



A CIRCLE OF ALL NATIONS
A CULTURE OF PEACE

© *Circle of All Nations*
Segimai Papers - 1
“Never Underestimate the Clout of One Mosquito”
Blog Post 10 May 2020



**Isolation and Coronavirus viewed through the Lens of Indigenous Elder
William Commanda, Founder, *Circle of All Nations***

**By Romola V. Thumbadoo, PhD
Coordinator, *Circle of All Nations*
Romola@circleofallnations.ca**

Ginawaydaganuc is the word my friend North American Indigenous Elder William Commanda used to awaken us to the fact that *Everything is Related*. I myself, a Canadian immigrant of East Indian roots and born in South Africa (everyone's Motherland), used to translate that to the Zulu, *Ubuntu*, popularly, *I am because you are*, until I began to understand much better the nature of relationship that Elder Commanda was talking about – relationship with Nature, beyond borders with people, plants, animal, the key elements: fire, earth, water and air, and the cosmic world of the visible and invisible. With such a foundational world view, isolation is an inconceivable concept, inconsistent with the Laws of Nature. We are at a crossroad of critical importance in this moment of global wake up on the same page in the book of life.

William Commanda was the carrier of the prophetic heritage of his Algonquin ancestors, and he talked about the Seven Fires Prophecy with great urgency from 1987, on the local, national and global stages. Passionately concerned about the escalating warfare and environmental crisis in what is now called the Age of the Anthropocene, he warned of the choices humanity would have to make to be able to live sustainably on the Earth. What is prophecy but an early warning signal, said the late Zulu shaman and writer, Credo Mutwa, himself a visionary voice of Africa, when they met. Elder Commanda believed that we were being given a choice between the roads to peace and reconciliation with earth and each other, or destruction, and on, 11 September 2001, he stated that the choice taken by some had plunged the world into ever increasing bloodshed and that the balance of life had been irrevocably shifted.

It is ironic to me that it is something called *Corona* virus, that that has both isolated us and at the same time obliged us to awaken to unprecedented global interconnection, has association with the two leadership voices of my adopted and birth homelands. Both William Commanda and Nelson Mandela were presented with Wolf Project Awards, named after *Corona Borealis* and *Corona Australis* constellations, for their efforts to challenge segregation by asserting relationship and harmony. Despite the political and racial oppression they had experienced viscerally, and had challenged actively from youth, they also became the faces of racial harmony; William Commanda was also passionately concerned about *Gaia*, the living planet. Since 2001, we have fallen into a world of escalating localized and global violence and warfare, and now *Corona* virus is shifting our focus on the target – this new target is everywhere, both defying and compelling isolation. It is a *contagion*, and that, Siri tells me, is a communication transferred from one organism to another, from one person to another. Some say we are now at war with *Corona* virus.

Yet, despite all that conspiracy theorists might conclude, *Corona* virus is a phenomenon birthed of Nature, birthed of the Pangolin, birthed in Motherland Africa: this most trafficked endangered species is headed for extinction, poached relentlessly for the supposed healing components of its armour of scales. This creature has been accused of serving Bat as intermediary to transmit the viral respiratory dis-ease to Human; Snake has been associated with this “relay” too, and scientists are following all the protein clues to figure this out – but who knows? there could be other intermediaries or transmitters of the *Corona* virus out there too. From a William Commanda perspective, the Laws of Nature are the science, and the animals are the teachers. To many Indigenous Peoples, Bat is the symbol of birth – it hangs upside in the position the baby in the womb prepares itself for birth, so it is deeply respected for this assertion of life. Snake, on the other hand, is a symbol of rebirth to many – as it grows, it sheds its old skin; if it does not, it will strangle itself; thus, extracting its symbolic teaching for us, Elder Commanda would say that we have to

integrate new ideas that present themselves to us in order to evolve. Our friend Hopi Elder Martin Gashwaseoma would take the lessons from Nature further – he taught us how the venom of the rattlesnake can also be a medicine, and can teach us about fear, amongst other things.

It was World War One, from the time of William Commanda's birth, that awakened us to global connection; in contemporary times, 9/11 reaffirmed it with the failed United Nations Conference against Racism and Xenophobia, and birthed a new generation infected with fear. Fear renders one vulnerable and malleable, as oppressors all over the world have known. Young people recently challenged fear in global rhizomic climate change activism – but their voices have been subdued. In South America, where Indigenous voices fighting exploitation of their land refuse to be silenced, they are killed off.

In William Commanda's colonized homeland Canada, within his larger North American territory, the original colonizing settlers seeking the New World after *Paradise (was) Lost*, were joined by post world war refugees who had been abused and conditioned by fear for a long time in Europe; newer immigrants like me, escaping apartheid/segregation for a better education, came with our racialized fears. Today, Canada is the face of the world, and the grand natural resources of the land have sustained us all well; and it has also assuaged our historical woundedness from other homelands. Canada ranks high on the United Nations human development index and is the envy of the world. We are the Canadian mosaic, a composite of many individual entities working hard to imprint ourselves on the land that William Commanda calls Turtle Island. Yet a fatal woundedness lies at the core in this land - fundamental injustices that impact the realities of the First Peoples of the land, and this informs the deep unease in the Canadian psyche. This is not unlike the reality of the rest of the world – we have all been impacted by the world history of colonization of the past 600 years, as beneficiaries or victims. Mother Earth, as well as people, has a long memory.

When *Corona* virus reared its head, we panicked and lined up for toilet paper in Canada, defying the social distancing rules that had sprang up. I recall thinking, why? We have not stopped our relentless cutting of William Commanda's trees, despite the heightened environmental activism of Indigenous peoples. So why? An ancient terror, superimposed with a fear of scarcity, had been reawakened in us by *Corona* virus.

Need we panic like this? Is this not just like pneumonia? We have learned to deal with HIVaids. We are coping with cancer. Are we fussing too much here?

Or is the wildcard Trickster *Corona* virus giving us another prophetic early warning signal? Scientists now call ours the Age of the Anthropocene; who will deny that this is driven by our economic model? But for Life on Earth, is Nature is not really the prime player? She has been tossing many thunderbolts to awaken us to the critical issues of our time over recent years – volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, tornados, global warming, ice cap melt – and unprecedented extinction of countless species that she has created and sustained since time immemorial. Now she has sent us home. It is almost like she wants to shrug us off as an alien species that is contaminating her beyond endurance. Are we? Or are we children of Mother Earth? Isolation is the double-edged sword that can bring out the best and worst in us. Most importantly, it is giving us much opportunity for reflection. And at this moment, it seems like the key thing we

have to ponder is the place of the individual in the communal. I myself keep thinking about this poem:

There's a worm addicted to eating grape leaves.
Suddenly, he wakes up,
call it grace, whatever,
something wakes him, and
he's no longer a worm.
He's the entire vineyard,
and the orchard too,
the fruit, the trunks,
a growing wisdom and joy
that does not need
to devour

The Rumi quotation says that, *This is how a human being can change.* (The Illuminated Rumi, by Coleman Barks and Michael Green, Broadway Books New York 1997)

Can we benefit from this moment of isolation to embrace *Ginawaydaganuc*? Everything is connected. That is where life is evolving. Is going back to the old normal and the old economic model an option anymore? Isolation is our global portal – and it will close soon.

Romola

© Romola V. Thumbadoo

PhD Geography, SSHRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow

Coordinator, Circle of All Nations, 613-599-8385

Legacy Work of Indigenous Elder William Commanda, OC, PhD

www.circleofallnations.ca; www.asinabka.com

circleofallnations@sympatico.ca