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THE SACRED AND THE SUPERFUND

A drop forms at the end of a mossy branch, hangs in a momentary sparkle, and then lets go. Other drips and drops join in the procession, one of a hundred rivulets from the hills above Otisco Lake. Gathering speed they splash over rocky ledges with growing urgency to be on their way, down Nine Mile Creek, and to Onondaga Lake. I cup my hands to the spring and drink. Knowing what I know, I want to tell it to stop, to hold it back from its fate. But, there is no stopping water.

This watershed lies within the ancestral homelands of the Onondaga people, the central fire of the Iroquois or Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Traditional Onondaga understand a world in which all beings were given a gift, a gift which simultaneously engenders a responsibility to the world. Water is a life sustainer. It has manifold duties: making plants grow, creating homes for fish and mayflies, and providing, for me, a cool drink. Fulfilling the role to which it is assigned is sacred work, a covenant with the rest of creation. Is it not a great wrong for any being to interfere with the sacred purpose of another, including water?

The sweetness of this water comes from the hills themselves, great shoulders of fine-grained limestone of inordinate purity. These old seafloors are almost pure calcium carbonate, with scarcely a trace of other elements to discolor its pearly gray. But, not all springs in these hills are sweet. Beneath the limestone shelves are salt-filled caverns, crystal palaces lined with cubes of halite. The Onondaga used the salt springs to season their corn soup and venison and to preserve the baskets of fish the waters offered up. Life was good and the people offered their thanks in the ways passed down for generations. Water rushes off to do its work, faithful to its responsibility, but people are not always as mindful as water. We can forget. And so the Haudenosaunee were given the Thanksgiving Address, a beautiful river of words by which the people send their greetings and thanks to all the elements of the natural world. Whenever the people gather, no matter how many or few, they begin with thanks for every element of the ecosystem. To the waters they say:

We give thanks to all the waters of the world for quenching our thirst and providing us with strength. Water is life. We know its power in many forms—waterfalls and rain, mists and streams, rivers and oceans. With one mind we send greetings and thanks to the Spirit of Water.⁽¹⁾



These “words that come before all else” reflect the sacred purpose of the people. For just as water was given certain responsibilities for sustaining the world, so too were the people. Chief among their duties was to give thanks for the gifts of the earth and to care for them. People are charged with sustaining those who sustain them, in the web of reciprocity.

The stories are told of the long ago times when the Haudenosaunee people did forget to live in gratitude. They became greedy and jealous and began fighting among themselves. Conflict brought only more conflict, until war between the nations became continuous. Soon, grief was known in every longhouse, and yet the violence went on. All were suffering.

It is told that, at that sorry time, far to the west, a son was born to a Huron woman who had not yet known a man. This handsome youth grew to manhood knowing that he had a special purpose. He explained to his family that he must leave home to carry a message to people in the east, a message from the Creator. He built for himself a great canoe carved of white granite. He journeyed across many waters until he pulled his stone canoe ashore, in the midst of the warring Iroquois. Here he spoke his message of peace and became known to all by the name of the Peacemaker. Few would hear him, but those who listened were transformed. His life in danger, weighted down with sorrow, the Peacemaker and his allies spoke peace in times of terrible trouble. For years, they traveled among villages. One by one, the chiefs of the warring nations came to accept the message of peace. All but one. Tadodaho, an evil wizard of the Onondaga, refused the way of peace for his people. He was a man so filled with evil that his hair was writhing with snakes and his body was crippled by hate. Tadodaho sent death and sorrow to the carriers of the message. But, the message was more powerful than he and eventually, Onondaga too accepted the words of peace. His twisted body was restored and, together, the messengers of peace combed the snakes from his hair. Tadodaho, was transformed.

The Peacemaker gathered together the leaders of all five Haudenosaunee nations. With his words and actions, he joined them with one mind. Here on the shores of Onondaga Lake, the Great Tree of Peace was planted, an enormous white pine. Five long green needles, joined in one bundle, represented the unity of the Five Nations. With one hand, it is told that the Peacemaker lifted the great tree from the soil. The assembled chiefs stepped forward to cast into the hole their weapons of war. On this very shore, the Nations agreed to “bury the hatchet” and live by the Great Law of Peace, which sets out right relations among peoples and with the natural world. Four white roots spread out to the four directions, inviting all peace-loving nations to shelter under



its branches. So was born the great Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the oldest living democracy on the planet. For its pivotal role, the Onondaga Nation became the central fire of the Confederacy. From that time forward, the name Tadodaho is carried by the spiritual leader of the Confederacy, the name of a loving leader and a holder of the Great Law of Peace.

The Peacemaker placed the far-seeing eagle atop the Great Tree, to warn the people of approaching danger. For the many centuries that followed, the eagle did its work and the Haudenosaunee people lived in peace and prosperity. But then another danger came to their homelands. A different kind of violence. The great bird must have called and called, but its voice was lost in the maelstrom winds of change. Today, the ground where the Peacemaker walked is a Superfund site.

In fact, nine Superfund sites line the shore of Onondaga Lake, around which the present-day city of Syracuse, New York, has grown. Thanks to more than a century of industrial development, the lake historically known as one of North America's most sacred sites is now known as the most polluted lake in the country. The Onondaga homelands came once again under attack.

Drawn by abundant resources and the coming of the Erie Canal, the captains of industry brought their innovations to Onondaga territory. Early journals record that smokestacks made the air "a choking miasma." The manufacturers were thankful for the presence of the sparkling waters of Onondaga Lake, so close at hand as to be an ideal dumping ground. Millions of tons of industrial waste were slurried onto the lake bottom. The growing city followed suit, adding sewage to the suffering of the waters. It is as if the newcomers to Onondaga Lake had declared war, not on each other, but with the land.

Today, the land where the Peacemaker walked, the land that held the Tree of Peace, isn't land at all, but beds of industrial waste sixty feet deep. It sticks to my shoes like the thick white school paste we used in kindergarten to glue cutout birds onto construction-paper trees. There aren't too many birds here and the Tree of Peace is buried. The original people could no longer find even the familiar curve of the shore. The old contours were filled in, creating a new shoreline of more than a mile of waste beds.

It's been said that the waste beds made new land, but that's a lie. The wastebeds are the old homeland, chemically rearranged. This greasy sludge used to be our limestone hills. It used to be our water. It used to be our soil. This new terrain is our old land—pulverized, extracted, and poured out the end of a pipe. These hills of waste are the topographic inverse of the open pit mines where these rocks were quarried. They are the largest open pit mines



in New York State, and still unreclaimed. The earth was gouged out in one place, to bury the ground in another. If time could run backward, like a film in reverse, we would see this mess reassemble itself into lush green hills and moss-covered ledges of limestone. The streams would run back up the hills to the springs and the salt would stay glittering in underground rooms.

The waste that covers the sacred ground is known as Solvay waste, after the Solvay Process Company that left it behind. The Solvay Process was a chemical breakthrough that allowed the production of soda ash, an essential component of other industrial processes such as the manufacture of glass, detergents, pulp, and paper. Native limestone was melted in coke-fired furnaces and then reacted with salt to produce soda ash. Its manufacture fueled the growth of the whole region and chemical processing expanded to include organic chemicals, dyes, and chlorine gas. Train lines ran steadily past the factories, shipping out tons of product. Pipes ran in the other direction, pouring out tons of waste.

What used to be the lush sedge meadows and streamside forests where Nine Mile Creek met the lake is now more than one square mile of waste bed. There are five new hills where no hills had been before. This new “land” arrived at the end of a slurry pipe.

I can too easily imagine what it must have been like, those first ejections from the pipe, falling in chalky-white splats like the droppings of an enormous mechanical bird. Splurting and pulsing at first, with air in the mile-long intestine that stretched back to the gut of the factory. It soon settled into a steady flow burying the reeds and rushes. Did the frogs and mink get away in time to avoid being entombed? What about the turtles? Too slow, they wouldn't be able to escape being embedded at the bottom of the pile, in a perversion of the Onondaga story of the world's creation, when the earth was carried on Turtle's back.

First, they filled in the lakeshore itself, sending tons of sludge into the waters in a plume that turned blue water to white paste. The Peacemaker's shore was buried under sludge. Then they moved the end of the pipe to the surrounding wetlands. The flow continued for decades, long enough to bury the land sixty feet deep for one square mile, right up to the edges of the stream. The water of Nine Mile Creek must have wanted to head back up hill, to defy gravity and find again the mossy pools beneath the Otisco springs. Instead it kept to its work and found its way, seeping through the waste beds and out to the lake. Rain knows its responsibility to the land. But the rain can't choose where it falls and rain that falls on the waste beds is in trouble. The waste particles are so fine that they trap the water in the white clay. But gravity is



a patient force and rain eventually finds its way through sixty feet of sludge and out the bottom of the pile to join a drainage ditch instead of a stream. As it passes through the depths, it cannot help doing what it's been called to do: dissolving minerals, carrying ions intended to nurture plants and fish. By the time it reaches the bottom of the heap, the water has picked up enough ions to be as salty as soup and as corrosive as lye. I've walked along that original water, at the headwaters where it sluices over mossy rocks, where minnows school in the shallows. I can't recognize it here where it leaves the waste beds. This is a raw ditch through white banks that ooze streaks of iron like bloodstains. It doesn't look like water anymore, but some flat, viscous liquid. No sparkle, no sound. It has lost even its beautiful name of water. It is now called leachate. Leachate seeps from the waste beds with a pH of 11. Normal drinking water has a pH value of 7. pH 11 is like drain cleaner. It will burn your skin. Today, engineers collect the leachate and mix it with hydrochloric acid in order to neutralize the pH. It is then released to Nine Mile Creek and out into Onondaga Lake.

The water has been tricked. It has been corrupted and instead of being a bearer of life it must now deliver poison. And yet, it cannot stop itself from flowing. It must do what it must do, with the gifts bestowed upon it by the Creator. It is only people who have a choice, and they have chosen to foul the sacred intentions of water.

Today, you can boat on the lake the Peacemaker paddled. From across the water, the western shore stands out in sharp relief. Bright white bluffs gleam in the summer sun like the White Cliffs of Dover. But, when we approach them by water, you'll see that the cliffs are not rock at all, but sheer walls of Solvay waste. While the boat bobs on the waves, you can see erosion gullies in the wall. The weather conspires to mix the waste into the lake. Summer sun dries out the pasty surface until it blows, and subzero winter temperatures fracture it off in plates which fall to the water. A beach beckons around the point. But there are no swimmers, no docks. This bright white expanse is not a beach at all, but a flat expanse of waste that slumped into the water when a retaining wall collapsed many years ago. The water is very shallow and quite clear today. Leaning over the edge of the boat, you can see the white pavement of settled waste extending far out from shore. The smooth shelf is punctuated by cobble-size rocks, ghostly beneath the water, unlike any rock you know. These are oncolites, accretions of calcium carbonate that pepper the lake bottom. Oncolites or tumorous rocks. The word aptly shares its origin with oncology, the study of cancer.



If you put into shore, and step out onto the barren flat, the white sludge will suck at your feet. Pilings stick up through it like a skeleton backbone, remnants of the old retaining wall. Here and there, among bleached-out tufts of grass are rusted old pipes that carried the sludge. *Rhizomes of Phragmites*, common reeds, run over the surface of the spoils, as if their roots wanted to avoid touching the “soil” below. Where the sludge piles meet the flats, there are small, trickling seeps that are eerily reminiscent of the springs above Otisco Lake. But, the liquid that emerges seems slightly thicker than water and there are plates of ice along the little rivulets that drain toward the lake. Ice? In August? What are these clear plates, these crystal sheets beneath which the water bubbles like a melting stream at the end of winter? It is salt. Crystallized windows of salt. The waste beds continue to leach tons of salt into the lake every year. Before Allied Chemical ceased operation, the salinity of Onondaga Lake was 10 times the salinity of the headwaters above Otisco.

The salt, the oncolites, and the waste impede the growth of rooted aquatic plants. Lakes rely on their submerged plants to generate oxygen by photosynthesis; so, without plants, the depths of Onondaga Lake are oxygen-poor. And without the swaying beds of vegetation, fish, frogs, insects, herons, the whole food chain is left without habitat. While rooted water plants have a hard time, floating algae flourish in Onondaga Lake. High quantities of nitrogen and phosphorous from municipal sewage fertilize the lake and fuel their growth. The algae cover the surface of the water, but then die and sink to the bottom. Their decay depletes what little oxygen is in the water and the lake begins to smell like dead fish, which can wash up on shore on any hot summer’s day.

The fish that do survive, you may not eat. A ban was placed on fishing in 1970 due to high concentrations of mercury. The lake was re-opened to fishing in 1986, but whatever you catch, you must throw back. Fish from Onondaga Lake are unsafe for human consumption. It is estimated that 165,000 pounds of mercury were discharged into Onondaga Lake between 1946 and 1970. The Allied Chemical Company, successor to Solvay Process, used the mercury cell process to produce industrial chlorine from the native salt brines. The mercury waste which we know today as extremely toxic was handled quite freely on its way to disposal in the lake. Local people recall that a kid could make good pocket money on “reclaimed” mercury. One old timer told me that you could go out to the waste beds with a kitchen spoon and just pick up the small glistening spheres of mercury that lay on the ground. A kid could fill an old canning jar with mercury and sell it back to the company for the price of a movie ticket. Inputs of mercury were sharply



curtailed in the 1970s but the mercury didn't go away. It remains trapped in the sediments where, when methylated, it can circulate through the aquatic food chain. It is estimated that seven million cubic yards of lake sediments are today contaminated with mercury.

If I were you, I'd probably want to stop reading by now. I'd like not to write it. Witnessing the slow death of a lake is a painful process. The wounds to these waters are as numerous as the snakes in the Tadodaho's hair, and they must be named before they can be combed out.

Allied Chemical and the city of Syracuse were not solely to blame for the contamination. Hanlin Plastics, General Electric, Crucible Steel, and others all used the lake in the same way. Some of the corporate culprits are still unnamed, but their inputs are apparent. A sampling core, drilled into the lake bottom, cuts through sludge, trapped layers of discharged gas, oil, and sticky black ooze. Analysis of the lake sediments reveals significant concentrations of cadmium, barium, chromium, cobalt, lead, benzene, chlorobenzene, assorted xylenes, pesticides, and PCBs. But not many insects.

And not many fish. But it wasn't always that way. Onondaga Lake in the 1880s was famed for its whitefish, served freshly caught on steaming platters, alongside potatoes boiled in salty brine. Fine restaurants did a booming business along the lakeshore, where tourists came for the scenery, the amusement parks, and picnic grounds where families spread their blankets on a Sunday afternoon. A trolley delivered passengers to the grand hotels that lined its shore. One famed resort, "White Beach," featured a long wooden slide, lit with strings of glittering gaslights. Holiday makers would sit in wheeled carts and whoosh down the ramp to splash into the lake below, promising an "exhilarating dousing for ladies, gentlemen, and children of all ages." Swimming was banned in 1940. Beautiful Onondaga Lake. People spoke of it with pride. Now they barely speak of it at all, like a family member whose death was so shameful that the name never comes up.

You'd think that such toxic waters would be nearly transparent with the absence of life. But instead, some areas of the lake are often nearly opaque with a dark cloud of silt. The turbidity comes from a muddy plume which enters the lake from another tributary, Onondaga Creek. It flows in from the south, from the high ridge above the Tully Valley, from hillsides of forests, farms, and sweet-smelling apple orchards. The headwater brooks are crystal clear. Muddy water is usually attributed to runoff from farmland, but in this case the mud comes from below. High in the watershed are the Tully mudboils, which erupt into the creek like a mud volcano, sending tons of soft sediment downstream.



There is some debate as to whether the mudboils are of natural geologic origin. The Onondaga elders remember the times, not so long ago, when Onondaga Creek ran so clear through their Nation that they could spear fish by lantern light. They know that there was no mud in the creek until salt mining began upstream. When the salt wells near the factories ran out, Allied Chemical used solution mining to access the underground salt deposits up near the headwaters. They pumped water into the subterranean salt deposits, dissolved them away and then pumped the brine miles down the valley to the Solvay plant. The brine line was run through the remaining territory of the Onondaga Nation, where breaks in the line ruined the well water for the community. Eventually, the dissolved salt domes collapsed underground, creating holes through which groundwater pushed with high pressure. The resulting gushers created the mudboils that flow downstream and fill the lake with sediment. The creek that was once a fishery for Atlantic salmon, a swimming hole for kids, and a focal point of community life now runs as brown as chocolate milk. Allied Chemical and its successors deny any role in formation of the mudboils. They claim it was an act of God. What kind of God would that be?

The ancestral Onondaga territory stretches from the Pennsylvania border north to Canada. It was a mosaic of rich woodlands, expansive cornfields, lakes, and rivers that sustained the native people for centuries. Indigenous rights to these lands were guaranteed by treaties between the two sovereign nations, Onondaga Nation and the United States Government. But water is more faithful to its responsibilities than was the United States.

George Washington directed federal troops to exterminate the Onondaga; the Nation that had numbered in the tens of thousands was reduced to a few hundred people. Every single treaty was broken. Illegal takings of land by the State of New York diminished their aboriginal territories to a reservation of only 4,300 acres. The size of the Onondaga Nation territory today is not much bigger than the size of the Solvay waste beds. Living on a remnant of their homelands, assaults on Onondaga culture continued. Parents tried to hide them from Indian agents, but their children were taken from them and sent to boarding schools. The express intent was cultural extermination through the assimilating engines of education. The language that framed the Great Law of Peace was forbidden. Missionaries were dispatched to the matrilineal communities in which men and women were equals, to show them the error of their ways. Longhouse ceremonies of thanksgiving, ceremonies meant to keep the world in balance, were banned by law.



The people have endured the pain of being bystanders to the degradation of their lands. But they have never surrendered their caregiving responsibilities, continuing the ceremonies of honoring the land and their connection to it. The Onondaga people still live by the precepts of the Great Law, which sets forth right relationships not only among people, but also between people and the land. However, without title to their ancestral lands, their hands were tied.

Evicted from their homelands, with wounds to land, language, and family, they saw strangers bury the Peacemaker's footsteps. The plants, animals, and waters they were bound to protect dwindled away. But the covenant with the land was never broken. Like the springs above Otisco Lake, the people just kept doing what they were called to do, no matter what fate would meet them downstream. Human beings are given the responsibility of caring for the non-human, for stewardship of the land. In return for the gifts of Mother Earth, their duty is to care for those gifts. It is this reciprocity that allows the world to continue. Although physically exiled from their land-care duties, the Onondaga continued in their spiritual responsibilities. Whenever people gathered, "the words that come before all else" were spoken. Every day, they sent thanks to the natural world, through the words of the Thanksgiving Address. The people went on giving thanks to the land, although so much of the land had little reason to be thankful for the people.

Generations of grief, generations of loss, but also of strength. They did not surrender. They had spirit on their side. They had their traditional teachings. And they also had the law. The Onondaga Nation never relinquished its title to its lands nor compromised its status as a sovereign nation. Onondaga is a rarity in the United States, a native nation that has never surrendered its traditional government, never given up its identity. Federal laws were ignored by their own authors.

Out of grief and its strength has come a rising power, a resurgence that became public on March 11, 2005. The Nation has filed a complaint in federal court with the goal of reclaiming title to their lost homelands, so that they might once again exercise their caregiving responsibilities.

While elders remembered and babies became elders, the people held to the dream of regaining their traditional lands, but they had no legal voice to do so. The halls of justice were closed to them for decades. As the judicial climate gradually changed to permit tribes to bring federal suit, other Haudenosaunee tribes filed claims to recover their lands. The substance of these claims has been upheld by the Supreme Court, which has ruled that Haudenosaunee



lands were illegally taken, and the people greatly wronged. Indian lands were unlawfully “purchased” in contravention of the United States Constitution. New York State has been ordered to forge a settlement. However, remedies and reparations for the illegal seizures have proven difficult to find.

Some nations have negotiated land claims for cash payoffs, land gains, and casino deals in an effort to find relief from poverty and ensure their cultural survival on the remnants of their territories. Their ancestral lands have effectively been converted to cash and casinos. Others have sought to reclaim their original lands by outright purchase from willing sellers, land swaps with New York State, or by the threat of retaking private lands by suing individual land owners.

But the Onondaga Nation has taken a different approach. Its claim is made under United States law, but its moral power lies in the directives of the Great Law: to act on behalf of peace, the natural world, and the future generations.

The Onondaga have sought a solution which honors their land and their spiritual responsibility. They do not call their suit a land “claim,” because they know that land is not property, but a gift, the sustainer of life. Tadodaho Sid Hill has said that the Onondaga Nation will never seek to evict people from their homes. The Onondaga people know the pain of displacement too well to inflict it on their neighbors. Instead, the suit is termed a Land Rights Action. The motion begins with a statement unprecedented in Indian Law:

“The Onondaga people wish to bring about a healing between themselves and all others who live in this region that has been the homeland of the Onondaga Nation since the dawn of time. The Nation and its people have a unique spiritual, cultural, and historic relationship with the land, which is embodied in Gayanashagowa, the Great Law of Peace. This relationship goes far beyond federal and state legal concerns of ownership, possession, or other legal rights. The people are one with the land and consider themselves stewards of it. It is the duty of the Nation’s leaders to work for a healing of this land, to protect it, and to pass it on to future generations. The Onondaga Nation brings this action on behalf of its people in the hope that it may hasten the process of reconciliation and bring lasting justice, peace, and respect among all who inhabit this area.”

The Onondaga land rights action seeks legal recognition of title to their home, not to remove their neighbors and not for development of casinos, which they view as destructive to community life. Their intention is to use their title to give them a legal voice. Only with title can the Onondaga gain the legal standing to begin restoration of land which has suffered at the hands of its



occupiers. Only with title can they ensure that mines are reclaimed and that Onondaga Lake is cleaned up. The land action, which elders have longed for since their grandparents dreamed it, strengthens the ability of the Onondaga to regain their traditional role as stewards of their homelands. Tadodaho Sid Hill says, “We had to stand by and watch what happens to Mother Earth, but nobody listens to what we think. The land claim will give us a voice.”

The list of named defendants is headed by the State of New York, who illegally took the lands. However, the suit also lists those corporations which have been responsible for its degradation. A quarry, a mine, an air polluting power plant, and the more sweetly named successor to Allied Chemical, Honeywell Incorporated, are called to responsibility for damage they’ve caused to the earth on which they stand.

The legal action not only concerns rights *to* the land, but also the rights *of* the land, the right to be whole and healthy. The Onondaga Nation is calling for restoration of their homelands. Clan Mother Audrey Shenandoah makes the goal clear. It is not casinos and not money and not revenge. “In this land claim,” she says, “we seek justice. Justice for the waters. Justice for the four leggeds and the wingeds, whose habitats have been taken. We seek justice, not just for ourselves, but justice for the whole of creation.” The spirit of the Peacemaker still walks along this lake.

Despite all efforts at eradication, the Onondaga are still here, still carrying out their responsibilities as human people. The resilience of the people is synchronously mirrored in the resilience of the lake. I think that this is no coincidence. I think they gather courage from each other. Reciprocity is taught by the land. On the land it is written, “What you do to the earth, you do to yourself.” This includes healing.

The lake shows its own desire for healing. In just the past few years, the lake has given us signs of hope. As factories have closed and citizens of the watershed build better sewage treatment plants, the waters of the lake have responded to that care. The natural resilience of the lake is making its presence known in tiny increments of dissolved oxygen and returning fish. Hydrogeologists have redirected the energies of the mudboils so that their load is lightened. Engineers, scientists, and activists have all applied the gift of human ingenuity on behalf of the water. The water, too, has done its part. With lessened inputs, the lakes and streams seem to be cleaning themselves as the water moves through. In some places, plants are starting to inhabit the bottom. Just this spring, trout were found once again in the lake, and when water quality took an upward turn it was front-page news. The waters have



not forgotten their responsibility. The waters are reminding the people that they will use their healing gifts, if we will use ours.

The cleansing potential of the water itself is powerful, which gives even greater weight to the work that lies ahead. After all, the trout that come to the lake are likely to become contaminated by the mercury and other toxins. Passing it up the food chain can spell disaster, as the eagle can attest. Oxygen levels are still way too low for a healthy lake; it is too salty, and toxins ooze from the bottom. There is great debate on the best approach to clean up the contaminated sediments so that natural healing can go forward: dredging, capping, leaving it alone.

Allied Chemical, now going by its less tarnished name of Honeywell, Inc., is finally being held accountable for the lake cleanup. State, local, and federal environmental agencies are all offering solutions with a range of price tags. The scientific issues surrounding competing lake restoration proposals are complex and each scenario offers a suite of environmental and economic trade-offs. After decades of foot dragging, Honeywell has predictably offered its own cleanup plan that involves the minimum cost to corporate profits and the minimum benefit to the lake.

They've negotiated a plan to dredge and clean the most contaminated sediments and bury them in a sealed landfill in the waste beds. That may be a good beginning, but the bulk of the contaminants lie diffused in the sediments spread over the entire lake bottom. From here they enter the food chain. The Honeywell plan is to leave those sediments in place, but cover them with a four-inch layer of sand that would partially isolate them from the ecosystem. Even if isolation were technically feasible, they propose to cap less than half of the lake bottom, leaving the rest to circulate as usual. Onondaga Chief Irving Powless characterizes the solution as a Band-Aid® on the lake bottom. Band-Aids are fine for small hurts, but he says that, "You don't prescribe a Band-Aid for cancer." This solution might benefit the Honeywell shareholders, but does not ensure a cleanup of the lake. The Onondaga Nation has called for a thorough cleanup of their sacred lake, but the powers-that-be have not given the Nation a place at the negotiating table. Regaining title to their homeland will give them a voice.

History may turn itself to prophecy, as the Onondaga Nation combs the snakes from the hair of Honeywell. While the others quarrel over cleanup costs, the Onondaga are taking a stance that reverses the usual equation where



economics takes priority over well being. The Onondaga Nation Land Rights Action stipulates a full cleanup as part of the restitution; no halfway measures will be accepted.

In the midst of technical debates and environmental models, it is important that we not lose sight of the sacred nature of the task. Isn't it possible that this most polluted lake can be made sacred again? Made whole by the sacrifices and care of the people, all of the people who live here, guided by the ones who never abandoned the Great Law for the law of supply and demand. The spirit of the Peacemaker still walks along this lake.

What we contemplate here is more than ecological restoration; it is the restoration of right relationship between land and people. Scientists have made a dent in understanding how to put ecosystems back together, but the experiments focus on salinity and hydrology, on matter, to the exclusion of spirit. Often it is not the land which is broken, but our relationship to it. The Onondaga people are offering us a gift of vision. They lead us to dream of a time when the land might give thanks for the people, to envision a time when the Tree of Peace will stand again, growing from the wastebeds.

1. *Thanksgiving Address: Greetings to the Natural World*. Native Self-Sufficiency Center, Six Nations Indian Museum, Tracking Project, Tree of Peace Society. ISBN 0-9643214-0-8

