

Article

Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén and Kanien'kehá:ka Teachings of Gratitude and Connection

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Abstract: This article stems from a conversation with Otsi'tsakén:ra Charlie Patton that took place on Mohawk/Kanien'kehá:ka territory in Southern Turtle Island (Also known as Quebec, Canada) Otsi: tsaken'ra is a Kanien'kehá:ka who teaches the importance of harvest and the inter-relational connection that human beings have with what they harvest. His teachings begin with the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén (Also known as the Thanksgiving address, greetings, or opening prayer), an opening address, which invites all who partake to be "of one mind". The Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén embodies the importance of storytelling, the Creation story, harvest teachings, and cultural continuity, which are all important teachings that are necessary for Onkwehónwe (The Original People) to begin healing from the effects of colonialism, cultural and linguistic disconnection, state-imposed violence, and racism.

Keywords: Kanien'kehá:ka; first nations; healing; storytelling; traditions; harvest



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1. Introduction

In this article, the authors document Otsi'tsakén:ra Charlie Patton's approach to healing through storytelling and through the transmission of Haudenosaunee traditional and cultural knowledge. Otsi'tsakén:ra is a Faithkeeper of the Longhouse tradition, which means that he practices the spiritual and cultural traditions of his Nation and serves as a spiritual mentor in teaching others about the traditional and cultural ways of the Kanien'kehá:ka ([Haudenosaunee Confederacy n.d.b](#)). For generations, the Longhouse has been a place of great cultural significance and is where cultural practices and traditional knowledges are shared and where important decisions are made by the Clans and their Clan mothers ([Milette 2002](#)). Through his knowledge of cultural traditions, Otsi'tsakén:ra facilitates healing and wellness in his community. Otsi'tsakén:ra relates community healing to sacred seeds and planting cycles: "When we talk of harvest, we talk of the bigger picture. We are the seeds and our future is the harvest, that's what we need to work for" ([Patton 2020](#)).

2. Methodology

This article was created in the context of the Indigenous Healing Knowledges project, which is a research project conducted to explore healing approaches from Indigenous Elders and knowledge keepers from around the world. This article was created based on an interview between Kanien'kehá:ka Knowledge Keeper Otsi'tsakén:ra Charlie Patton and Kanien'kehá:ka researcher Alicia Ibarra-Lemay. The interview was conducted via Zoom and later transcribed to help quote and contextualize this article. The article uses Indigenous knowledge and storytelling as a way of contextualizing and highlighting the importance of Indigenous knowledge as a methodology, as well as highlighting the importance of cultural revitalization. This article was also created with an Indigenous mindset of the Seven Generations. Which requires understanding how our actions impact

Seven Generations before and after us. The teachings shared by Otsi'tsakén:ra were learned over many years and have been passed down through generations of Knowledge Keepers. In sharing this knowledge, he is not speaking on behalf of his entire community, but from his own perspective and from his own knowledge of teachings that he has been taught. As per permission from the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke, no permission or declaration is needed for Otsi'tsakén:ra to share this knowledge; as a Knowledge Keeper, he has the right to share his own teachings and knowledge in the context of his choosing.

3. Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén—The Words Which Come before All Things

Otsi'tsakén:ra begins his teachings with the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén: “The words which come before all things—which is an acknowledgement that helps us to understand our purpose in this world and our relationship within this thing, we call the cycle of life” (Patton 2020). Its expression is a way of honoring the land and all its creations and of giving thanks to Mother Earth for all that she provides. The Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén varies in length and will differ from person to person, as it continually changes as a living expression. From generation to generation and person to person, traditions are kept alive and continually evolve to match the current state. As Elder Tom Porter states, “If traditions do not change, they become stagnant” (Porter 2008).

Otsi'tsakén:ra shares the entire Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén in Kanien'keha, his traditional language, and then explains in English. “I often tell people, we don't pray, we don't have to ask the Creator for anything because he already gave it to us. All the Creator ever did, we give thanks for and appreciate what we have and that's really what these words are about” (Patton 2020). As Otsi'tsakén:ra begins to offer his own version of the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén, he begins by greeting and giving thanks for all nations of people in the world. He especially thanks them for being present and for opening their minds and vision for the knowledge that they are about to receive. Otsi'tsakén:ra then takes the time to thank everything individually. He thanks Mother Earth, the Creator¹, the roots beneath his feet, the food that grows to feed people, the four winds, the four legged², the birds, the waters, the trees, and all that surrounds him. As he thanks every living being and element and; he explains some of their origins. In doing so, he highlights the importance of thanking and honoring all living things and teachings the importance of gratitude providing a sense of connection with all living things.

In Braiding Sweetgrass, botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) speaks of the significance of the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén as more than just a way to begin the day. She sees it as a political and cultural statement in which Indigenous people are reclaiming historical and cultural practices which were once forbidden and seen as inferior to Western knowledge. “[. . .] The Thanksgiving Address is at heart an invocation of gratitude, but it is also a material, scientific inventory of the natural world. [. . .] As it goes forward each element of the ecosystem is named in its turn, along with its function. It is a lesson in Native science” (p. 108). Kimmerer also highlights the fact that the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén does not remind human beings of what has been lost or what is missing, but it places emphasis on expressing gratitude for the many gifts that the natural world provides. Such gifts have long been taken for granted, as humans have forgotten their original instructions and have disrespected the relationship and responsibility to the natural world. The Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén serves as a reminder that everything is a gift and that human beings are not more important than the waters or the four legged, but all are equal and interrelated. What flows through the trees flows through humans, and when people uphold their responsibilities to all life, the world is in balance.

As highlighted by both Otsi'tsakén:ra and Kimmerer, the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén is a reminder to have gratitude for all living beings, as without food, water, animals, Mother Earth, and the air that sustains all life, humans would not be able to survive (Legacies Earth to Tables n.d.). Otsi'tsakén:ra concludes: “And so now we give thanks to all things of the earth, some of them I named and some of them maybe I forgot to name, but we give our greetings because all things on the Earth are special and because they live

and we live” (Patton 2020). The Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén helps open people’s minds and spirits and prepares them to receive the teachings it carries. It is also an important reminder to Onkwehónwe of their relation to all that surrounds them and to be thankful for it. Next, Otsi’tsakén:ra shares the Haudenosaunee Creation Story.

4. Creation Story

“So, at the beginning, in our Creation story, the Creator made all things in life [...] he made the waters. [...] He planted the seeds of all the different foods and the strawberries. And he says, ‘this is where your place will be and you will feed all of the beings on this earth’ and so, everything was put in place. On the death of his Grandmother, he threw her head into the sky and she became Grandmother Moon, and he said, ‘now you will always watch over us’. And now, when he was complete of things, of the earth and sky, they say he went to the river and in that reflection of the river water, the Creator could see his image. So, he reached into the living earth and took some clay. He molded that clay to the image he saw in his reflection and when he was done, he gave us a piece of his mind and he gave us his fire. He put his fire in the blood of this clay being, and then he breathed into its mouth three times and that human being began to live. [...] he picked up the living earth and he said, ‘this earth is your mother, from her you came from her, you came from the living earth and you will always take care of her, give her things and love her. She will take care of you’. Then the man, he released him on the earth”. (Patton 2020)

This is a shortened version of one of many versions of the Haudenosaunee Creation story. Just like the Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén, there is no official version of the story (Mohawk 2005; Porter 2008; Thomas 1992; Thomas and Boyle 1994), and it may differ from person to person and will vary in length, spanning from five minutes to two days, depending on who is doing the telling and in what context. The Creation story holds many teachings, as it relays the history of the Haudenosaunee, how they came to be, who they are, their responsibilities, and in which direction they are meant to go in the future.

Thomas King (2003) speaks of the Creation story and its significance to Indigenous people and compares its importance to that of the Christian origin story in the book of Genesis. He highlights the fact that many might critique the Creation stories told by Indigenous people as being unrealistic, as the use of animals and elements such as the moon and Earth throughout their stories distort reality. “So here are our choices: a world in which creation is a solitary, individual act or a world in which creation is a shared activity; a world that begins in harmony and slides towards chaos or a world that begins in chaos and moves toward harmony; a world marked by competition or a world determined by co-operation” (p. 25). In his comparison, he demonstrates the peaceful and cooperative ways in which Indigenous people came to be and who they are, ways that are not shown in the Christian Creation story. He uses comparisons as a way of showing value in a story that many are unaware of. He highlights the important values and cultural norms shared in Indigenous culture to show a side of Indigenous people that has long been distorted through colonization. King demonstrates the significance of the two very different, yet equally important stories.

Creation stories ground people. They hold information on how humans and all life came to be. They are the origins of a people, grounded in ancestral teachings and knowledge. Specifically for the Haudenosaunee, the Creation Story is a road map aimed to guide them into a balanced and sustainable future, one that is linked to teachings of a people and connection to the land (Hill 2017). The foundation of cultural teachings and their transmission is through the traditional methods of storytelling.

5. Storytelling

Storytelling in Kanien’kehá:ka tradition is a means of teaching future generations about history, language, and culture. Storytelling is a means of passing down knowledge

from one generation to the next and allowing for traditional and cultural continuity, which is especially important in healing from the impacts of colonialism.

“In our stories, we were told, human beings, they lived great for a while, but we are forgetful people. Human beings, we know the path that we should be walking on this world, but we always seem to look to a different path. And so human beings, they forgot to give thanks. They took life for granted and that was a time when they lived forever. In the spirit times, there was no such thing as death and the Creator, he looked and he saw that all of these human beings that walked at his feet, that they had forgotten to give thanks, they took life for granted. So, he searched out on earth and he found this being, this giant being, and all he did was travel around and rip up trees and tear things apart and send these winds and destroy everything in his path. He had no face and he had no heart and he had no pity. So, he went to him [. . .] and he said ‘look at this earth, see these beings that live on this earth. [. . .] they have long lives, but they forgot to give thanks for life. And, he says now I will give you a responsibility to take their life from their bodies and now life will end, and you’re the only one who can do that cause you don’t care who you hurt’. [. . .] the first human being, he was laughing, he was walking, he was healthy and all of a sudden, he fell to the earth and there was no more life, no more breath and his body grew cold. And then no matter what people did, they couldn’t wake him. [. . .] So, they put him in the sky, high in a tree [. . .] where the people, buried their people in the sky and they said, ‘maybe we’ll wait and maybe he’ll wake up one day’, but he never did. And so, the earth, as it works today, the same way the sun works, the body, the flesh of that body melted and the birds came and they cleaned up what remained. But you know what happened when that first body fell. [. . .] That’s the first time they ever started to cry and the first time they had a great lump in their throat and food had no more taste, life was empty for them. And so, that’s what happened to human beings. And then they say it happened about three more times. [. . .] And now, everyone was so down and deep in the darkness, they went to a seer³, and the seer asked the Creator now, to understand ‘why is this happening to our people?’ And in that story, it says the Creator spoke to that seer and he says, [. . .] Everything will change for human beings from this day on, no human, no Onkwehónwe, no human being will no longer live forever. [. . .] This is the way it is from now on for every human being that lives [. . .] And for everyone that lives, there are only so many days that you have and that’s hidden from us and only the creator will know. And, when there’s no more time left [. . .] death will come, and this is the way it was made for all human beings. Now for every day that we live and we see another sunrise, we take another breath, we should give thanks because the Creator allowed us another day to live”. (Patton 2020)

Through this story, Otsi’tsakén:ra shares the cycle of life and the importance of not dwelling on the darkness and on death, but focusing instead on the continuation of life and all that one has to live for. In Haudenosaunee tradition, it is believed that once you die, you continue onto your next journey into the spirit world. This story reiterates that idea and belief that death is not the end and that Onkwehónwe should not fear it.

Many traditional Indigenous stories are meant to serve as a form of guidance, rather than as rules or specific instructions. They help shape one’s life journey and ways they may have never imagined (Kimmerer 2013). Storytelling is not the act of telling one’s children fairy tales before going to bed. Storytelling is a spiritual connection between human beings and all living things. As explained by Mi’kmaq and Celtic writer, Evan Pritchard (2005), storytelling details sacred stories that are eternal and that hold important cultural teachings and wisdom for both children and adults alike, and they highlight Indigenous values and beliefs. Otsi’tsakén:ra continues with another story on harvesting, which is similar to the teachings of the cycle of life.

6. Harvest Teachings

Traditionally, the Haudenosaunee have thirteen ceremonies that coincide with the thirteen moons that occur throughout the year. These thirteen ceremonies are Midwinter, Maple Ceremony, Thunder Dance, Sun and Moon dance, Seed Ceremony, Planting Ceremony, Strawberry Ceremony, String Bean, Corn, Harvest, Thunder, and End of Seasons ([Haudenosaunee Confederacy n.d.a](#)). These ceremonies, like many teachings the Haudenosaunee and Kanien'kehá:ka traditions, serve as a reminder to give thanks to all of Creation and serve as a way of teaching to respect and acknowledge the gifts of Mother Earth ([Francis 2019](#)).

Otsi'tsakén:ra shares: "When we talk about harvest, there are so many things that we must understand before, that it's all about life. Food is life and we give thanks to the food life and because we give thanks to the food life, then, life continues, right? If there was no more food left, what would life be for us?" ([Patton 2020](#)). Harvest season entails more than growing and picking food. It is a reciprocal relationship between human beings and is a reminder that without food, we as humans could not survive, so it is important to cherish and honour all foods and all that is harvested. Some foods, such as corn, cannot grow without assistance from the humans who plant them each season. To properly care for each seed that is planted, it is equally as important to understand why it is done and the relationship that grows with the plant. [Delormier et al. \(2017\)](#) explains that with the harvest season comes harvest teachings and she stresses the importance of transmitting these teachings to the next generation: "Therefore, a key aspect of food security is understanding and respecting the spiritual connection that is part of seed keeping and planting". By embodying these responsibilities and passing them on, as Haudenosaunee⁴, "we have these ways that we are supposed to be doing it, [...] community to community, but basically the same. So, if we don't, then are we living something else?". The repercussions of this sacred relationship have far-reaching implications for our responsibilities to care for each other and ensure that everyone has not only food, but also what is essential to be Onkwehónwe and to thrive as Kanien'kehá:ka and Haudenosaunee" (p. 10). Otsi'tsakén:ra shares his teachings about harvest:

"When we talk of harvest, it's not just berries and squash and corn, everything is a harvest. Everything is providing for us. So even the sap of the maple tree that we use to make sugar, that's our harvest in the spring. The first harvest that we have is after the maple sugaring is done in the spring. The next thing we do, is we look at the sun again and we see the sun getting warmer and the snow leaves, and the earth begins to thaw. Then we see the first grass start to grow. Then what we do is we gather and we burn tobacco and this group of people in the Longhouse, and we say, 'now we give thanks to you, our mother, the earth, and now you have had your sleep for the winter. Now we say, get ready and provide us with the power that you need to thaw the earth and make it warm so we can put seeds in the ground and we can grow food again. [...] And now, it's time we take our corn seeds or pumpkin seeds or squash seeds, our beans, and anything else that will grow. Now, we go back to the longhouse again, and we burned tobacco for the seeds. Now we save the seeds. Now we are getting ready to put the seeds in the ground and we asked the seeds, now give over your life again. Hear us give your life and start to grow so we can grow again and grow the food so we can taste the corn, so we can taste the beans. And so, we can taste the squash, so we can taste all of those things that we grow'. I don't know if people know that, but I've often heard, you know, that corn is so very special to our people because we're tied to the corn. The corn needs us to survive, to live, and we need corn to survive, to eat. So, we're tied together, wrapped together in this, in this cycle of life because we have to pick the corn, save the seeds, dry it, and preserve, protect it. And in the spring, we put it in the ground and we watch it. We nurture it and the corn will grow, it'll give us food. Then we take the seeds again and we guard it. It's a cycle of life. We have to always

be planting. Corn will not take care of itself, corn will not plant itself [. . .] So it needs human beings to survive. So, we have to take care of it. That's how special corn is". (Patton 2020)

Otsi'tsakén:ra's words are a reminder to honor and respect the many gifts that Mother Earth provides in order to ensure a sustainable harvest. It is also a reminder of the life that is in each seed. Each seed that is planted goes through its own cycle of life, much like humans. Just as we need nourishment and guidance, so do the plants growing beneath us.

Kimmerer (2013) aligns herself with generations of ancestral and cultural teachings about interacting with the land or Mother Earth in a respectful way while centering Indigenous knowledge. She does so by engaging in a sustainable harvest, which involves honoring the plants and foods that she grows and thanking them for helping sustain her: "How generously they shower us with food, literally giving themselves so that we can live. But in the giving their lives are also ensured. Our taking returns benefit to them in the circle of life making life, the chain of reciprocity. Living by the precepts of the Honorable Harvest—to take only what is given, to use it well, to be grateful for the gift, and to reciprocate the gift" (p. 20). Similar to Otsi'tsakén:ra, Kimmerer highlights the importance that Indigenous people place on respecting the land and all that it provides, and she emphasizes the need for a reciprocal relationship amongst humans and the land beneath their feet. These teachings offer insight into important traditions and cultural knowledge and highlight the power and impact of passing them down to the next generation.

7. Cultural Connection

Culture is tradition, language, identity, and values—it is what binds people together. Culture guides people, communities, languages, and knowledges. Without culture, all is lost. Unfortunately for Indigenous people, connection to their culture has been severely impacted by colonization (Gomashie 2019). Colonization has had profound and detrimental impacts on the identity and knowledge of traditional cultures and languages for many Indigenous people (Talaga 2018). These impacts have caused a ripple effect throughout several generations; only now are Indigenous people beginning to recover from this effect (Rodriguez and Wakerahkats:teh 2018). Kanien'kehá:ka scholar Kahente Horn-Miller explains: "As Indigenous peoples we have found it necessary both to react to and to differentiate ourselves from the beliefs, values and practices that have been imposed on us" (Horn-Miller 2003, p. iii). The first step in this process is taking back cultural traditions, practices, and traditional languages.

Like many Indigenous peoples, the Haudenosaunee have a responsibility to uphold and maintain cultural connections for Seven Generations into the future (Alfred 2015; Goodleaf 1995). The strength in knowing one's traditions and cultural practices helps instill a deep connection to community and identity and ensures the continual existence of Indigenous ways of life. Otsi'tsakén:ra's teachings reflect ways of resisting colonial oppression through the power of knowing cultural traditions and language:

"But see that's our roots and that's what makes us strong. And sometimes when we don't have roots, that's when we have no strength. But in ourselves, I often heard the leaders in the past. They say, we can't walk through this world with a split mind. We can't have our mind in two vessels. And when we do that, then we're not strong. We never will be strong. We need to be clear of mind and spirit, and know who we are and be in touch, you know, where our ancestors lie, then we will have power". (Patton 2020)

Strength comes from knowing one's roots and from continuing the work of the ancestors by passing on cultural teachings to the next generation. The renowned Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Simpson shares the notion of regaining strength in traditions and languages by analyzing and eliminating colonial systems. She asserts that to recover what has been lost "requires us to reclaim the very best practices of our traditional cultures, knowledge systems and life ways in the dynamic, fluid, compassionate, respectful context within which they were originally generated" (Simpson 2011, p. 18). Simpson

argues that this work needs to begin within each community first and then between Indigenous Nations.

Similar to the teachings of Otsi'tsakén:ra, Kimmerer speaks of the significance and importance of Indigenous culture: "When a language dies, so much more than words are lost. Language is the dwelling place of ideas that do not exist anywhere else. It is a prism through which to see the world. Tom Porter says that even words as basic as numbers are imbued with layers of meaning. The numbers we use to count plants in the sweetgrass meadow also recall the Creation Story. Én:ska—one. This word invokes the fall of Skywoman from the world above. All alone, én:ska, she fell toward the earth. But she was not alone, for in her womb a second life was growing. Tékeni—there were two. Skywoman gave birth to a daughter, who bore twin sons and so then there were three—áhsen. Every time the Haudenosaunee count to three in their own language, they reaffirm their bond to creation" (Kimmerer 2013, p. 258).

8. Conclusions

Unlike Western approaches to treating ailments, Indigenous ways of healing does not only treat the problem, it treats the person as a whole. Anishinaabe journalist Tanya Talaga reiterates this notion of healing: "Every Indigenous Nation has its own holistic healing practices, traditions, and medicine peoples that for centuries it has relied on to take care of body, mind, and spirit—all of which, in the Indigenous worldview, are connected. [...] If someone is sick, the whole person is treated" (Talaga 2018, p. 141). Indigenous people are trying to heal from the traumatic wounds of colonization and rebuild their identities and their communities. Reconnecting with the land, traditions, culture, language, stories, and self has allowed for Indigenous people to begin their healing journey.

Otsi'tsakén:ra and his sacred teachings are vital to the healing of his community through cultural reconnection and resurgence. His teachings remind us of our shared values of connection and gratitude. In continuing to share this knowledge with others, Otsi'tsakén:ra is helping ensure that the ties that Onkwehónwe have with the earth, their families, communities and culture, remains strong. As more Knowledge Keepers like Otsi'tsakén:ra share their knowledge, the more that Onkwehónwe can begin to rebuild these ties, rebuild their communities and start to rebuild themselves, which are all important steps needed to begin their journey towards healing.

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Notes

- ¹ Being who made all of the land and all living things in Kanien'kehá:ka traditions (Porter 2008).
- ² Also known as animals.
- ³ In Indigenous tradition, these are people who are known to have spiritual gifts, as they foresee the future, can speak to people who have passed on, and can help interpret dreams and visions.
- ⁴ The six Nations that make up the Haudenosaunee Confederacy are the Mohawks (Kanien'kehá:ka), Oneidas, Onondagas, Senecas, Tuscaroras, and Cayugas (Goodleaf 1995).

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