



William Commanda's Passing – August 3, 2011

It is said we live with our deaths from the moment we first draw breath; it is said we choose the moment we let our last breath leave.

These are big thoughts with which I contemplate William Commanda's passing to the other journey of the soul. Other chapters will no doubt be written about the many pivotal moments of his long life, conceived in February 1913, birthed at 8.30 on November 11 under the light of the Morning Star, a moment of profound illumination, a day of deep remembrance. This year, on 11-11-11, he would have been ninety-eight. He would already have been in his ninety ninth year; his spirit will have embraced this Earth about a hundred years.

Now, I think only of the last phase of his earthly journey.

You know he was dealing with an acceleration in his kidney disease during the last three months of his life. I commence now with the final weeks.

He traveled from his home in Kitigan Zibi to recommence his dialysis program on July 12 – the so-called stabilization that would permit him to receive treatment in Maniwaki. The long trip and the four hours on the dialysis machine, the extraction of weight gain assumed to be fluid were devastatingly draining. He was too exhausted, too wasted, to go back for the next scheduled treatment on July 14. I thought it would not be feasible to go in for the next session on the July 16 either. But he woke up that Saturday morning saying we had something important to do that day. He insisted on dressing in his dress pants and spring shirt, not a treatment style track outfit. After two and a half hours of dialysis, his body had had enough – it was very difficult to finish off the three, and fortunately not four, hours I had negotiated for that day.

We tried hard to schedule an appointment with a doctor to discuss a moderated, gentler, palliative type program for his ninety seven and a half year old body – Susan, his heart nurse and friend and I were with him when we eventually got a meeting with a doctor. We were startled when he stated clearly to her that he was terminating his treatment at the nephrology clinic, that he was going to his Indian medicines and traditional remedies and to the support of his Creator to recoup his strength and health for the remainder of his

life. The doctor was pleased with his decision, it seemed, and accepted it without discussion; after all, he was ninety-seven – what should one wish for? Susan and I wondered if the potential implications of this decision were clear to him – upon terminating dialysis, the kidneys shut down fast; we had hoped for a moderated, gentler treatment with fewer sessions and shorter ones close to home, so he could finish the work he obviously felt he needed to do (in the past month, he had returned from the place of departure to the next life on several occasions, noting to me that he had returned from the bridge, but more about that another time) – but *he* knew, with his return to the ancient healing around the medicine wheel of his ancestors, attending to his spiritual, emotional, physical and mental needs, he had exactly the time he wanted to fully execute his responsibilities and commitments.

Unfortunately, his last weeks were further aggravated by a bladder infection not properly treated despite repeated queries and requests; but still, he was living – *encore vivant*, as he would say!

He spent the next week taking care of his friends and work in Ottawa, exhausting as it was. Then he returned to Kitigan Zibi, to finish other work with his family, and land and community. Thus he attended to the emotional dimension. He had things he wanted to teach his family about very urgently, and even late on the first evening of his return home, he summoned them for the first of these teachings. On other nights, he would waken me at three or so and share other messages, often time in long exhortations in Algonquin, which he would then translate for me – I missed so much, I was tired or impatient, but he delivered his key ideas – the man was brilliant like no other; his mental capacity was as sharp as ever. I shall mention two urgent ones right here – ***we must share, and we are all equal***. He had discourses with the other side, and the sacred moments were overwhelmingly powerful. His spiritual energy illuminated and elevated him. Many shaman, pipe carriers and spiritual and medicine people supported his efforts with their prayers – locally and indeed, across the world. He was strengthened and sustained by medicines presented by friends like Susan, Edmond and Jacques; his pain and faith rendered strength to the medicines and the helpers. The foot sores he incurred in hospital had reached a point of excruciating pain in his last weeks, aggravated by the accommodation of a range of healing strategies, but here too, thanks to the *cure in the cupboard*, he was able to find healing, and as his doctor was to attest the evening before his death, no amputation would be necessary – I say he was able to walk into his next journey with no *Achilles* heel!

How long would he live, I wondered; likely everybody wondered the same. Would he stay strong till the New Moon? His Gathering? Maybe September 12, when his new Honorary Doctorate Degree from the Université du Québec en Outaouais was to be presented? September 21, when his Paddle for Peace event would launch the City of Ottawa's Peace Fest, inspired by the United Nations International Day of Peace? Maybe his birthday of 11-11-11? Maybe 2012? I began to think he would live forever. Actually, I guess he will, in you and me and Mother Earth.

It was only in late July that the preparations for his annual international *Circle of All Nations* Gathering began. We owe deep thanks to many, many friends who worked so hard to make it happen – but the four who in their deepest selves compelled its manifestation were Michael and Three Rivers from afar, Tennessee; and Gaston and Fran, the faithfuls at all his activities on his sacred grounds. His long time friend and Sacred Fire Keeper, Peter Decontie, oversaw all the work. Others streamed in to help animate this amazing experience that has become so vitally relevant to such a broad group of people – the zone where he animated the spirit of sharing and equality.

Grandfather Commanda was able to note the buzz – but he was really preoccupied with his bigger commitments, and all his energy focused there.

I wrote once before, Grandfather is always early, if not earlier. That is his version of Indian time – and it is not without reason that he has noted the urgency of our times this past century. That is why he was always able to live in the moment, why he was so contemporary. He knew he was living in times of prophecy, times of urgency.

And so, indeed, that is how/when/why he left – earlier! New urgency? Some might say so.

He slipped away in his sleep at 4.40 on August 3, 2011. Was he asleep? I don't know; he awakened me as he departed. His body stayed warm for a long, long time – it is amazing how long it takes a body to grow cold.

It was two days before his Gathering. August 3rd was the birthday of his old friend Jules Sioui, the Indian activist who had begun the process of awakening Indigenous Peoples and governments to their history and rights in the nineteen forties, who had created the North American Indian Nations Government, precursor to the National Indian Brotherhood – William Commanda, loyal to its aspirations and principles till the end, remained Supreme Chief of this NAING for fifty years, until his death. Strange how there is no mention of Jules Sioui in the Indian Affairs Library. But the energies of these two friends were definitely alive – William Commanda loved flags; I wanted to put up his *Circle of All Nations* flag at his house, but I simply could not find it - it was the NAING flag embracing Turtle Island that came to hand!

August 3 was also the birthday of the son and grandson of William's oldest friend, American John Garren, who, in the half century of their multi-border crossing friendship had brought him his '*simply the best wood burning stove*', and who had created the long metal heating trough that William used for his canoe making, and whose white heart of gold undoubtedly enabled *Billy* to maintain his great faith in the potential of humanity across racial boundaries. It was also the birthday of his young Japanese American friend Migumi, associated with the 1995 Sunbow Five Walk.

His daughter Evelyn and grandsons Johnny and Andy came into their strength in the hours following his death. Johnny said he saw his grandfather leaving in a canoe –

strange, I had envisioned the same ever since the building of the canoe with Todd Labrador, presented in his (Valerie Pouyanne's) documentary, *Good Enough for Two*. Everything fell into place after that moment – Johnny talked to Chief Gilbert Whiteduck, and brought home a canoe on display at the local school – one built and stenciled by William himself, his wife Mary and their grandchildren – marked so in the WC fashion! – and dated September 1980. (See, you will likely always be able to tell the genuine Commanda canoes!) McConnery's Funeral Palour accommodated all our requests, and William arrived in the afternoon to rest in his canoe in his Lodge tidied up by great grand daughter Patricia, and to be with us at his home the Wednesday, Thursday and Friday.

Family and community came in to visit him; in lieu of flowers, we asked/*ask* folk to find their own ways to support his vision for the Indigenous Centre at the Sacred Chaudière Site. His spirit oversaw the preparations for his Gathering, and he ensured that all, family, community and *Circle of All Nations* friends, embraced its animation. It was a great comfort for me to be able to pop into his Lodge at any moment over those days and nights and find the strength and inspiration to keep working, in the *typically William determined upward thrust of his jaw*. He looked incredibly beautiful in his old and by now (post the Officer of the Order of Canada and National Aboriginal Achievement Awards) nationally well known leather outfit made and beaded by Mary, and the beaded headband made by his daughter Evelyn – an old time venerable and venerated chief, lying in the ancient craft of his ancestors, in his round lodge with the central fire place, and looking absolutely contemporary too. A designer elder to the end for sure!

Throughout the three days and nights, his grandchildren, including Claudette, (who had spent his first dreadful night in hospital with him, when he cried out his pain in his Algonquin tongue), sister Mary, niece Daisy, and many grand and great grand children and Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg community members, connected with him and the family dogs, his *CAN* Gang, and many spiritual elders; there were constant prayers, ceremonies, drumming and singing, vigils at the Sacred Fire tended by Bob, Daniel and others, commemorations on the lake, and conversations about him; and he drew us all along together to his funeral on the Friday, when he then departed, and left us to continue with the Gathering.

But his death did not only impact us at Bitobi Lake. There was national interest in his parting – and within minutes of the news of his death, there was APTN, TVO, CBC and calls from other media and papers all over. The intense coverage over the past weeks, including in the Citizen, Globe and Mail, Le Gatineau, Metro, and many small town papers, organization and government newsletters, etc has been exciting to see – we shall digest this and report on it soon, together with the countless other messages of love – at this point, suffice it to say, he is being understood now as the incredible visionary he has been and lived for so long – and being greatly valued and honoured as such. We can already see this influence the leadership in the National Capital Region – as recent stories in the Citizen reveal, big vision is now becoming important!

At this point, may I say that William Commanda has opened the door for this country to better see and know the Indigenous face at its heart – and now all of us, both Aboriginal

and non-Aboriginal, have the sacred responsibility to honour and nurture this tremendous legacy – it is the gateway to reconciliation and self-respect for all.

I have said William orchestrated his *Going Away Party*. His was a funeral like no other, I am sure. No one was invited, and we learned the obituary notice did not even make it into the papers; but should we say, all were welcome; and all came to his funeral. The funeral inserted itself into his Gathering, and ignited his work – it went from the early lighting of the Sacred Fire by Elder Peter Decontie, to the opening Sunrise Ceremony led by Elder T8aminik Rankin and others, to the Memorial Circle at the Lakeside Arbour; Algonquins from both sides of the Mighty Kichissippi arrived for the funeral - chiefs and former chiefs, like Gilbert Whiteduck, Kirby Whiteduck, Adrienne Anichinapéo, Lucien Wabanonik, Steeve Mathias, Danny Pien, Jimmy Papatie, then Angus Toulous and Elder Elmer Courchene from the Assembly of First Nations, Stephen Augustine, Traditional Chief of the Mi'qMaq Nation, Danny Beaton, fellow Achievement Award recipient; leadership, representatives and friends from First Nations, Inuit and Metis organizations; federal and provincial politicians; federal institutions like Indian Affairs, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages and the National Capital Commission; foreign diplomats like the South African High Commission and Embassy of Venezuela; guests from France, Belgium, United States and South America; peace and harmony activists like the Wolf Project, Initiatives of Change, Organizing for Justice and Department of Peace; environmental activists from Canadian Parks and Wilderness and Canoe Canada, Ottawa Riverkeepers, Plenty Canada; spiritual elders from across the country and borders, including our regular supporter, Abuela Marguerita, and the Innus, including the St. Onge family, from Seven Islands; Paul, Heather, Roy, Susan, Donald, my gosh, many; many artists, musicians, architects like friend Douglas Cardinal, writers like Evan Prichard, and filmmakers like Lee Pennington, Patrick Gravel and John Thomson; RCMP, OPP and Kitigan Zibi First Nations Police; fundraisers, grass roots folks, children – I risk offending by making such a list – there were so many folk there to express their love of Grandfather Commanda – but I note this to show the tremendous diversity of the circle of people of all races and backgrounds drawn to him – and so he says, *Yes we CAN CREATE A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS, A CULTURE OF PEACE* – and his *CAN GANG* can show how! (Where? At the Sacred Chaudiere Site and Victoria Island - and that's where we plant the flowers!)

It is hard to envision space where one can really experience an elevated level of peace, tolerance, cooperation, collaboration, love, trust, hope – with folk who emerge from such dramatically varied backgrounds as Grandfather's friends; in living and constantly espousing his unshakeable faith in love, forgiveness, equality, sharing and grace, and in animating his heritage, beliefs and values, William Commanda created the space where all could find their commonality, and aspire to the same ideals as him – and now that he has animated this energy, the transformation can continue to move us as we permit, embrace and engage.

Friends of South American ancestry, Tito Medina and Marco Chenard played a haunting Guatamalan song as his coffin left his lodge (with, I might add, his Eagle and favourite *Condor* feather, which he loved to use in affirmation of the integrity of the continents of

North and South America, and the unfolding of the Prophecy of the Eagle and the Condor). Police friends Wayne Russett and Ray Westgarth, in uniform in honour of this special man who had blessed their policing institutions and efforts, offered a salute of deep respect. Elders Peter Decontie and T8aminik Rankin presided over his graveside prayers, and countless friends shed their last tears and paid their final respects in the hot sun. As Mi'qMaq Traditional Chief Stephen Augustine reflected on the friendship and confederation of the Algonquin nations of the sixteen hundreds, those Algonquins of the Kichissippi Ottawa River Valley being part of the 1603 encounter with the explorer Samuel de Champlain at Tadousac, under the leadership of the legendary chief Tessouat, I reflected on the thought that if you say your prayers in words, it is powerful; if you sing your prayers, this is even more powerful; but if you dance your prayer, as the Indigenous Peoples were doing at *that* moment, this dance with eternity is a moment of great profoundness. It was at this time that William Commanda's great niece Bethany Kizis Smith danced him to his resting place in his beloved Mother Earth to the drumbeat – for me it was a breath stopping moment. The energies of centuries of repression of even dance transformed.

William had told me his first act as chief in 1951 was to ensure the creation of the Indian Burial Grounds, frustrated as he and others had been with the Church's desecration of bodies piled together for months on end and disintegrating before a proper laying to rest. For a peoples so attuned to the eternal life of the spirits of the Ancestors, so mindful of providing spirit plates of respect and honour, one can only imagine how unbearable must this must have been.

For me, his singular, entirely unplanned and spontaneously co-created state funeral served to restore an ancient balance and to negotiate a reconciliation with the larger energies of human existence – indeed a time for deep healing. It will be incumbent on each and every one to shoulder this great legacy mindfully. That is where me might sometimes have to think of one of Grandfather's favourite phrases – *Good Enough for Two!* – we might sometimes have to be *good enough for two*.

The burial over, we returned to the great work he had assigned us. As you likely know, for Grandfather Commanda, the show must go on, and on schedule! Thank goodness he had inspired such a team of workers.

Of course he had the last word on Friday. As darkness fell, we screened his latest documentary, *The Portage of Wisdom*, produced by a passionate Indigenous and *Circle of All Nations* supporter, environmentalist, and now amateur video man, Patrick Gravel – also the humble volunteer who took care of the washrooms during the Gathering.

I should add at this point that we also previewed another documentary that profiled Grandfather's prayers, insights and version of history, *Canada the Movie*, produced professionally by John Thomson - you will be able to see it in the theatres soon – and you will see that, beyond invading the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill in the new NCC

summer Sound and Light show, Grandfather Commanda's spirit is becoming the voice of truth in Canada!

On Saturday, we returned to our scheduled program, Gilbert our sound man keeping things on track, and discussions focused heavily on the on-going animation of the work of the *Circle of All Nations*, the manifestation of the Vision for the *Asinabka* Indigenous Centre on Victoria Island, and the protection of sacred landscape and special sites, under the leadership of Patrick Gravel, Phil Weir and Daniel Benard respectively.

The Saturday evening community feast, created under the watchful eye of Three Rivers from Tennessee, was spectacular and did Grandfather proud – for him, all important work had to be completed with a *banquet* – I am sure this year's spirit plate was especially meaningful.

Two videos took the stage on Saturday evening – Grandfather's canoe video, *Good Enough for Two* by Valerie Pouyanne; and then our special feature, *We Can Shine – From Institutions to Independence*, a documentary about the emancipation of disabled people produced by Grandfather's young friend Adrian Esposito, and his mother Kristina Nomeiko, from Rochester, New York – Adrian himself having Aspergers Syndrome, a form of autism. This documentary won best documentary awards in Moscow, Russia, at the Buffalo/Niagara Film Festival and at the Love Unlimited Film Festival in California and Oregon. As with last year's screening of *Third World Canada* by Andree Cazabon, you know Grandfather's young buddies are on the leading edge with social justice issues! Adrian filmed Grandfather for an upcoming documentary last winter, so you have not heard the last word from our irrepressible Elder.

Then it was time for the evening's socialization. There was some flute, violin and guitar music, and attentive listening; but when Grandfather's giant drum (cottonwood sent by his friend John Helman from Arizona) thundered, the energy in the Round Arbour electrified – and people immediately moved in passionate dance. This was no longer performance or entertainment – this was co-created animation of life force.

At one-thirty at night, Tennessee Mike and I were walking around doing a security check on the campers to support Wayne Boucher and Eric – and we found a caravan of a half a dozen busses arriving – unbeknownst to us, Marc Vella's La Caravane Amoureuse (www.marcvella.com), with a bus load of fifty French supporters, had come to join us, replete with Baby Grand Piano! Over the years, Marc had taken his message of love and peace through music all over the world – and now he was here at Grandfather's party! We had other musicians to animate Sunday's giveaway and closing ceremonies with Grandfather's big Drum and friends – Balam, the South American youth with magic guitar fingers; singers and flutists; Elder Josie Whiteduck's grandson Keith played some of his music on the big piano in the Arbor; and then fifty boys with a Boys' Choir from Belgium arrived!

Some of you may know that Grandfather loved music as much as anything else, having himself sung *acepelo* many years, and having purchased and learned to play fiddle

himself as a young teen. You may also know how much he enjoyed Johnny Cash, David Bowie, Bruce Springsteen, Andrea Bocelli, Travis Tratt, Edith Piaf – the list would boggle your mind - and how much he enjoyed the musical collaboration in *Spirit* – a concert depicting the alienated urban person reconnecting with his Indigenous ancestry and heritage through the integration of the music, drum, dance and mythology of the Indigenous spirit of the land with the new beat, making holy the even newer unified beat. So it was good to hear the jamming at his farewell party! (You've heard it before - check out our July 7, 2009 Full Moon Blog – Evan Almighty and the Michael Jackson Moon Dance! – Blog page of the www.circleofallnations.ca site).

But it was the ancient rhythm of the land and the waters that asserted itself in the end, in the transcendental motif for the journey of life – the canoe on the lake, escorting him to his new horizons – Chuck, one of his grandsons, trained in canoe building with his grandparents in his youth, now returning to this heritage, finished a birch bark canoe started at the Gathering of 2010, critiqued by WC in the fall, presented at Victoria Island on June 21, the day of William's last visit there, and finally gummed up and in the water on August 7, 2011 – symbolically escorting us too on our journeys into the future!

Just a few days before he died William said to me, *Romola, you wrote 'Ginawaydaganuc' on my back!* This was entirely what his life was all about; it was the central prayer integrated in all his pipe ceremonies and all his teachings.

Ginawaydaganuc – We Are All Connected – with nature and each other; he was always trying to tell us that it is really that seamless. So is our relationship with eternity – seamless. Connect with Mother Earth, and you will know what he meant – and you will find him there.

With deep respect and gratitude.

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