

Oren R. Lyons

Excerpts from “Tradition as a Foundation for Today’s Tribal Successes”

Welcoming address at honoring ceremony for Honoring Nations 2002, Bismarck, North Dakota, June 18, 2002

By Oren R. Lyons (Onondaga)

Nyawenha skannon – Thank you for being well. Skannon is our word for “peace,” which also means “health.” In that simple greeting is embodied a nation’s principle of peace and the understanding that there can be no peace without health. Compare that greeting with “Hello” or “Hey man, what’s up,” you begin to get an idea of the depth of Native peoples experience, knowledge and wisdom based upon our common law of respect.

Language is the soul of a nation. It is the wellspring of our wisdom and our identity. There are momentous struggles going on in Indian Country to retain our languages. This struggle is taking place around the world as the languages of colonizing states obliterate indigenous languages. Today, English is becoming the common language of the world; Spanish is next. Both languages have a powerful history of colonization that we well know. I grew up in an era where teachers said, “speak English.” The generations before me went through the same thing.

Many of our parents began not teaching their languages to protect their children from punishments. Boarding schools were predicated upon destroying our languages and replacing them with English. The first such boarding school was the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. Colonel Pratt’s philosophy there was to “Kill the Indian and save the man.”

Mission schools across America did the same thing and US laws were made to forbid Native religious practices. Laws that are still on the books. The current Indian education law is purposely predicated upon our assimilation into the mainstream of American life.

Indigenous languages were never “lost.” That term implies that somehow Indian nations are responsible for their own demise. Our languages were taken, in some cases destroyed, as a deliberate federal policy. Mission schools across America were given the authority and task to do this. Well, they did not succeed. We are still here. Every Indian nation in North America has a history that will make you cry. Indeed our leaders did cry for the future of our peoples. For us.

In spite of all that, we are still here. Lucky for America. I say that in regard to the new movie out called “The Wind Talkers.” Navajo men used their language to save the lives of untold thousands of American soldiers, maybe even to win the war. Talk about irony. If Colonel Pratt and federal policy had been successful, there would have been no Navajo language to save the American soldiers. That’s unintended consequences in reverse. That brings me to why we are here.

This gathering is about human spirit. It’s about the integrity of the Native peoples of North America. It’s about our will to survive. It’s about honoring nations. The Harvard Project’s Honoring Contributions in the Governance of American Indian Nations is about the celebration of our peoples, not only as survivors, but as innovators and designers for our next generations. High-tech countries like Sweden, Denmark, Finland and some member states of the European Union

are now seeking indigenous philosophies regarding the Earth as a whole living entity. Respect for the Earth is respect for the future.

We, as leaders of our nations, must consider unbridled development for its long-term consequences. As a cautionary tone to our Indian nations as we develop, stick to our original principles of respect and work with the Earth as we have always done to ensure a safe and good future for our children. That's you Honoring Nations honorees and I salute you.

Oren Lyons is a Chief and Faithkeeper of the Onondaga Indian Nation.