

CHIEF OREN LYONS



*WILDERNESS RESOURCE
DISTINGUISHED LECTURESHIP*

University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center

Wilderness Resource
Distinguished Lectureship

10

***WILDERNESS IN
NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE***

Chief Oren Lyons

University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center

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Foreword

James R. Fazio

The wilderness resource distinguished lecture by Chief Oren Lyons is an historic occasion. I say this for two reasons. First, it is the tenth presentation in the Wilderness Resource Distinguished Lecture Series sponsored by the University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center. This is a real milestone, and it is a tribute to the vision of former dean John Ehrenreich who initiated the series in 1977.

I remember our first discussion about what we hoped would be annual visits by prominent individuals associated with wilderness. Dean Ehrenreich's view was that the University of Idaho could and should be a national leader not only in the scientific investigation of wilderness but also in wilderness education. As he envisioned the lecture series, it would be one of the ways the Wilderness Research Center could intelligently examine the problems, the values, and the opportunities of wilderness areas after they have been established through the political and legislative process.

The series began in 1977 with Senator Frank Church speaking to a standing-room-only crowd in the ballroom of the Student Union Building and to a live, state-wide television audience. His subject was "Wilderness in a Balanced Land Use Framework." The next year our speaker was Roderick Nash, historian and author of *Wilderness and the American Mind*, who spoke of "Wilderness Management: A Contradiction in Terms?" He was followed in 1979 by Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus who proposed a reorganization of the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management into a Department of Natural Resources and discussed the reorganization's implications for wilderness.

In 1980 we went from the large scale to the smaller scale with Patrick F. Noonan, former president of The Nature Conservancy, who talked about his organization's work to preserve natural diversity and America's natural heritage. The following year our speaker was Russell

E. Dickenson, director of the National Park Service, who addressed the subject "Wilderness Values in the National Parks." Then, in 1982, author Michael Frome asked rhetorically if the "battle for the wilderness" would be "our forever conflict."

In 1983, we hosted the First National Conference on Wilderness Management and heard from the directors of all four major land management agencies—the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—who addressed issues of wilderness management facing their organizations.

In 1984, congressional candidate and former vice president of the National Audubon Society Brock Evans presented an essay titled "In Celebration of Wilderness: The Progress and the Promise."

We then broke the annual sequence for two years, reviving it in 1987 with Jay D. Hair, president of the nation's largest conservation organization, the National Wildlife Federation, who spoke about "Wilderness: Promises, Poetry, and Pragmatism." Finally, last year we went international with Ian Player of South Africa, founder of the Wilderness Leadership School and World Wilderness Congress, who provided his perspective on "Using Wilderness Experiences to Enhance Human Potential and Understanding."

Besides being the landmark tenth in this series of truly distinguished lectures, the 1989 presentation is historic because for the first time—and long overdue—we receive a Native American perspective on wilderness. Those of us in the Wilderness Research Center are particularly pleased and honored to have Chief Oren Lyons make this contribution to the Wilderness Resource Distinguished Lecture Series.

Dr. James R. Fazio is head of the Department of Wildland Recreation Management and acting director of the Wilderness Research Center.

Introduction

John C. Hendee

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to our 1989 wilderness resource distinguished lecture. Tonight it's my privilege to introduce Chief Oren Lyons, professor in the Department of American Studies and director of Native American studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Oren is Turtle Clan chief in the Onondaga Nation of the Iroquois Confederacy. He is truly an international leader of indigenous people, representing them on the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders for Global Survival. During the past 12 months Chief Lyons has conferred and spoken in the Soviet Union, Australia, Canada, England, South Africa, and Lesotho.

Oren Lyons has been a leader in all his endeavors. He was an all-American lacrosse player on a national championship team at Syracuse University. He is an outstanding artist, worked as a free-lance sports illustrator, and rose through the ranks of Norcross greeting card company to become its planning director, guiding the efforts of 180 artists. In 1970, having been named a chief in the Onondaga Nation, he walked away from his Madison Avenue executive responsibilities to work for the cause of Indian people.

Last year, it was my great pleasure to travel for three weeks with Chief Oren Lyons in Africa, reviewing the condition of wilderness and wildlife reserves and the plight of nearby indigenous people. There I had the great pleasure of experiencing Chief Lyons's compassion, insight, wisdom, appreciation for indigenous cultures and ways of life, and also his sense of humor and personal warmth.

Early in our trip, while we were recovering from jet lag, I was awakened by Chief's hand on my shoulder. He whispered, "Come with me, and let's greet the new day."

We trudged to the beach of the Indian Ocean, less than a mile from the Mozambique border, where during the night we had heard gun fire and seen occasional flashes of explosions from the continuing civil war. There he led me and others in our party in a beautiful ceremony: greeting the sun with a sharp yell to get the attention of the creator and all of the animals and then sending messages of hope, in turn, to each direction. We then shared smoke from tobacco, grown from seeds handed down for 10,000 years or more among his people.

The significance of this beautiful and inspiring ceremony was to greet the new day and, before it was sullied by a cross word or a jealous thought, to pledge oneself to do the best that one could in all efforts that day. It was an inspiring experience and one that we repeated at every opportunity during the rest of our trip. It reflected Chief Oren Lyons's appreciation for people and animals as part of the earth, the creator, spiritual life, and the holistic view we associate with wilderness.

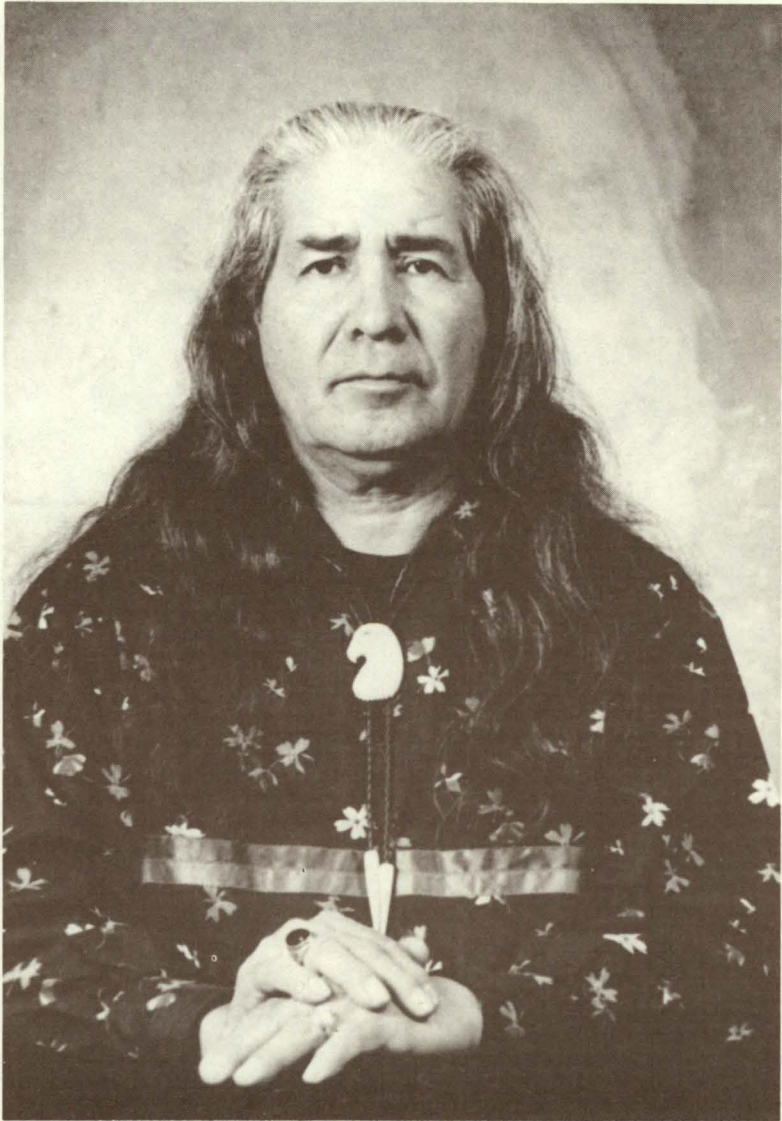
It gives me great pleasure to introduce my distinguished friend and colleague, Chief Oren Lyons.

John C. Hendee is dean of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Range Sciences at the University of Idaho.



The Maple

Ashland '09



WILDERNESS IN NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE

Chief Oren Lyons

Neyawenha skano: Thank you for being well, for being here. During the introduction, as John was telling about our trip and the ceremony that I did my best to carry through, I reflected on what I would consider to be spiritual people. And I would like you to know that I do not consider myself a spiritual leader. Because I know the spiritual leaders that we depend on, and I know the knowledge, experience, commitment, and sacrifice that it takes to be one. I know these spiritual leaders, and I'm very grateful for them.

And with the help and support of my friend Bob Staffanson, I've been working with the traditional Circle of Elders for many years, gathering these leaders together annually to talk about the health and welfare of our Mother Earth and also to consider what needs to be done for the millions of people who live on our Mother Earth and all of the life that abounds. So annually we struggle to get this meeting together, and through Bob's good effort it has occurred every year.

We will be meeting in Haida-Gwaii this year, in mid-June, and we'll be meeting with varieties of people. Who knows? It's always a guess to us who will arrive. And the young people are very much involved in this, and they were intent this year, wherever we were going to meet, on building a meetinghouse for the elders. They wanted to go there ahead of time and build this meetinghouse and gather up the young people who live there and do this in respect for the people who were coming.

Now I don't know whether they're going to be able to accomplish that. Our meeting came forward much earlier than usual, so we'll just have to wait and see, but I thought that their initiative and their effort—because this was their idea, what they wanted to do—was important because it gives direction to young people in relation to things that have to be done throughout this world. And it also reminds the elders of the energy and the needs of young people in this world and the directions that they are seeking and the need for guidance and leadership.

And so, I wanted to remind everyone that this title, spiritual leader, is a very sacred one; it demands great respect, and not too many can carry that title. So with that I'll begin the discussion.

And I start with a greeting, the ancient greeting from my nation: Neyawenha skano, "Thank you for being well." It's a greeting of our people and recognition of good health. And I extend this greeting on behalf of my people to all who are here and even to those who cannot be here.

And I want to thank you for allowing me to address this forum, the Wilderness Resource Distinguished Lecture Series. My thanks and appreciation to my host, the University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center, and in particular to my friend and colleague, the dean of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Range Sciences, John Hendee.

The title "Wilderness in Native American Culture" is all-inclusive. I can only address you with my limited knowledge in this sphere. You must understand that no one can speak for all the Indian nations in this Great Turtle Island. I can only relate to you the experiences of the native peoples of these lands because we have a common understanding and ethic about this great land we call Mother Earth.

We share a common reverence and love for our lands, and we have hundreds of distinct languages and dialects, and we have prayers and ceremonies to honor these commitments and duties to the spiritual forces and powers that prevail over all life. We believe in the creation and the creator, the giver of all life.

Cycles of Ceremony and Song

The traditional life styles of the indigenous peoples of these lands are endless cycles of ceremony and song, commemorating all aspects of the

creation. Though our languages are different, our prayers and ceremonies honor the same spiritual powers. In spite of the combined efforts of our white brothers over five centuries to change us and to replace our ways with theirs, we still endure and continue our ceremonies locked in with the seasons and cycles of life; we continue to survive.

It is interesting to me how attitudes are now beginning to change: how the same churches and their leaders who missionized our people, took our children, forbade them to speak their languages, forbade our people to carry through our ancient ceremonies, captured and destroyed our religious items and sacred objects, these same people are now sitting down with us in a common effort to survive. It's ironic that in these discussions they are probing for knowledge and understanding of these lands and the natural forces of nature. Ironic because the sources of this knowledge are in the languages, ceremonies, and cultures of our people that they spent 500 years trying to change and destroy.

In 1981, I was invited to participate as a speaker in a gathering in New Zealand called the Namibasa Festival with an amazing collection of religious leaders, environmentalists, alternative life style specialists, musicians, and people concerned for the environment, not the least of whom included Chuck Daniels and Dizzy Gillespie. The organizers had asked the Maori people to act as security for the event, and naturally I spent a lot of time with these Maoris.

We stood there one bright and sunny day observing the scene in amazement, seeing at least half of the 30,000 people there were not wearing any clothes, and my Maori brother said, "Look at that: They spent the past 200 years taking the paint off our faces and getting us to wear clothes, and now they wear the paint and no clothes." I thought that was an interesting observation.

The So-Called Medicine Men

As one of the members of the traditional Circle of Elders and Youth, I listen to complaints from Indian people from all parts of the continent who say that their sacred ceremonies and sacred ceremonial objects, such as pipes, feathers, and symbols, have been appropriated by so-called medicine men and women who purport to be shamans and spiritual advisers and leaders carrying out ceremonies that they say they learned from some mysterious Indian medicine man or woman. And all kinds of people buy into this, literally paying hundreds of dollars for sweat lodges and vision quests among other things. Most of

these so-called medicine men are not Indians, but a few are, greed and avarice unfortunately being a common denominator among all peoples. Now this has become a major problem among all of our people because they feel that their sacred ceremonies have been appropriated without their consent and misused commercially, not to say spiritually.

I don't feel responsible for any adults who wish to spend their money on such things, but I am concerned about this feeling of being betrayed by those Indians who indulge in this and by those non-Indian "shamans" who for commercial gain purport to use our methods and ceremonies. This goes on around the world, and we hear of sun dances being held in Germany, Holland, Austria, and in other places.

Seeking a Spiritual Way

There's another side to this that I think is important. Many of the people are young, many are involved in the "New Age" phenomenon occurring all over the Western world, and many are just seeking. It seems to me they are seeking a spiritual way; it seems to me that they are not satisfied with the organized religions that they were brought up with and that there is a general dissatisfaction with organized religions—a sort of spiritual bankruptcy of the church. These are my observations, and I could be far off the mark, but I have been traveling considerably, and it's pretty consistent. In fact, I'm amazed at the consistency of this particular phenomenon.

Since I am an Indian chief they often come to me wherever I go, and they seek the wisdom of our grandfathers. They believe we have a wisdom and a power, and they search for the security of a belief, and this reflects the sad state of affairs that prevails around the world.

Tatanga Mani

Tatanga Mani or "Walking Buffalo," a Stoney Indian from Canada, said at an address in London, England, in 1958:

Hills are always more beautiful than stone buildings, you know. Living in a city is an artificial existence. Lots of people hardly ever feel real soil under their feet, see plants grow except in flower pots, or get far enough beyond the street light to catch the enchantment of a night sky studded with stars. When people live far from scenes of the Great Spirit's making, it's easy for them to forget his laws.

Then he went on to say:

We were a lawless people, but we were on pretty good terms with the Great Spirit, creator and ruler of all. You whites assumed we were savages. You didn't understand our prayers. You didn't try to understand. When we sang our praises to the sun or moon or wind, you said we were worshipping idols. Without understanding, you condemned us as lost souls just because our form of worship was different from yours.

We saw the Great Spirit's work in almost everything: sun, moon, trees, wind, and mountains. Sometimes we approached him through these things. Was that so bad? I think we have a true belief in the supreme being, a stronger faith than that of most whites who have called us pagans . . . Indians living close to nature and nature's ruler are not living in darkness.

Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don't listen. They never learned to listen to the Indians so I don't suppose they'll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit.

This man died in 1967, not too long ago, a grandfather to all, a man of wisdom and compassion. He said we were lawless, and then he went on to recount some of our laws: The law of love and respect, the duties of ceremony, the understanding that the creator made all things and therefore we must respect them, the law of stillness and quiet to listen and to learn. He spoke of many things in that short speech, things that we should reflect upon.

Our people had many such speakers down through the centuries of our coexistence here on these lands, and they spoke often, but no one listened, or cared to. The white people didn't understand why we called the four winds our grandfathers, the moon our grandmother, the sun our uncle or father, or the earth our mother. They didn't understand how we wanted to draw as close to them as we could, like our family. How we loved them, and all that they did for us.

They didn't understand how we were instructed by song and ceremony to give a great thanksgiving for all of these things. We the Iroquois have been told that our primary duty is to carry through the great ceremonies of thanksgiving for all of these things—the chief of the trees, the maple; the chief of the fruits, the strawberry; the corn, beans, and squash (the three sisters)—the harvest thanksgiving and the great mid-winter festival that ties the year together in one bundle and prepares us for the next season.

A Spiritual Law

We have instructions that continue to direct our lives. At one time this hemisphere was peopled by nations who understood the great law and abided by these laws. The lands were clean, the water was pure, and the air was crystal clear. It would be hard to describe the pristine beauty of these lands or the abundance of fish and animal life. There was a general peace that prevailed because there was an adherence to law, ancient and unwritten, a great spiritual law.

All nations lived as free people, from the youngest to the eldest, and these thousands of communities were governed by these natural laws. We are blood, flesh, and bone, and we are bound by the same laws of *all* blood, flesh, and bone; all growing life is bound by these laws, and the first of these laws is *water*.

Water is necessary for life, water that we take for granted. But we are now being faced with some stark realities of this particular law. We take rain for granted, but now see that we cannot take any water source for granted.

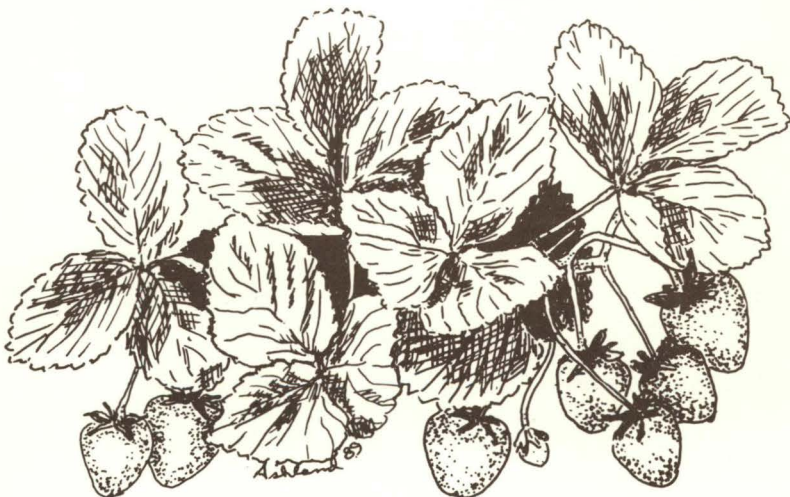
We Indians have ceremonies for the thunder and the lightning that bring the rain that waters the earth. We call the thundering voices our grandfathers, and we greet the first thunder of the new season with a ceremony of thanksgiving because they have returned to continue their duties to water the earth and the life upon this earth and to freshen the springs, streams, lakes, and oceans. We respect this great source of life and have special ways to acknowledge it.

Our ceremonies may seem, at times, barbaric or quaint to some, but we love them. The familiarity of ancient songs to commemorate our fidelity to these laws and these ceremonies breeds respect, an attitude of humble gratitude, something that I think is sorely lacking in contemporary society.

We must protect and defend our water resources because we are accountable to our coming generations, to our children and to their grandchildren. So then it is attitudes that we must change. It is philosophies that put economic gains in the short term ahead of stabilized life support systems in the long term that threaten life as we know it. We must question the motives of our leaders today, wherever they are. We must not despair because we think we are powerless, because we do have power: the power of the people with one mind, with one purpose, one heart, the power of unity.

A long time ago, the great peacemaker came to my people, long before Columbus made his landfall in these lands. And this great man brought to the Haudenosaunee these ideas that are now ancient, but at the same time as new and as fresh as spring—these great principles of peace and freedom. He gave us our government, the constitution of the Haudenosaunee that united the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Tuscarora, and Seneca into the great Iroquois Confederacy that continues to stand today.

He planted the great tree of peace with the four white roots of truth reaching out in the four cardinal directions of the earth, instructing any of those who are lost and have nowhere to go to follow those roots back to their source and sit under the great long leaves of the tree of peace.



Vision of a Free Nation

We shared these principles with the founding fathers of the United States of America and helped raise you up as a free and independent nation. The person who saw this possibility, who had the vision to think of a free nation, was Benjamin Franklin. In 1744, at what is now Lancaster, Pennsylvania, a meeting was held between the Six Nations's chiefs and the governors of several of the colonies. An Onondaga chief exhorted the governors to gather themselves together like the Six Nations and bind themselves together as one. He told them they would never get anywhere fighting one another as they were doing, and they should follow the example of the Haudenosaunee.

The man keeping the minutes and records of that particular meeting was Benjamin Franklin. It was he who had the vision of a free nation, and it was he who said, "Why not?" He called together the Albany Plan of Union 10 years later, and he asked the Six Nations's chiefs to be there and explain union and government.

Later, in 1775, commissioners from the Continental Congress came to Iroquois country and asked for a meeting with the confederacy, which was granted. At that meeting they asked that the Six Nations remain neutral in the coming conflict, and we saw this conflict as a battle between father and son, and we agreed. They said at that time, and I quote from the records of the Continental Congress, "We live upon the same ground as you. The same island [Turtle Island] is our common birth place. We desire to sit down under the same tree of peace with you; let us water its roots and cherish its growth, till the large leaves and flourishing branches shall extend to the setting sun and reach the skies."

And so it was that they took our advice and began a new nation predicated on peace, equality, and freedom—ancient principles to all Indian nations. And on these lands in 1776, two commissioners, George Morgan and Simon Girty, came to Fort Pitt in July and brought a great wampum belt with 13 diamonds designating the 13 fires of their new union and commemorated a peace with the Haudenosaunee on the eve of the revolution.

And in the discussion, they asked that we not be involved. And our chiefs said, "We agree, and we must ask you not to invite our young men to fight with you. Do not seek them out. And leave us in peace. And we like your suggestion so well that we're going to send chiefs with your men and this belt, and we'll carry it through the Great Lakes to the other nations." And they did.

The First Treaty

This was the first treaty the United States made in its new history as a nation. Subsequently it made many more, but unfortunately for the Indian nations, as our white brother grew stronger, he began to disregard his promises.

In 1915, in Supreme Court testimony concerning the validity of the Walla Walla treaty of 1855 with the Yakimas, Chief Weninock of the Yakimas explained what happened at Walla Walla, and he told how

Chief Kamiaken spoke after Governor Stevens asked him why he was so silent for so many days, and Kamiaken replied, "I am afraid that the white men are not speaking straight; that their children will not do what is right by our children; that they will not do what you have promised for them." And that's why he was so silent. He was another man of vision.

You are those children. He was speaking about you. And he said he didn't think you were going to keep your promise, and it seems that's the way it is.

So it comes to laws again, yours and ours. It comes to respect for the women and love for the children to see if we shall endure on this earth as people.

Wilderness

I will close with a quotation about wilderness. You reflect and be the judges of its contents.

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth as "wild." Only to the white man was nature a "wilderness" and only to him was the land "infested" with "wild" animals and "savage" people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it "wild" for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that for us the "Wild West" began.

This was Chief Luther Standing Bear, Oglala Sioux Nation. It's a comment on wilderness. So it's how you look at it. When the landfall occurred at Plymouth Rock, the Pilgrims looked at the great pines of New England, and they called it the "Dark Continent." They were afraid of the same great pines that surround us, what's left of them. And so it's all in perception, how you look at things.

Now it's spring. The wild onions are up; the leeks are up; everybody's out picking. Fish are running. And the Indians are out gathering, still gathering today. The greens that grow, the new food of the new year, our people are out gathering. The dandelions in my mother's yard are not safe from her stew pot; she will be out immediately, as soon as they come up. The cowslips, all of these things that we enjoy

so much and have enjoyed for years and years, the berries, are all coming.

And the people are tuned into this. Our people go out and gather them, they still gather. They still make the soup; they still make the greens; still in touch. And as the elder said, "When you separate yourself from the reality, then you lose touch, and you become insensitive, and it becomes easier to challenge these great forces."

A Common Cause

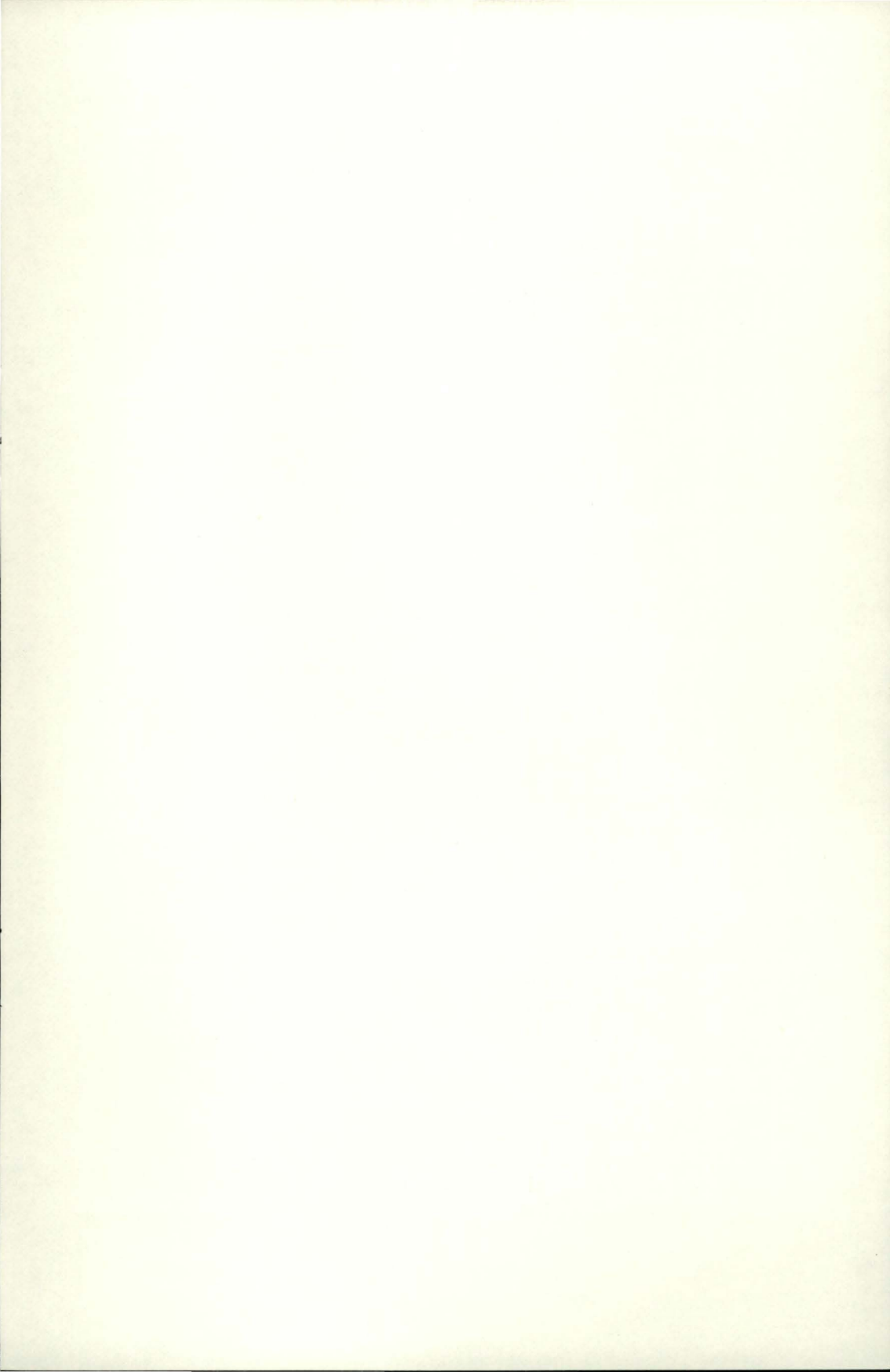
Today we have a common cause; we have to look out for the life coming—for your children, for my children. We are accountable; they will hold us accountable. When they're suffering in the coming times, they will look back upon us and say, "Why did they do this to us?" This is what we have to consider.

There's still time. Around the world it's the same. As John Hendee has said, I've been in the four corners. The feeling is the same; the people are the same; the issue is the same: Is there going to be a future for our young people?

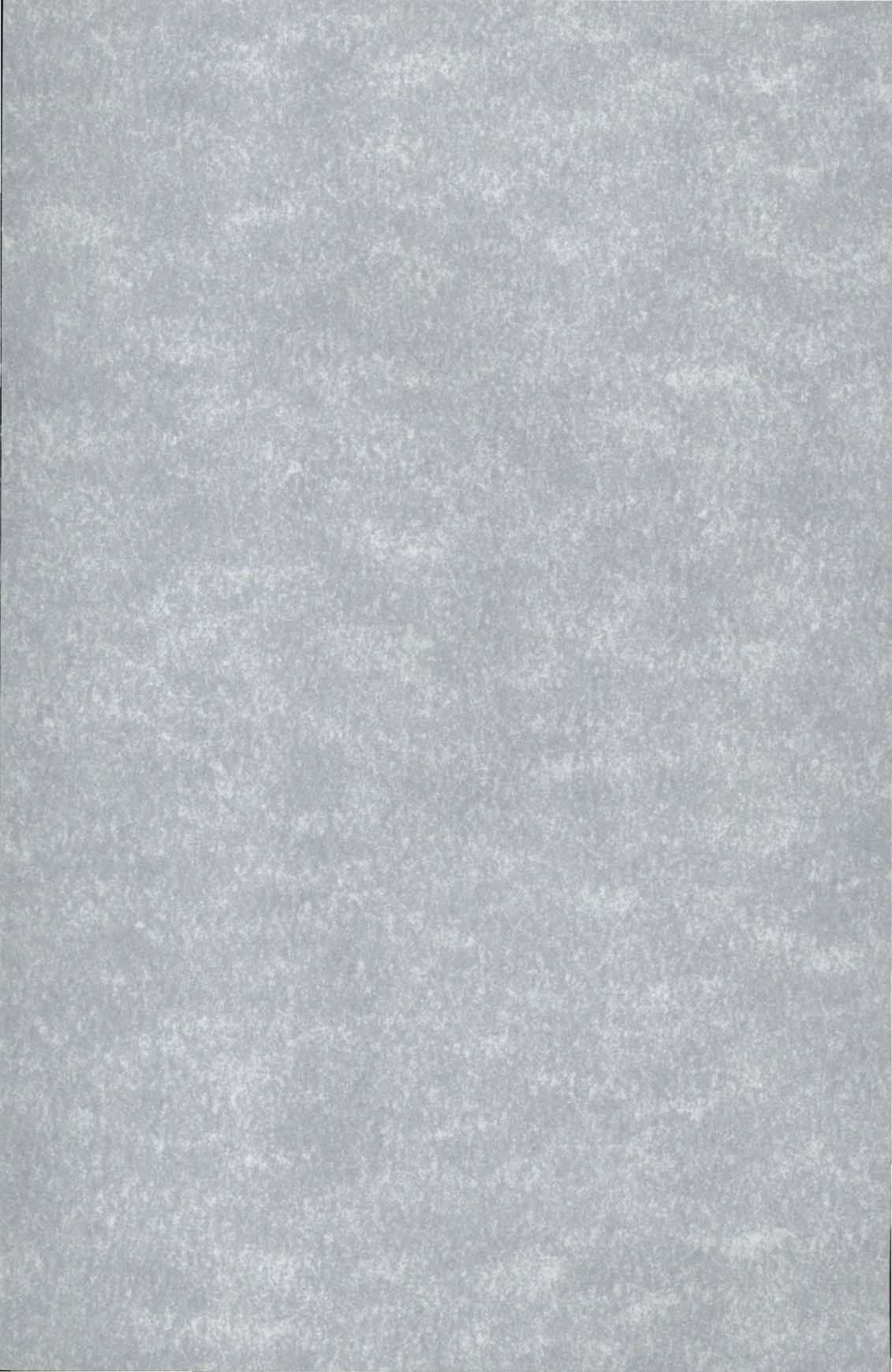
And it comes back to one of the old prophecies from the Six Nations. We had a third visionary called Guaniiyodiyoh, "Handsome Lake." And he was told many things, around 1799. But as he had listened and after he had observed and been shown all of these things, he said, "This is very discouraging. Is this all going to happen?" And the Four Spiritual Beings said to him, "We believe what you have seen is true and will come about. Just don't let it be your generation, because the generation that allows this to happen will suffer beyond all comprehension."

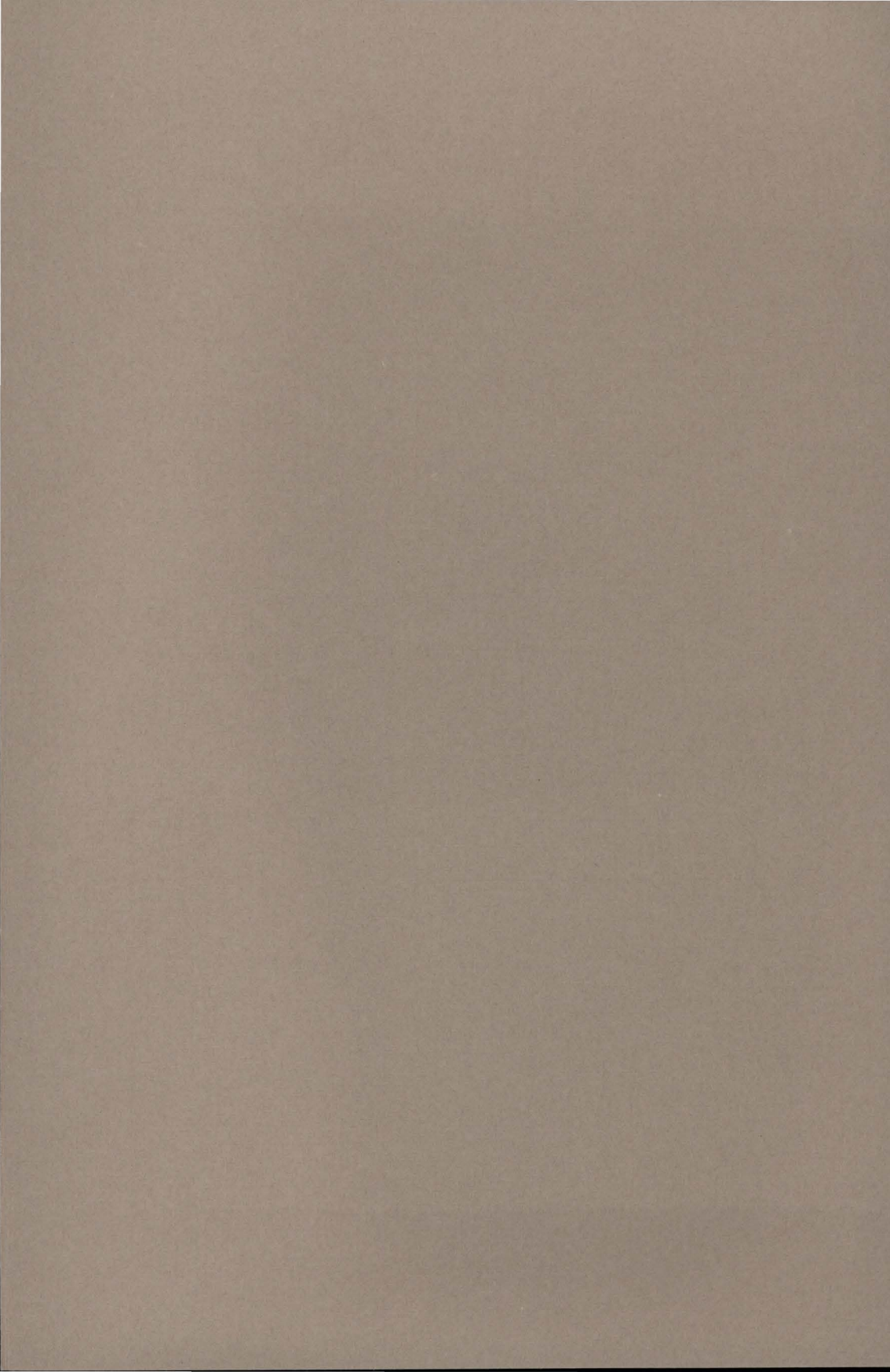
And so, in a word, the creator threw the ball back into our lap and simply said it's up to you when this will occur. And so we have to put aside thoughts of our own comfort, of our own security, of our own future, and think in terms of the instructions that we were given as chiefs of the confederacy, which are to make all decisions on behalf of, and in regard to, the Seventh Generation to come.

With that kind of vision, and with that kind of motive, I don't think it's too late. But it's a lot of work. We have to set aside our differences, and we have to work together as one people, one family, for the future of Mother Earth. Dahnayto. Now I am finished.











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