

Laws Braided into Belts

Understanding wampum belts

The Dish with One Spoon - Sewatokwà:tshera



Jock holds up a glass replica of the Dish with One Spoon, reminding us of our responsibilities to each other, the Earth, and future generations.

Below is an excerpt from an interview with Gayogohó:nq' (Cayuga) Sub-Chief and Faithkeeper Leroy (Jock) Hill from Six Nations of the Grand River.

Note: Aionwatha was an Onondaga man, and one of the figures from the historical moment when the Haudenosaunee Nations first became one. His name was later anglicized as Hiawatha.

The Peacemaker recognized that hunting territories were a major point of contention among all the nations in the region. He instructed the Haudenosaunee as to how they needed to interact with all our other relations — humans and more-than-human — to maintain the peace. The Dish with One Spoon Wampum is a pre-colonial treaty between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe that is still honoured today.

"We're placing everything in one dish," Jock says. "One dish is going to hold all what Mother Earth holds... Symbolically, he put cooked beavertail in a wooden one-dish, [and] said we all can take a piece off of that. And that's representing all the things that sustain humans and sustain life."

"We all are entitled to a piece of that. Nobody owns the dish. But we all have equal responsibility... so that the next people coming can have access, and the coming faces can have what's there in the dish."

Ohwentya'konta yakosonten'iénke, the "coming faces" in Kanyen'kéha, is how the Haudenosaunee talk about future generations. We think about those generations living with the choices we make today, as future ancestors, but their faces are not yet formed. When a decision is made, it must be done with consideration for all the ohwentya'konta yakosonten'iénke.

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Peace is still an integral part of this Wampum, as the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe had been fearsome enemies for centuries. "We're going to have to keep the knife out of that dish, because if we had a sharp instrument like a knife, that would draw blood again and it would cause us to go back to warfare. So, some say, well, you can use a spoon because it's not sharp. So that's where this concept of one dish and one spoon come from."

Colour plays a part in the symbolism, too. "The white around [the dish] represents all of the goodness on Earth. So good mind, charity, compassion, sharing and caring, all of those," says Jock. "All of those values are what governs our behavior with the dish." While the Dish with One Spoon is often co-opted by environmental sustainability groups as a reminder to consume less, the belt is as much about our human responsibility to other humans as it is to the environment.

In the current colonial context, this Wampum Belt also reminds the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinaabe of an age-old agreement to one another. In Dish with One Spoon territory, we raise each other up, making space for both culture and language groups to thrive. In urban communities of mixed peoples, especially, we have to be conscious that one voice or culture doesn't become dominant over the other.

No wampum, however, has managed to prevent the Haudenosaunee and the Anishinaabe from ribbing each other about select cultural differences, such as dancing in opposite directions. It's the classic "nobody punches my brother but me" rule.