

Laws Braided into Belts

Understanding wampum belts

The Hiawatha Belt - Kayanere'kó:wa (Great Law)



Four Haudenosaunee women in wampum-coloured regalia hold a glass replica of the Hiawatha belt. Left to right: Karissa John (Mohawk), Clan Mother Mary Sandy (Oneida), Elder Norma Jacobs (Cayuga), Makasa Looking Horse (Mohawk/ Lakota).

Below is an excerpt from an interview with Gayogohó:nə' (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.

Jock starts at the beginning, before Aionwatha strung the first beads together. "Most people know of a period in their history, of a dark age, where it was barbaric and all the bad things that you could imagine humans could do to one another" were done. This is what the Haudenosaunee were going through, almost a thousand years ago.

He says the Creator looked down and saw that the veins of Mother Earth were flowing with the blood of war, senseless killing and other evils. To remind our ancestors how to follow their original instructions, Creator sent the Messenger of Peace, also known as the Peacemaker.

With the help of Aionwatha, the Messenger travelled by stone canoe. He went to the Mohawk, to the Oneida, to the Seneca and to the Cayuga. One nation at a time, he convinced them to accept the message of peace. Together, these four nations confronted Atotarho of the Onondaga Nation, the most wicked sorcerer and war chief in the region. They showed him the power that lies in peace and cured Atotarho of his evil ways. The Onondaga then joined the other nations and became the central leader of the Haudenosaunee, a role they hold to this day.

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Under the Great Tree of Peace, a towering white pine, the chiefs surrendered their weapons. "We're going to put away the weapons of war so our grandchildren will not see them," said the Peacemaker, according to Jock. And the Haudenosaunee have remained at peace with each other ever since.

Jock explains they chose a great white pine because each cluster contains five needles, symbolizing the five founding nations. "So that means all of the minds come together in one. And that's where our true strength and power lies, to forge a future of peace, power and righteousness." Skén:nen, kasahsten:sera, tahnon skanikonri:io.

The Messenger appointed Tsikonhsahse, an influential Haudenosaunee woman, as the first Clan Mother and installed the clan system, declaring that Haudenosaunee women would play a significant role in society. The Messenger "denoted how important the women's role is going to be in making peace, and keeping peace, and managing the population to keep everybody at peace," says Jock. Among other responsibilities, the Clan Mothers would elect chiefs and ensure that they were representing the needs of the community, other living beings, and the coming generations. Today, the traditional chief system has largely been replaced by the Band Council system under the Indian Act, though we still have Clan Mothers.

After Aionwatha found those initial pieces of wampum, says Jock, "he took them back to Onondaga and showed the Peace Messenger and Atotarho. They worked together, along with the women, and they strung them up in the pattern." Aionwatha told the others: 'this is going to be the record of peace on Earth.' So when people see this, it's going to work on their minds that we [Haudenosaunee] achieved peace." And so, Aionwatha created the first Haudenosaunee Wampum Belt, now known as the Hiawatha Belt.

When Aionwatha designed the belt, he arranged the symbols of each nation in relation to their geography. East to West, the belt represents: the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. The Messenger of Peace designated the Mohawk and Seneca as the Keepers of the Eastern and Western Doors, respectively. Jock explains that an idea or issue flows in through those doors, then passes to the little brother nations, the Oneida and the Cayuga. "Once it's unanimous, it goes to the firekeepers, the Onondaga, to resolve— to make final resolution."

Hundreds of years later, in 1722, the Tuscarora would join the Haudenosaunee, forming the 6 Nations as we are known today. Almost 120 Haudenosaunee laws that the Peacemaker brought to maintain peace, are enumerated in Aionwatha's belt. It's unequivocally the most foundational document of our confederacy.

Now, the Wampum continues to work on our minds the way those ancestors intended. The Hiawatha belt, which holds this knowledge in its beads, has become the most ubiquitous symbol of the Haudenosaunee. Cloth versions can be seen flying on the flagpoles of our allies all around the world.