

WATER – A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS REFLECTION ON WILLIAM COMMANDA AND THE SPIRIT OF WATER, FOR MARCH 22, 2014

Water Spirit blessed us in abundance on March 22, in a dramatic snow fall, after days of sunshine - it reminded me of one legend Grandfather shared - Spirit of the South had headed in too early one year, and Spirit of the North caused his to shiver and shed his fleas! Note how Indigenous Peoples valued the cold winters, when all germs were eliminated in anticipation of the new season of growth.

Prayer for water, joy in water, valuing and respecting water – this was a central feature throughout Grandfather William Commanda’s long life. He was born to this water-based heritage. His ancestors were the nomads – the *Mamiwinini* – who travelled the water highways of North America in their iconic birch bark canoes.

He believed they were descendants of the ancient Maritime hunters of the North Atlantic Seaboard, who, over ten thousand years ago, arrived here after the Wisconsin Ice Age, and left evidence of their presence on the retreating shorelines of the ancient Champlain Sea, right here in Asinabka, the place of bare rock, the place of glare rock. The capital city of Canada now stands at the confluence of the primary river of the territory of the Algonquins: the Mighty Kichissippi, the Ottawa, flowing west to east, joined by its major tributaries, the Gatineau from the north and the Rideau from the south, showing in the geography how, despite historical division, Quebec and Ontario are connected.

Nature’s own Medicine Wheel is etched on this special sacred part of the Mother Earth, centered and spun by the circular rapids, the *Akikpautik*, the Chaudieres. This place held deep spiritual significance to the ancient peoples, and the earliest newcomers to the continent witnessed the homage paid to the boiling waters. The *Akikpautik* symbolized the bowl of the sacred pipe, with its constant spray taking the prayers of the people to the cosmic creator in perpetuity. The underground rock formations, the karsts, and the underground rivers sang messages from the womb of Mother Earth at this sacred place, and the thundering water drum of the Chaudiere Rapids called the people to the source.

Born on the confluence of the Desert and Gatineau rivers to his water based heritage, William’s mother helped her little toddler fashion tiny birch bark canoes to sail on the mud streams and gullies that the spring rains would pound into his yard – he spent countless hours playing with his canoes, every lesson about the movement of water, impacted by wind, rocks, plants, sun, weather, implanted in his psyche, remembered with as much vividness at ninety as when a toddler.

As a child, his mother’s brother, Uncle Andre, taught him how to make proper birch bark canoes and throughout his life, this ancient craft gave him his independence and strength – but that is a separate story.

His passionate concern for Water was roused when he would challenge tourists who dumped gasoline and debris into the pristine lakes and rivers of his ancestors in the days of the old fishing and gaming clubs. Later, in the forties, the interventions of the Hopi

tribes at the fledging United Nations meetings alerted him to water issues at a continental level – there in their arid homeland, these Indigenous Peoples, who knew the critical importance of the underground water table to their survival, were already raising alarm bells about water. How prescient were they – today, it is believed by many that the wars of the 21st Century will about water.

In 1987, William Commanda brought his concerns to the national public attention at the time of the Constitutional Debates organized by Prime Minister Mulroney. It was also the first time he presented the Sacred Wampum Belts publicly – these are the ancient mnemonic record keeping and prophetic artifacts created from quahog shell by the peoples over many centuries. As he raised the Three Figure Welcoming and Sharing Wampum Belt from 1700, instead of the anticipated exhortation on Aboriginal Rights to the political leadership, he instead talked about the pollution of the waters, earth and air, and stated “we depend on you to remedy this before the end of time!” (William Commanda’s archival tapes).

But he did not – depend on the Prime Minister or the Premiers, that is. In 1990, he did three days of pipe ceremonies at the Pre-Rio Earth Summit conference hosted by President Mitterand in France – here when scientists and environmentalists were seeking to manage the resources of Mother Earth more judiciously in the face of devastating global environment challenges, Indigenous Peoples, under William Commanda’s spiritual guidance, were igniting a fire for relationship with Mother Earth. In 1993, he took his Wampum Belts and messages about the looming environmental crises to the first United Nations Conference of Indigenous Peoples, one they called the *Cry of the Earth*.

In the nineties, after a decade of damning justice inquiries in every province and territory across the country, and after the OKA crisis, Canada initiated the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) – and after its exhaustive work, it released its reports on Victoria Island in 1996. William Commanda was there – and his intervention was singular – he asked the government whether they would be prepared to drink the waters of the Ottawa River. People were startled – but few, not even the Indigenous peoples, understood the enormity of his statement – for him, the survival and strengthening of the First Peoples and the transformation of their relationship with Canada was grounded in a transformation of the relationship with Water.

He told people repeatedly that Water was a critical natural element that we could not survive without for long. He described the living Gaia, his Mother Earth – the rivers were her veins, he said; he described the Earth’s natural cycles – snow thaws and spring rains flushed out the debris accumulated in the waters in Nature’s natural cleansing processes – he bemoaned the dams stifling the movement of the mighty rivers of North America at every turn – and especially so at the Sacred Chaudiere Rapids. He noted the eight thousand barrages impeding the movement of water and contributing to the decimation of the ancient Eels, fish precious to his ancestors, throughout the St. Lawrence River Watershed. Now when we hear how the Hoover Dam is no longer able to sustain the Las Vegas community onto the foreseeable future and how artificial floods have to be created on the Colorado River to replicate the seasonal cleansing inherent to the intelligence of

Nature's Law, or about the impacts of invasive species, some begin to understand the enormity of William Commanda's wisdom, and the wisdom of Indigenous Elders more deeply.

Ever the leader and teacher, he began rekindling people's relationships with water at multiple levels. At the 2002 Circle of All Nations Gathering at Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, we had a workshop on Dr. Emoto's innovative studies of water crystals - showing they changed patterns in concert with energies impacting them - Indigenous Peoples remembered their ancestral knowledge of this phenomena in their prayer and offering to the spirit of Water (and other forces in nature). The 2004 Gathering was dedicated to Water - there were with multiple presentations, including the creation of a living stream learning project - and some of the work was animated by a delegation of 30 Japanese environmentalists and healers. In 2006, our Elder hosted the Waterlife Gathering in Ottawa - it fired up energies for water stewardship on the Ottawa, and quite literally - to today, participants remember the smudging and pipe ceremony of the Algonquin Elders at the Travel Lodge which set off the fire alarms - they did not stop praying as the firemen swarmed around; and the Full and New Moon ceremonies he initiated, and the Equinox and Solstice events at Victoria Island have gradually awakened the Indigenous Peoples and citizens at large to the cosmic forces impacting water. The Waterlife Gathering drew attention to sewage spills, and the subsequent fining of the City of Ottawa led to the formal creation of Ottawa Riverkeeper organization. Interventions at the National Capital Commission led to joint water management planning by the cities of Gatineau and Ottawa - yes, William Commanda was awakening people to the River in its ancient form as zone of confluence, so different from its historical enlistment as border and separator.

William Commanda impacted on other water related matters in the region and beyond. He challenged Domtar's plans to expand hydro development at the Sacred Chaudiere Falls - he wanted the dam freed from its bondage as a symbol of the Industrial Age. He engaged in the challenge of uranium mining in the Ardoch/Sharbot Lake area in Ontario; he made presentation to the commission enquiring into the creation of a mega dump at Danford Lake in Quebec, and influenced their decision to stop the project; he added his voice to the call to place the Eel on the endangered species list, (seven eels were found at Victoria Island exactly a year after William Commanda's death); he prayed to protect the migration route of the Loons through Moira Lake area in Ontario; he prayed at Source Gabriel, the source of the drinking water of Val d'Or and area, the city opened by his Uncle Gabriel Commanda - and he served as Honorary Chair in the effort to designate the Ottawa River a Heritage River. He prayed for the waters at Sept Isles at the mouth of the Mighty St. Lawrence, and also, marking the territory of his ancestors to the home of the Quahog Shellfish of the Wampum Belts in the Cape Cod waters, he conducted Pipe Ceremony on a boat at Boston Harbour, (transforming forever the Moby Dick images of the American psyche in my mind!)

On my first visit through his community with him in 1997, William Commanda took me to Cedar Lake - at a certain spot, there was a spring, and a tin cup hung on a crook of a stick - here you could drink the pure waters emerging from the breast of Mother Earth -

this was very significant to him. When we visited the spot again a few years ago, there was a sign warning us against drinking the waters. So much has changed over such a short time. Because of contaminants now found in the rivers and lakes of his homeland, he himself had to contend with bottled water in his home – who knows its implications in the kidney disease that took his life, or with the great grandson born with one kidney. Yes, things are changing fast, and not yet for the better.

When I was struggling hard to understand megadumps, William Commanda instead insisted on going out to buy me a kayak – he sent me to the water, to understand what it was really all about – and as I paddle, I find the journey on the waters offers me endless lessons. William knew what a teacher water is. His people knew intimately how water worked, how it moved, how it shifted with the seasons, how it sustained life. Science tells us life was birthed in the waters – we must reclaim a respectful relationship with this critical force.

Yes, water inspired William Commanda throughout his long life, and developed a vision at a most sacred water place to guide us on our journey. The vision was to create a space for people to gather and reconnect with nature at the heart of his ancestral homeland, within the National Capital Region; to free the Chaudiere Dam as a statement of symbolic reconciliation with nature; to replant Chaudiere Island with Indigenous trees and create a *Central Park* and nature sanctuary for the public at large; to acknowledge the historical development in the area; and to entrench the Indigenous peoples in their ancient meeting grounds, and in the hearts and psyche of the people of this country and beyond. He believed that the capital city held a tremendous responsibility in this regard, and had a critical leadership role to play, of global importance. He was grateful to know of their endorsement of his vision in 2010, before he died.

Over the past two decades, William Commanda showed us that embracing him, just as he embraced all in his Motherland, was not a fearful thing. He became endeared to Ottawa, and he accepted a Key to the City in 2006 – in return, he offered her a legacy vision, a vision he knew would include and benefit all; in that vision we see both the reflections of his ancestors and the future of our children.

Many of us were ignited by the vision and work of William Commanda. Hence, we continue to keep vigil at the Sacred Chaudiere Site, fanning the embers of William Commanda's eternal prayer at the waters edge.

Ginawadaganuc!

Megwetch!

Romola
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