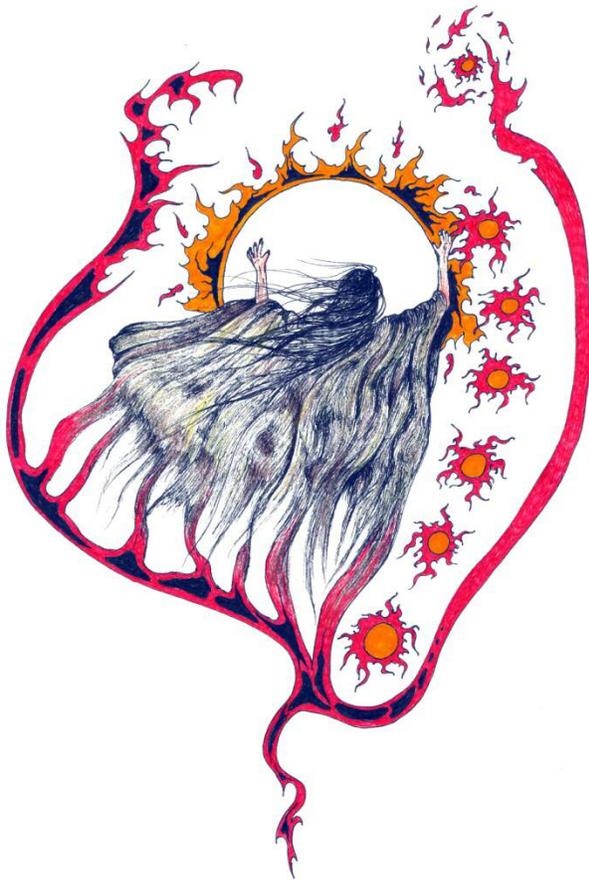


Colleen Gray's Reflection on her First Meeting with Grandfather William Commanda

March 2002 was when I first met Grandfather William Commanda. I had many butterflies in my stomach, was absolutely sure I'd say the wrong thing and I just knew he'd think I was a foolish woman. All my assumptions were wrong.

My husband Fred set out to give me a birthday gift that would greatly influence my life when I remarked on how amazing it would be to just sit and spend time with an Elder who was that wise and that dedicated to his path. He connected with Evelyn through a friend who knew her and from there he was directed to Romola who arranged the meeting for my 40th birthday.



The moment Fred and I entered Romola's home and warm welcome, I felt at ease, albeit still nervous about meeting the Algonquin Elder known for his gentle pursuit of peace through forgiveness and love. I was sweating; waiting for my lips to betray me with the wrong words. Ray Sunstrum was there also, another gentle soul in the room. Grandfather William looked just as he did in the newspaper that I'd read – the one that piqued my interest in him. His handshake was warm and inviting and he gestured for me to sit down beside him.

The conversation as I remember it is a bit muddy, likely because I was so nervous. I presented him with a drawing that I'd created inspired by his words about the 7th Fire we now live in and how the 8th Fire is the place we want to journey to. His teaching moved me and the drawing I presented to him was taken with great appreciation and humility. Ray had pointed out that it was interesting how I had made the two paths into the shape of a human heart. I had not noticed this before he mentioned it – such is the way of art sometimes.

As Grandfather spoke to me, he mentioned the Wampum Belts a few times. I had no idea what that was, so I asked him, "What is a Wampum Belt exactly?" He looked at me for what felt like a long time and I felt as though he were looking into me and not really at me. I waited for his answer. He turned to Romola and said, "Should I do this?" Romola smiled and shrugged, returning the ball to his court and he decided that he would "do this". At this point I was confused – what "this" was, I had no idea. He returned from his room carrying what looked to be a white bowling ball bag. "We're going bowling?" I thought. He proceeded to smudge us all and upon setting the

smudge down on the table, he began removing and smudging the Wampum Belts that he's carried and protected for years. He took out the Jay Treaty belt and explained to me what this was. He then took out the Welcoming Belt and explained to me what it was. Then he took out the Seven Fires Prophecy belt and the well worn sheets of paper that accompanied the belts. He used his Eagle feather to follow the text and set out to explain the belt in its entirety to me. I was in awe. That I should be shown these things was very humbling and I could sense the importance of what he was showing me. It would be years later that I truly recognized the impact and honour of his actions and words at my visit.

When he was finished, he put the belts away into the white leather case with careful and loving hands and returned them to his room. I looked up at Ray, Romola and Fred. Ray said to me, "I've never seen him do this for someone before. This is a beautiful thing you've been given."

As Grandfather came and sat down beside me again, I turned to him, my eyes overflowing with huge tears pushed from my body by the gratitude and humility in my heart at his gift to me. I said, "I don't understand why you did this for me. Why me?"

He looked deeply into my eyes and said, "Because you were honest. Because you asked."

The impact this beautiful man made on my life that day continues to echo in me 15 years later as I write this accounting on my 55th birthday. I remember the exchange clearly and always with gratitude for the gift he gave me, for the time he allowed me to be a part of his life. I am grateful to Romola who invited us into her home and was a vehicle for this meeting and for the subsequent loving echo in my heart that continues to this day. But more than all this, I'm grateful to the Creator for allowing our paths to cross and our hearts to touch through the teaching and learning of the Seventh Fire Prophecy Belt.

My work and passion for Indigenous art has taken me on a journey to put art supplies into remote First Nations, Inuit and Metis schools and communities. Young people are facing challenging times in their communities. We

work to help them find an artistic outlet for their anger or frustrations or to simply pass the time in a creative and positive way.

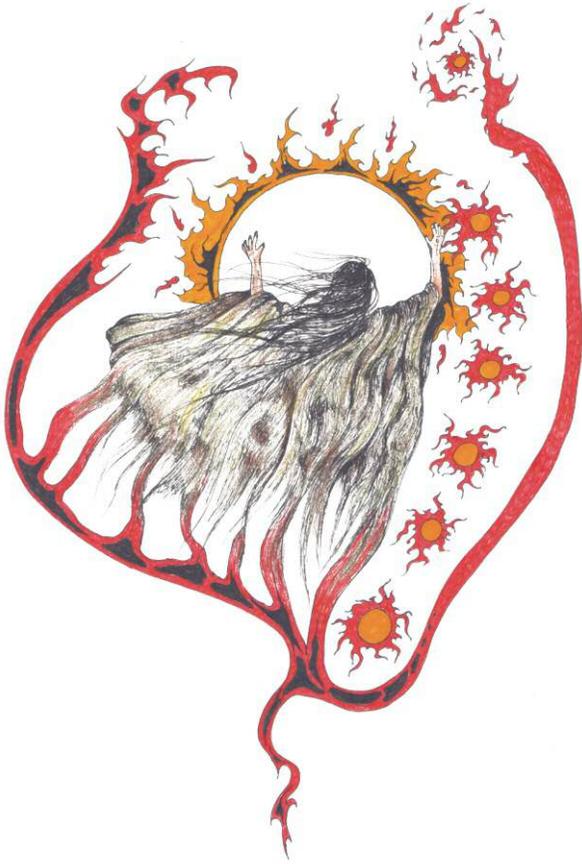


Often teaching staff take money from their own paycheques to supplement art supplies for their students. The Art For Aid Project seeks to support art in remote communities by ensuring supplies are in place so creativity can bloom. We keep people informed about what we're doing and where we're working through our website at www.artforaid.ca. We collect new and gently used art supplies all year long to continue supporting Canada's First Artists in all the

ways we can. If you feel you would like to support this effort, get in touch with us.

Fred and Colleen - The National Art Gallery at Alex Janvier's demonstration and exhibition.

Seventh Fire Prophecy Drawing by Colleen Gray



Seventh Fire Prophecy

A Holy Man speaks to his people of the Seventh Fire. His words come from the hearts and souls of the Ancients. He speaks of two roads but only one will take us to the Eighth Fire - to a place of harmony and peace. A Holy Man speaks to his people of the choices they must soon make, and his heart is filled with sorrow for those unable to hear. But the children of tomorrow hear the words of the Creator's Sacred Message in the Holy Man's heart and their wisdom keeps the hope of tomorrow's fire burning.

Inspired by William Commanda's teachings and given as a gift to him - he then honoured me by laying out the Seventh Fire Belt and gave me his teaching of it to help me better understand this thing I had done. It was a time I'll not soon forget, and an honour that lives with me with every thought of him.