are to be raised, only the first three strings of condolence would be used on the people. These strings are used on the eyes, ears and throats of the people. With these three strings used to remove the obstructions of a clear mind, the people will be bundled with good feelings and a newly restored hope. However, it is important to note that such a ceremony is only as powerful as the individual allows it to be.

Young people are especially encouraged to participate, not only because they will inherit the guardianship of Kahnawake, but also because they have inherited the emotional burdens carried by their parents. A burden caused by neglect, lack of expressive love, abuse, and a number of other factors caused as direct or indirect result of colonialism. This burden that the young people have accumulated is now expressed in the form of graffiti by some and in some more unfortunate cases,

through violence. Our young people should be the focus of this ceremony and be bundled with good feelings belief in their true potential. Let us now reestablish the true interdependent nature of our ancestors by not being too proud or ignorant to accept a helping hand. Let us now all proceed towards the good tidings of peace and the power of a good mind together as one community, thus establishing one mind, one body, and one heart.

We will restore hope!