



A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS  
A CULTURE OF PEACE

## *A Circle of All Nations ~ A Culture of Peace*

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# 2006 Mid Year Report on William Commanda's Work



### *Highlight of the Mid Year Report*

**June 21, 2006:**

**National Aboriginal Day at *Asinabka* - Victoria Island:  
A Sacred Ceremony, A Historic Moment,  
A Glorious Celebration!**

**Mayor Bob Chiarelli presents  
Elder *William Commanda* with the Key to the City**

Over five hundred people joined in this year's Summer Solstice activities at *Asinabka*: Victoria Island. It was a very special moment: Elder William Commanda's annual Gathering of Nations Pipe Ceremony was enhanced by a special luncheon reception hosted by His Worship, Bob Chiarelli, the Mayor of the Capital City, to present the ninety two year old Indigenous leader with the city's highest honour: the Key to the City. He is the first Aboriginal person to receive this unique award; in fact, only twelve have been presented since its inception in the mid thirties.

It was ten years since former Governor General Romeo LeBlanc had declared June 21 National Aboriginal Day officially; but, in fact, it was Willam's old friend Jules Sioui, the Indigenous rights activist, together with North American Indian Chiefs from across Turtle Island (Canada and the United States) who had declared this sacred day in Mother Earth's calendar *Indian Day* in 1945. Acknowledged in various ways over the decades, this year was the 10th year that Elder Commanda was celebrating the day with a Pipe Ceremony at the sacred site

*"It was prophesied that the time would come when the voice of indigenous peoples would rise again after five hundred years of silence and oppression, to light a path to an eternal fire of peace, love, brotherhood and sisterhood amongst all nations."*

We must come together  
with one heart, one mind,  
one love and one determination



acknowledged as the spiritual meeting grounds of his ancestors since time immemorial. I remembered the years of ceremony on the gravel roadway under the watchful eye of the summer Sun, igniting the prayer for the place of gathering and strengthening of peoples, wondering how this old man could find the strength and stamina for this annual commitment, while the rest of us wilted in the heat, and wavered in our efforts to support the great vision for the Indigenous healing and peace-building centre.

But this year, as with the walnut that survives the harshest of winters, there was some deep quickening in the heartland of his ancestors, some sense of the sprouting of new life and hope. The presentation of the Key to the City to their son was finally a recognition and acknowledgment of their presence on the land. The Elder was right in commending the Mayor for his courage in presenting him with this high honour, symbolic of so much.

It was an eclectic group who joined in the celebrations, a microcosmic statement that William's Circle of All Nations is indeed viable because it was not just his close faithful friends and admirers who were there, but representatives from all types of communities and all walks of life: Algonquin First Nations Peoples (elders, leaders and youth) from the Ontario and Quebec sides of the Ottawa River, the Mighty *Kichissippi*, non-status and off-reserve Algonquin peoples, Aboriginal Peoples originating from different parts of country, and of Inuit and Metis ancestry, the Eagle Staff Carrier and Elders from the Assembly of First Nations, political leaders, Senators,

the diplomatic corps, environmentalists, peace activists, writers, musicians and artists, the Chief and Deputy Chief of Police from the City of Ottawa and representatives of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ontario Provincial Police and Surete du Quebec: ordinary folk and extraordinary folk.



The Vision for Asinabka / Victoria Island

Mother Nature blessed the day with glorious sunshine and cooling breezes, and we were all energized by her kiss. The sacred fire and the many pipes augmented her gift during the sacred Pipe Ceremony, and consecrated the Elder's prayer for *Asinabka*. The Chief of Police, Vince Bevan, presented Elder Commanda with a DVD on the service's history and with a police cap during the Pipe Ceremony, acknowledging the unique role he plays in contributing to the security of his homeland.

Then it was time for the Mayor's Reception, "mced" under the Big Top by the Elder's granddaughter Claudette Commanda Cote. The reception line was unending, and the Mayor was most gracious, standing beside the Elder as simply everybody

awaited their turn to be hugged by him. The organizing team had arranged a marvelous picnic feast on the river combining the four sacred colours and tablecloths with salmon and cedar tea, bannock and petits fours, and the feast was punctuated by sacred drumming and fiddle music, animated conversation and the key note speeches, first the Mayor's presentation speech, and then the Elder's informal and formal words.

We include their messages here:

# Speaking Notes for Mayor Chiarelli Key to the City Presentation to Elder William Commanda

National Aboriginal Day  
Victoria Island  
Wednesday, June 21, 2006

Kwe kwe (hello in Algonquin),  
Thank you. Ms. Commanda-Cote

I would like to extend a special welcome to the members of the Diplomatic Corps, members of the Senate, elected officials, First Nations Leaders.

Greetings and thank you for having me here at Victoria Island, the sacred spiritual meeting grounds of Elder William Commanda's ancestors.

C'est avec beaucoup de respect pour ce site traditionnel que nous nous rassemblons ici aujourd'hui pour honorer un grand chef, un ami, un enseignant, un élève et un modèle.

This year marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of National Aboriginal Day Celebrations in Canada, but just before we begin if I could invite Elder William Commanda to come forward to the podium.

As the Mayor of Ottawa I am both pleased and privileged to grant the Key to the City today, because it demonstrates how strongly our city feels about honouring Aboriginal people of Ottawa and Canada.

Ottawa's Aboriginal heritage shapes the way in which our government conducts its business and how we work together to build and strengthen our city. The traditions, culture and language of Aboriginal peoples are an integral part of our unique identity as a city, including our very name.

Our commitment extends well beyond this award. The City is working hard to keep the spirit of National Aboriginal Day alive through our daily work with Aboriginal leaders, communities, governments and organizations.

Which brings us to why we are here today to present the "Key to the City" to Elder William Commanda who is also known by his Algonquin name - "Ojigkwanong" or "Morning Star". Or, for many of you he is known simply as "Grandfather".

This is an historic moment for our Nation's Capital, as Elder William Commanda will be the first Aboriginal leader to receive the Key to the City in this city's history.

Although this honour is long over due, I am sure Elder Commanda would prefer to have us look to the future and focus on how this honour can support his life's vision of bridging differences between the Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people in the years to come.

As many of you know, central to all of Elder Commanda's teachings are the fundamental concepts of equality, harmony, as well as respect for Mother Earth, for all life forms she supports, and for people of all racial and cultural backgrounds.

Chief Commanda is convinced that the future of life on the planet depends on our learning to live in harmony with nature. Healing human relationships is the first step. Tolerance and forgiveness are essential. For these teachings and for his perseverance we are so grateful and open to receive his words.

For all of you who are fortunate enough to know Elder Commanda you may already know of his many talents and teachings. By presenting the Key to the City I am honoured to have an opportunity to spread his message to a wider audience. And so I would like to take a moment to introduce Elder Commanda's beliefs to people who may not be as familiar with his wisdom.

Elder William Commanda believes that it is of crucial importance that all of Mother Earth's children learn to come together with one heart, one mind, one love and one determination. Elder Commanda is the great, great grandson of Pakinawatik, the Algonquin Chief who, in the middle of the 1800's led his people to settle in the Ottawa River Valley.

His ancestors were the Mamiwinini, the nomads who were comprised of 84 Algonquin Nations across North America. The birch bark canoe is the symbol of their travels through the waters and the land.

Elder Commanda belongs to the Squirrel Clan, the clan of tireless seed planters. Squirrels are amongst the most gentle and friendly of the wild creatures, while at the same time never retreating and they inspire courage and perseverance.

Elder Commanda is the keeper of three sacred wampum shell belts of historic and spiritual importance that were

once held by Pakinawatik.

He was acclaimed Chief of the Kitigan Zibi Reserve for over nineteen years.

He is a world-renowned birch bark canoe maker and craftsman and his work is on display at the Canadian Canoe Museum in Peterborough. He built his last canoe when he was 90 years old.

In 1987, he began public teachings on the messages of the wampum belts at the fourth First Nations Ministers Conference on Inherent Rights and Self Government for Aboriginal Peoples, chaired by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

He served as a spiritual guide to the 1995 Sunbow Five Walk, which was organized to carry the prayers of indigenous peoples across the North American continent, from First Encounter Beach on the Atlantic Coast to Santa Barbara on the Pacific Ocean.

In the 1960's he began hosting an annual gathering of the Circle of All Nations. The goal of these meetings was to eradicate racism and build community. The talking circle is a traditional means of communication and policy-making in most First Nations.

During an illness he had a vision of a 'Circle of All Nations' where all races could solve their problems by face-to-face communication in a talking circle. The work of reconciliation has now been expanded to many cultures and races. Today, the Circle of All Nations attracts over 3,500 participants who gather at his home in Maniwaki every August.

In addition, Elder Commanda has received many recognitions and awards, most valued amongst these are the Wolf Project and Harmony awards for his efforts to foster racial harmony.

The Wolf Project Award is presented to "those that demonstrate excellence working toward enhancing respect and understanding between cultures and races". Recipients of the award include President Nelson Mandela.

The Harmony Award encourages Canadians of all racial, cultural and religious origins to embrace and promote harmony, diversity, as well as equality. Elder Commanda was presented with the 2000 Harmony Award. Other recipients of the award include Dr. David Lam, Mr. Herbert Carnegie and Mr. Bromley Armstrong.

In addition to these esteemed awards, Elder Commanda also received the Bill Mason National River Conservation Award in 2004. The award is presented every three years to a Canadian citizen who has made an outstanding contribution to canoeing heritage and river conservation in Canada.

***“And we respect the vision of Elder Commanda that this place will become a beacon for all those values that speak to protecting Mother Earth, and the philosophies and values of all our First Nations peoples.”***

Past Award Winners are Mr. Kirk Wipper, Founder of the Canadian Recreational Canoeing Association, and the Honourable Pierre Elliot Trudeau, former Prime Minister of Canada.

Elder Commanda received the Aboriginal Justice Award from the University of Ottawa's Aboriginal Legal Services Division in 2002.

And in 2005, Elder Commanda received an Honourary Doctorate from the University of Ottawa.

I am extremely pleased to have the privilege to present the City's highest honour here on Victoria Island. A place rich in First Nations and Algonquin history and heritage. A place where, before Parliament sat upon the hill close by, the river flowed freely and the air was clean and pure.

And we respect the vision of Elder Commanda that this place will become a beacon for all those values that speak to protecting Mother Earth, and the philosophies and values of all our First Nations peoples.

I invite you to join me in celebration and praise of Elder Commanda and his work. And, I am truly honoured to present Elder William Commanda with the "Key to the City" on behalf of City Council and the citizens of Ottawa in recognition of your outstanding leadership and devotion over four decades in fostering an understanding amongst aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples and in creating the Circle of All Nations.

**In his informal response Elder Commanda talked about equality, respect, love, forgiveness and Mother Earth. The following is his formal response:**

# William Commanda's Remarks Upon Receipt of The Key to The City of Ottawa - June 21, 2006

I wish to thank His Worship, Mayor Bob Chiarelli for taking this courageous step of presenting me with the *Key* to the capital city of Canada. I am deeply moved to be honoured in this fashion on National Aboriginal Day. For me, this is as much an expression of understanding of my own individual efforts to work and serve my people, *all* the people who now reside on the land of my ancestors, as it is also an acknowledgement of the spirit of my ancestors and my Indigenous brothers and sisters. Thank you all for joining us today.

You may know that use of *symbol* is of great importance to Indigenous Peoples, guiding us to understandings of the bigger realities of life, and this gesture of the presentation of the *Key* to the heart of the country is of great symbolic significance to me.

For well over thirty years now, I have been the Keeper of Three Sacred Wampum Belts. These sacred relics of my ancestors hold messages of historic and spiritual importance for all peoples.



The youngest belt, the Jay Treaty Belt of 1793, the time before my country was divided, held the commitment for free movement across Turtle Island for my people. This Belt contains both genuine wampum and artificial Hudson Bay beads, foretelling the time when the borders would again dissolve.

In some respects, this message is ominous. But today, I see three levels of significance that makes me happy. The City of Ottawa is acknowledging someone from the City of Maniwaki; the Province of Ontario is reaching across to the Province of Quebec; and the National Capital Region, representing the entire country, is opening its heart to some one seen generally as

belonging within the confines of a reserve, the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg. I see the spirit of borderlessness gaining strength. I see it as a symbol of hope.



I also carry the Three Figure Welcoming Belt, created in the 1700s, when my ancestors welcomed the newcomers, then the French and English, agreeing to share the grand natural resources of our land and our values with them in three equal parts. Mayor Chiarelli's letter to me states that I am being presented with the *Key to the City* in recognition of my immeasurable contribution to the community, my formidable accomplishments and my positive influence - I see implicit in these words a recognition of the wisdom of the Indigenous Peoples, such as my ancestors had hoped would be understood years ago, and I am grateful. The indigenous still stands in the centre between the original settlers and the newer people.

Today I wear with pride my Eagle Feather Headdress, a symbol of respect and wisdom amongst Indigenous Peoples, and this mantle, representative of my Honorary Doctorate Degree.

My people were also guided by the Seven Fires Prophecy, which had forewarned us of the difficulties we would pass through during seven epochs of time. We are now at the time of the final message of the prophecy; we all, and not just the Indigenous Peoples, are experiencing Mother Earth's pain and turmoil in our physical and spiritual health. Today, we are all also impacted by the pain and stain of war. I was born on the eve of the First World War, ninety three years ago; today the energy of hatred and racism divides us even more dramatically.



It is the time of the Eighth Fire, and we need to search for more profound solutions to our deep troubles, in order to leave a legacy of hope for all our children.

### **Two Core Messages**

**My ancestors left us with two core messages - messages that have guided my work, and messages that the world needs to awaken to in these times of unprecedented global crisis: one, *Respect for Mother Earth*, and two, realization that *We are All Related*.**

### **The Vision for Asinabka/Victoria Island**

**I want to share with you my vision to guide us through these difficult times. It is a vision for the revitalization of this Sacred Site, *Asinabka*, at the circular Chaudière Rapids, *Akikpautik: The Pipe Bowl Falls*. In this vision, the falls are restored to their original state, in celebration of the spirit of water, and Chaudière Island is replanted with trees. Together, they constitute a wild space in the heart of the country, a sanctuary to be shared with all who live in and visit this great city, and they send a symbolic message of reconciliation with Mother Earth across the globe.**

**This Sacred Site was a very special and powerful meeting place for Indigenous peoples from time immemorial. It is time for us to light the council fires again. The vision for *Asinabka* calls for an Indigenous Centre to revitalize Indigenous culture and heritage, and a Peace Building Conference Centre for *All Our Relations*, on Victoria Island. It is here that we can come all come together as *A Circle of All Nations, A Culture of Peace*.**

I thank Mayor Chiarelli for giving me this special opportunity to present you with this vision. Its realization is dependent on all of us. I am deeply honoured that you have all come to join me in lighting the Eighth Fire on this International Peace and Prayer Day.



*Megwetch! Merci!*

*William Commanda*

Dr. William Commanda  
Algonquin Elder  
[www.circleofallnations.com](http://www.circleofallnations.com)



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Then it was time for more informal music and dancing organized by TitoMendinoMusic The Women's Hand Drummers, the Youth Drum from his home community of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, Irish, Guatamalan, Inuit musicians and Mexican Dancers. People viewed the Birthday Posters from Grandfather's ninetieth celebration, together with the awards and photos celebrating special moments in his life and work, and his full colour book, *Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout*, by Romola Vasantha Thumbadoo, and his canoe dvd, *Good Enough for Two*, by Valerie Pouyanne, were enthusiastically welcomed by those wanting to learn more about the work, philosophy and passions of this truly unique and tireless worker.

It was indeed a marvelous day celebrating the life of this land's most unique individual in the heart of his country.

# Doctor Commanda, the Teacher: *Putting the University of Ottawa Honorary Doctorate Degree to Work*

Following the New Year's Eve Pipe Ceremony he generally hosts in his Lodge each year, the newly honoured Doctor prepared for the school year. He did two teaching sessions at Indigenous conferences at Trent University, the one university in Canada that offers a doctorate program in indigenous studies. Doctor Commanda's presentations on the Sacred Wampum Belts were very well received by students and staff and the public at large who participated in some of the sessions. In fact, one professor, well versed in the Three Fires Society and Midewewin Teachings, stated that his teachings enhanced her understanding of the historic, sacred and contemporary significance of the Wampum Belts considerably. He also did presentations on his work to create a Circle of All Nations, with practical suggestions to advance racial harmony and peace building. He then addressed the subject of indigenous justice; his knowledge in this area is not unsubstantial - his work with Aboriginal men in a federal prison is captured in the National Film Board Documentary by Lucie Ouhmet: *Ojigkwanong*; and in 2002, he was presented with the inaugural Justice Award by the Aboriginal Legal Services Unit of the University of Ottawa; this was presented by Aboriginal Lieutenant Governor James Bartleman. Further than this, of course, he is well versed in the broader justice issues impacting his peoples and others, pertaining to history, land issues, oppression, exploitation and racism; this grasp of history and world events, noted in his notes and annotations in his unique library of books, added a special depth and wisdom to the teachings he brought the students. And of course, no teaching session with William ever happens without mention of his greatest passion: Mother Earth and the three other elements, Air, Fire and Water, and his emphasis on Nature's Law. And, it was interesting to note that he was one of the few men who supported the Indigenous Women's Conference.

Might I add that he braved some of the bitterest days this winter to share his knowledge with his young friends. William, the eternal student, also has an avid interest in what other people have to share.

He attended a presentation by doctorate student Lynn Gehl, based in part on her research on his work and



Wampum Belt Teachings. Dr. Commanda also offers guidance and information to another doctorate student reclaiming Algonquin history, Paula Sherman.

He also did two more Wampum Belt teachings, one at St. Paul's University, for First Nations Leadership Development Program, and the other for community elders at his own Lodge in Maniwaki.

We think the University of Ottawa would be proud of their graduate!



## Prayer for Indigenous Justice

We have already mentioned Elder Commanda's interest and background in Aboriginal Justice. This winter, he supported Lawyer Michael Swinwood's efforts to advance Aboriginal Justice approaches to rights issues and conflict resolution in Ontario.

In the first instance, the original plan was to get Elder Commanda's testimony on the Wampum Belt agreements and his knowledge about Indigenous Rights on public record. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Nonetheless, he agreed to conduct a Reconciliation Circle to end the a c r i m o n i o u s proceedings on a more harmonious note.

We are not going into the details of the actual case here; suffice it to say that we were encouraged that a decade after the Aboriginal Justice Initiative and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Elder Commanda was able to see some miniscule reflection of his peoples approach to conflict resolution find expression within the adversarial court setting.

Well over a hundred Aboriginal people traveled far to join in the Reconciliation Circle held at the Friendship Centre in North Bay, not perhaps so much engaged in the actual case, but rather to see how an indigenous process reflecting a forgotten heritage might manifest in the current times, and to see the legendary Elder, who at 92 was prepared to journey through bleak winter roads from his home in Northern Quebec to North Bay to serve his people. The Pikwakanagan Traditional

Drummers smoked their Pipe and opened the Circle with drumsong; Elder Commanda conducted a smudge ceremony and offered an opening prayer, shared the core messages of the Three Figure Welcoming/Sharing Wampum Belt from the 1700s, and initiated a Talking Circle which involved all key participants, and the session ended with a communal meal. It was a mind opening experience for many of the representatives of the Criminal Justice System. In a country that celebrates diversity, it is frightening to realize how little we know of the original people and energy of the land. So very much more needs to be understood before real justice will take root. In the end, though it did not have any impact on the actual case, the restorative process contributed to some small bridging across immense cultural divides. Undoubtedly the process provided

some comfort to the family during the last moments of the plaintiff's seventy years. Sadly, he died a short few months after his trial. One wonders how much the preceding years of stress and tension contributed to his death.

Shortly after, he participated in a sentencing circle pertaining to an interpersonal dispute within a community. Again, the ceremonial components were so powerful, that even the Judge was visibly moved; so, too, were many Aboriginal peoples, distanced over generations from indigenous spirituality and their rich and ingenious cultural heritage. The process pointed the way to conflict resolution at the community level, though it was not an absolute resolution. It was disturbing to think of the tremendous pain and strife associated with the case over the years that it had taken to move even towards that resolution; it was even more disturbing to think about the costs of the formal criminal justice system.

You may have realized by now that it is an eclectic and diverse group of people who connect with the Elder, and support the different facets of his work, and we don't





always understand what others do to contribute to his large vision. Acknowledging Grandfather's influence on his life and work since 1996, Michael Swinwood's efforts have served to bring some notion of Indigenous Rights to the attention of the judicial system, as well as to ensure that that system and Aboriginal Peoples both are aware of the right and responsibility to access indigenous pathways to justice.

But we have a long way to go to reclaim conflict resolution practices that were lost along the years. For a people who had “no word for justice” to have to submit to a foreign and punitive ideology is a deep tragedy; it reflects our common loss when we realize that the

wisdom of the indigenous peoples was not safeguarded in the evolution of this country, as had been committed to in the Three Figure Wampum Belt; today, we watch W5 and begin to realize, two decades after Donald Marshall Junior's fight for justice, how many other lives have been devastated by the abuses within the justice system. Now as we look at a world filling with bigger prisons, longer sentences, younger prisoners, as well as ineffective approaches to resolving nation to nation conflict, some of us begin to see the tremendous costs of our shortsightedness to humankind.

(For more information on our thoughts about Indigenous Justice, check *Learning from a Kindergarten Dropout*.)

## Springtime Journeying on the Mighty Kichissippi



The river has figured in William's story since his birth. The world renowned canoe maker has traveled the waterways of Northern Quebec over countless decades. A tireless advocate for Mother Earth, he was presented with the Bill Mason Conservation Award by the Heritage River Association in 2004, where he joins the austere ranks of watermen like Kirk Wipper and Pierre Elliot Trudeau. Over the past few years, he has supported efforts to designate the Ottawa River a Heritage River, under the leadership of Senator Len Hopkins.

In the late winter, Elder Commanda traveled to Petawawa where he was invited to be Honorary Chair of the Ottawa Heritage River Designation Committee. This was quite remarkable. A few years ago, the largely mainstream team knew very little about the Aboriginal Peoples of the Ottawa River, and appeared to be rather taken aback with the presence of the Elder. A short few years later, he had won their respect and admiration, and they were enthusiastic about celebrating the ancient pre-contact history of the river and its peoples.

On the weekend of May 21, he journeyed to Val des Lacs, crossing one northeastern tributary of the Ottawa River after another, to Lac Original, to join Elder Dominic Rankin in a spring time prayer for Mother Earth, welcoming her season of renewal with traditional ceremony and prayer. Gentle spring rains

fell all weekend, and Earth took on her blanket of virgin green, draping the glorious mountains of the Mount Tremblay region; it was a site where seventeen bison now roam, regenerating the spirit of the ancient keepers of the land, cared for by Stephane Denis and his family. It is also where Dominic offers traditional ceremonies to the land and to the people. It was easy to see that this was one of the very sacred sites revered by William's ancestors and we could almost see the eastern reaches of traditional Algonquin territory at the St Maurice River.

A hundred people joined in the sacred ceremony, embraced by the steady drizzle, and the presence of the ancestral spirits was palpable in the rocks and shadows and tall trees, drawn closer by the smudge, the fire, the pipe and the drumming. Many folk came to see William, to bring him gifts, to drum or sing for him, to ask for his prayers, to pray for healing - was sad to see how many young folk were victims of cancer, or heart disease or diabetes.

It was a far different way to greet the returning spring than the usual May 24 dash to Canadian Tire and Home Depot, etc., etc., to seek out the floral bargains in the mad long weekend shopping spree, and I felt restored at a deep level of mypsyche.

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The following week, we were off to Montreal for June 4, when William was presented with the Bernard Assinniwi Lifetime Achievement Award by Lands in Sight - *Terres en Vues* an organization that has done so much to promote awareness and celebration of First Nations art and creativity in the city of Montreal over the past years, and where William's own videos, *Ojigkwanong* and *Good Enough for Two* have been featured in the annual film festival. William was a long time friend of the Assinniwi family, and he was glad to see his widow Marina and her two sons Mark and Jean Yves again; Jean Yves made a moving statement about William's stature as spiritual leader, political activist, peace maker and artist to Aboriginal Peoples and others who know him. I was again taken by the realization that no matter how intimately one might think one knows William, one has just to meet yet another old friend, and

learn about how intimately connected he has been with them, and about what detailed recall he has of the acquaintance, to realize his circle is truly unfathomable. His is the ultimate spirit of *Ubuntu*, I sometimes think but more about that later!

We met so many of William's old friends and acquaintances including Andre Dudemain, Christine Sioui, Alana Obonsowin, our old Inuit friend, Paulossie, who is the penultimate spirit of dance, Lucie Ouimet and Valerie Pouyanne, his film makers, and their families, regulars at his Gatherings, like Brian, and the Four Ladies; we visited the McCord Museum and saw the super powerful Robert Davidson exhibition where the black, white and red of the Medicine Wheel pulsated with energy. Some years ago, William was presented with a Robert Davidson Mask; and a few years ago, William and the artist sat side by side at the Supreme Court of Canada, praying for the protection of the Old Growth Forests in Haida Gwaii.

Then we took the opportunity to visit the Artist's Exposition.. Artisans de non violence and ironically enough, William's portrait had been placed beside one of Henry David Thoreau. What an absolute irony and what a full circle, I thought. Now most of you may know that Henry David Thoreau, of Waldon Pond fame, influenced many with his philosophy and ideology evolved of a reverence and respect for nature; this included Tolstoy, who in turn influenced Mahatma Gandhi, who influenced Martin Luther King, who influenced Nelson Mandela, and of course many others we think about as the wise peace activists of global importance.

But how many of us know that Thoreau's wisdom emerged from the teachings of his Penobscot guides William's Algonquin ancestors, the ones who taught the lessons of Nature. (We are now on the hunt for the story of another one of these obscured heroes and the search is bringing us to William's own family! See the next segment.)

It is no wonder that William repeatedly reminds us that we can have Civil Law, and Constitutional Law and International Law and so forth, but above all of these stands Nature's Law; if these others don't draw their

relevance from the laws of Nature, then they will fail to serve us well.

It was gratifying to see William's efforts to build peace honoured amongst others better know to the world at large. These others are supported by huge teams of workers. William has no workers and no funding. His helpers themselves are a part of his work.

It is truly remarkable what this kindergarten dropout, a second class citizen in his own land, has accomplished. And, this is not his job or career. It is merely his way of living. Far more than remarkable, it is awe-inspiring.

Oh yes, in Montreal, we were at the other end of the territory of William's ancestors. We drove over the Lake of Two Mountains, tracked the two channels where the Ottawa River emptied into the Mighty St Lawrence River, and we followed the river back to the Capital via the old road.

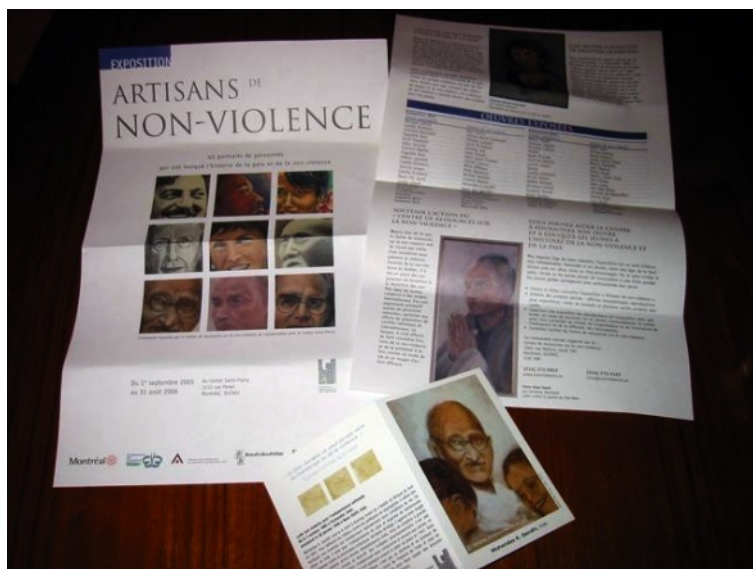
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A couple of weeks later, we headed west, crossing the tributaries on the southwestern side of the Ottawa River, the ones emerging from Algonquin Park and pointing to the southern reaches of the traditional territory of his ancestors to Mattawa, where the Ottawa had turned east to find its path to the St. Lawrence and the salt waters of the Atlantic Ocean, and from where the Mattawa drew one on to the Great Lakes.

Enroute, we visited the Bonnechere Caves. A new acquaintance, Bill Sluiman, arranged for us to have a tour of the caves; now, William had visited them in the sixties, but it was quite another thing to see the ninety two year old descend into the dark and wet bowels of Mother Earth. It was indeed a sacred moment when William offered a drumsong to the caves on Heather Sole's drum. The caves had been first discovered in 1851, but only explored 1951. Nothing is known in the history books about the Algonquin association with the Caves. But of course we know



that the Algonquins knew every tributary in their watershed intimately, and we also know that they held underground streams as places of special spiritual power. The story of their connection with the Caves is yet to be revealed. The Elder's prayer regenerates our spiritual connection with the waters. (Interestingly enough, as I write this, Nature's Law is expressing herself in unusual storms, wind bursts and downpours across the southern portion of the Ottawa River Valley, including Pembroke, the Capital City and Hawkesbury - did our Elder awaken or anticipate the voice of nature? I remembered how the day after he was telling the National Capital Commission that Nature's Law precedes and preempts man made laws, Mother Nature underlined his message by shutting down the Eastern Seaboard!)



## Discovering Anahareo and Piecing Together the Story of Uncle Gabriel Commanda

Then we were off to Mattawa to celebrate the life of Anahareo, the Aboriginal wife of Grey Owl. She warrants her own segment!

We have yet to visit the northwestern stretch and the source of the Ottawa. We know we have much work to undertake on this Quebec side of the mighty river of William's ancestors.

A few weeks before our trip to Mattawa, where Elder Commanda had been invited by John Whalen, (a member of the Ottawa Heritage River Designation Steering Committee), to participate in the 100 year celebration of the life of Anahareo, the wife of Grey Owl, I suddenly felt drawn to try to read the historical romance written in French by Jean Ferguson about William's uncle Gabriel Commanda. A trilingual nomad, the prospector who discovered the gold mines in the valley of gold, he is considered the first citizen of Val d'or, a day care centre at the Native Friendship Centre is named after him, and on the International Day for the Elimination of Racism, the city participates in the Gabriel Commanda Run for Unity. Ploughing my way through the French, I learned that Gabriel Commanda was also a World War One veteran, that he had met Archie Belaney, Englishman, later known as Grey Owl, in Belgium during the war, and that in fact he had carried him to safety when Grey Owl had shot himself in the foot on the battle field; it appears that that is when his interest in *being Indian* was first expressed. A few years later, I learned, Gabriel and Grey Owl, now with Anahareo, lived in the same general area in Northern Quebec, and engaged in animated discussions about protecting wildlife from poachers, etc., together with Chief Ignace Papatie from Grand Lac

Victoria, and that Gabriel actually wrote their letters of concern and protest to the federal government. (Doesn't his nephew sound a bit like him!)

In Mattawa, we learned more about Anahareo, thanks to the enthusiasm of Edward Sapiano, a Toronto lawyer of Italian descent, who had discovered Anahareo through her biography, and then persuaded the town of Mattawa to celebrate the life of this remarkable woman of Algonquin ancestry. A prospector, traveler and conservationist, she was the force that changed Grey Owl from trapper to renowned conservationist, author

and lecturer. Passionately concerned about nature herself, she was admitted in to the Order of Nature, the Paris based International League for Animal Rights in 1979, and later in 1983, the Order of Canada. We think she might have had more than a fleeting relationship with Gabriel Commanda, and we are on the hunt for more information!



Elder Commanda joined in the marvelous day of activities in Mattawa on June 17, where native heritage was highlighted and celebrated, where he connected with Annie Gallipeau, who had played Anahareo in the movie Grey Owl, and who actually comes from William's home town.

Thus, we learned, though Grey Owl was credited with mobilizing the effort to save the beaver, it was actually the Aboriginal people who were the real activists, and a few more threads in his shaky story of identity have unraveled, while history is being rewritten. Still, he has done much for the cause of Nature. It was sixty years ago that he said these words, and the message is as relevant, and perhaps even more urgent today:

I am not a hero or a prophet.  
Like most of us, I've done what I've had to get by.  
The one thing that gives me courage to stand before you today  
Is that what I have to say is crucial to our survival.

We are not the lords of this Earth, we're its children.  
We lie in the lap of creation,  
In the strong arms of a spirit greater than our own.

You know I am going to say protect our beavers;  
You know I am going to say stop cutting down the forests;  
You know I am going to say the money you make  
Is not worth the price you pay.

Here's some more:

If we can say that there are some things not for sale,  
That there are some things that belong to all of us  
And to future generations,  
Other people will hear us and say it too.

And some day there will be enough of us  
And we will believe that it can be done,  
That we can change the world.

So why don't we start in our own country,  
In Canada, here?

It is no wonder that William has renamed him Grey Owl!



## Miscellanea

Of course, there were many more activities and daily visitors to keep Grandfather Commanda extremely busy over the past months. He was pleased to attend the Opening celebrations for the Aboriginal Drop In Centre In Ottawa, and to participate in the Urban Aboriginal Strategy meeting, and to witness the growing strength and confidence in the voice of his people; he attended the RCMP Diversity recruitment outreach, where he learned about the isolation that Commissioner Zacerdelli's family had first experienced in their new homeland; his father did not believe there could be a place of rank for his Italian son in the national police - but, he assured us, in Canada, such was possible! Then there was a cultural teaching with public school children, participation in Black History Month activities, and in the launch of a weaver's exposition, participation in the University of Carleton's viewing of the Morriseau Exhibition, South Africa's Freedom Day celebrations, the launch of the English Theatre Season at the National Arts Centre, Winter Olympics launch,

Federation of Canadian Municipalities' Sustainable Communities Conference and the launch of canoes from Victoria Island in support Heritage Rivers Day. The list is endless!

On South Africa's Freedom Day, one of its heroes died Strini Moodley was the individual who built a legacy of good karma for Indians amongst the Africans and others engaged in the struggle for the eradication of racism in South Africa, and he was a unique reflection of the spirit of *Ubuntu I am because you are*; he had served time in Robben Island with President Nelson Mandela; and he had an intimate connection with a wide range of people; he had even met some of the members of the American Indian Movement some years back. My sister Beulah called to ask William to say a prayer for the dying activist and writer; I was amazed to realize William had absolutely clear recall of this man that he had met just once in 2001 during the World Conference for the Elimination of Racism in Durban South Africa. I felt I was witness to the spirit of Ubuntu embracing two of its more special voices.





A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS  
A CULTURE OF PEACE

## GRANDFATHER WILLIAM COMMANDA'S ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL

*A Circle of All Nations*

**SPIRITUAL GATHERING  
AUGUST 4, 5 and 6, 2006  
KITIGAN ZIBI ANISHINABEG**

Grandfather William Commanda is pleased to invite you to his annual international spiritual gathering at his home at Bitobi Lake, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, Maniwaki, Quebec.

The key themes that Grandfather advances at the Gathering, through a series of presentations and workshops, are

1. Indigenous Wisdom, Respect for Mother Earth and Healing,
2. Racial Harmony,
3. Social Justice and
4. Peace Building.

The Gathering provides opportunity for community development, networking, individual and communal healing, spiritual growth and creativity. Its key objectives are to

1. Share the wisdom, knowledge and sacred teachings of Indigenous Elders, Spiritual leaders and Medicine people
2. Promote discussion on a range of topics justice, poverty, aids, racism, spirituality, peace, leadership, healing
3. Raise awareness about our relationship with Mother Earth
4. Facilitate individual healing, spiritual growth and creativity
5. Foster positive inter personal relationships and harmony
6. Celebrate life, and build community

***The key theme for the 2006 Gathering is CONSERVATION, and you are invited join in efforts to teach others about your efforts and strategies to create a culture of conservation.***

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