

Dbaaqmoowin: Dialogue with the Elders

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I have a story. It is about relationship, shared experience, the role of story, and the importance of traditional language in dialogue, *Dbaaqmoowin*, with Native American elders. My story features the Algonquin Dome, the region of Ontario between the Ottawa River and Georgian Bay of Lake Huron, land which was occupied in pre-European contact times by Algonquian-speaking people. Just two hours drive south of the Algonquin Dome, over eight million people live in Ontario's Golden Horseshoe, a metropolitan area centered on the city of Toronto. Fully one-quarter of Canada's total population lives in the Golden Horseshoe. This demographic has required rethinking the protection plan for significant portions of the Algonquin Dome.

At the beginning of the 17th century the Great Lakes region was unknown to Europeans. As the century proceeded the French moved further inland, almost always with native guides. The main canoe route westward toward Lake Superior from Montreal was up the Ottawa River, through Lake Nipissing and down the river that came to be known as the French River. That section of the route forms the northern boundary of the Algonquin Dome. The dome, shaped like a huge turtle shell in the middle of central Ontario, has short rivers running to the north and long rivers running eastwardly to the Ottawa. Several short rivers flow southward across "The Land Between" rock barrens and limestone alvars and on to Lake Ontario. To the west the Algonquin Dome is drained by the French, Magnetawan, and Muskoka rivers flowing to Georgian Bay. The height of land from which the rivers flow to the four directions is in Algonquin Park, a rugged natural environment park sprawling across 7,630 square kilometers. The park has over 300 archeological sites and many aboriginal sacred sites, such as Manitou Mountain and the famous Kitchi Mikanak Assin, a perched erratic first photographed in 1897 by a Buffalo railway executive who was shown the location by his Mnjikaning guides. With over 1,900 lakes, the park's beauty extends to the horizon. It has inspired more than 40 books, 1,800 scientific papers, a dozen films, a symphony, and the art of some of Canada's best-known artists (Ontario Parks 1998:1). Meandering rivers flow through wildlife habitat that includes over 1,000 vascular plants and a cornucopia of aboriginal medicines. Many modern island campsites have evidence of ancient occupation. The breakup regime of ice in late April and early May shows areas of ancient *bibon kana*, winter trails of the Anishinaabeg people. Trails skirt places of rugged wilderness. In Algonquin Park forestry, recreation and cultural landscapes are managed simultaneously. The entire park is designated as a national historic site.

At the eastern lip of the Algonquin Dome is *Asinabka*, at Chaudière Falls on the Ottawa River (Allen 2006). This aboriginal sacred gathering place and fishing site was shared with Champlain on his first trip westward in 1613, seven years before the Mayflower arrived at Plymouth Rock (Champlain 1925:2-302). Champlain witnessed and documented the sacred tobacco ceremony carried out by his guides, an event depicted much later by the well-known Canadian artist Charles W. Jefferys. Champlain called the falls the "Chaudière"

because of the round kettle shape of the plunge pool and the boiling water below the falls. Asinabka describes the rocky area surrounding the falls, washed to a shiny glare by the rising mist. Before the kettle was artificially flattened by water lot development, the turbulence was increased by the restricted outlet shown in an 1836 map (Wright and Crawley 1836). We can see why ancient people saw the area as a Great Pipe Bowl with sacred smoke rising from it. Canada's capital city of Ottawa sprang up around the site.

The Chaudière Falls area now is the international focal point for the plight of the American eel (OMNR 2007), a fish which migrates from the Atlantic to inland waters via this route, wiggling out of the water across the rocks of Asinabka to reach the river above the falls. The American eel is now under consideration as a species at risk under Canadian legislation and is the subject of transboundary eel management planning. In February 2007, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service finding stated that although the species has been extirpated from some portions of its historical freshwater habitat over the last 100 years or so, the species remains distributed over the majority of its historical range (Bell 2007:4995). Canadian records indicate extirpation of the species in large portions of the upper Ottawa River (Haxton and Chubbuck 2002). In the history of aboriginal people, the eel is one of the most important species for sustenance, ceremony, medicine, teaching, and functional uses. Eel was a trade item in current-day Ontario as early as 1770 (Schmalz 1991:96). Now the eel stands as a symbolic warning of the health of all Great Lakes fish species. The dramatic decline in Great Lakes and Ottawa River eel populations is about to become much more widely understood and is being compared with declines in the Mississippi Basin between 1894 and 1922 (Coker 1929:173). The history of the eel is embedded in many native languages, such as the *nannisainti* or *yasinti* of the Choctaw of Louisiana (Read 1940:547). The declaration by Elder Dr. William Commanda that eel spirit is in the 600-year-old Seven Fires Prophecy Belt, which he carries, is rippling through the Americas as the eel, hardy metabolic miracle that it is, now is considered formally under Canadian Species at Risk legislation (Commanda 2007). We ignore at our peril the warning about the health of this species and its significance—yet another inconvenient truth of our time.

At the western lip of the Algonquin Dome the land slopes to the Georgian Bay coast where, in 2004, the Georgian Bay Littoral was designated as a World Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. Central to the designation was collaboration with aboriginal groups. Here lives the Great Sacred Turtle, symbol of an ancient aboriginal sacred site where aboriginal ceremony is still held, where traditional knowledge circles are led by elders and where Anishinaabeg can contemplate the ancient navigational and astronomical skills of ancestors who prayed here for calm water before making an evening and night-time crossing of the wide expanse of Georgian Bay out of sight of any land. The site now is protected in a conservation reserve under Ontario's Living Legacy legislation. At the southern end of Georgian Bay, Beausoleil Island is not only the traditional homeland of Beausoleil First Nation, it is the center of Georgian Bay Islands National Park, Canada's smallest national park and the site of stunning archeological discoveries.

Across the Algonquin Dome the need for planning to incorporate the wisdom of aboriginal elders has been widely acknowledged. This wisdom is beginning to be embedded into cultural heritage research objectives for specific programs and into cultural landscape



Figure 1. Elder Dr. William Commanda at age 91 with the author at Ajidimo Beach, Algonquin Park, on October 7, 2005, the 242nd anniversary date of the 1763 signing of the Royal Proclamation. Photo by the author.

interpretation. Pikwàknagàn First Nation has devised its own “protocol” based largely on the Canadian Archaeological Association’s *Statement of Principles for Ethical Conduct Pertaining to Aboriginal Peoples* (CAA 1996; Swayze and Badgley 2004). Ontario government policy, entitled *Ontario’s New Approach to Aboriginal Affairs*, facilitates respectful relationships with First Nations, Métis, and aboriginal service providers. Parks Canada Agency undertakes regular roundtable consultations, such as the one in April 2007 that drew aboriginal leaders from across the country to discuss building better relationships between aboriginal partners and Parks Canada and to identify ways of ensuring that traditional knowledge is incorporated into management planning. The Ottawa hotel chosen for the dialogue is directly across the street from Canada’s Aboriginal War Veterans Memorial.

The richest elder dialogue proceeds in a certain way. It begins with an understanding by all involved of the aboriginal perspective of land, fire, water, and air as sacred. The dialogue is preceded by purification ceremony and prayer. That process gets people connected and centered, much as a communion service does for Christians or a time of intense contemplation does for a downhill skier about to make a run. Speaking, *Giigidowin*, is necessary. Listening, *Bzindmoowin*, is more necessary (CAC 2007:2). Silence has a particularly significant role. Reflecting on what has been said helps concentration and remembering. The silence is not a void. It is a time of active reflection on what the speaker is saying. The speaker, likewise, uses pauses before the *Giigidowin* proceeds. It is respectful to wait until the speaker finally indicates that he or she has finished. It is wise to think of the “spect” of looking and to understand that “*respect*” means looking again and again. Sometime the speaker holds an eagle feather while speaking and only the speaker decides when to pass the feather.

Breaking the silence before a speaker is finished robs the listeners of the last part of the speaking. For aboriginal people one of the historical settings where dialogue with those of European ancestry has been practiced is the dialogue during treaty-making, a sometimes painful process (Long 2006). From this history we have learned that it is important to speak truthfully and to listen honestly, including allowing long periods of silence to just *be* with one another.

Dbaajmoowin is most meaningful when those in the dialogue already have a personal relationship. Dialogue nurtures the relationship more than achieving an agenda objective. Relationship is key. When relationship is strong, true caring is evident and disagreement about particulars is not a threat. Judgment and moralizing are suspended. Calmness and gentleness show on the faces. In my experience such dialogue is characterized by much healthy laughter.

Relationship is enriched through shared experiences. A shared helicopter inspection leads to subsequent reminiscences. A pow-wow becomes a touchstone in later dialogue. Hiking together to a medicine gathering site is bonding. Attending a planning circle for a new facility makes one part of a team. Attending an important speech or special ceremony means membership in a community's history. Teaching a skill at an outdoor education Aboriginal Youth Week becomes a learning experience for the volunteer teacher. No shared experience is more bonding than fulfilling the dream of an old elder to visit a remote sacred site. When Elder William Commanda of Kitigan Zibi, Quebec, was age 91, he boarded a float plane for a special trip on the anniversary of the 1763 Royal Proclamation. At the destination the pilot and park official built a stone bridge from the back of the pontoon to the shore, helped Grandfather out of the plane onto the pontoon, then watched him step—independently and with great glee—onto the beach named after his clan before he gave a prayer of thanks and rested.

Shared experience leads to dialogue in the form of story. A question about the days of fish spearing may result in a visit to the attic. A long-lost stone pipe brought to an elder along with a gift of tobacco may lead to reminiscences of a pipe story and a teaching about peace and the time the same story was shared with others. In time our own shared experiences show up in stories relayed to others, often over and over again. Frequently the story revisits one of the seven Grandfather teachings, since those principles are reinforced repeatedly.



Figure 2. Aboriginal people view the land as sacred and reflect about that sacredness at special places on the land. Photo by the author.

Figure 3. The seven feathers in the logo on an Aboriginal Youth Week tee-shirt provide reminders about the seven Grandfather teachings: wisdom, truth, humility, bravery, honesty, love, and respect. The seven Grandfather teachings are characteristic of dialogue with elders since they lie at the heart of aboriginal emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual development. Photo by the author.

As story proceeds, an elder often slips into traditional language to get the right nuance of meaning. The listener may be invited to repeat the word and gradually come to understand more of the language. Laughter is a common feature in dialogue, and may be prompted by something as simple as the differences in fur hats. These discussions are not just translations, but explanations of the efficiency and metaphors of the language which, in a few syllables, can portray complex notions. When *Ajidimo* runs headfirst down a tree trunk, the observer recalls myriad connections in an instant and pauses to reflect in gratitude about the principle of courage represented in the spirit of the squirrel.

After undertaking study and dialogue of their own, sometimes over many months, the elders have been naming newly found archeological sites on the Algonquin Dome. *Ojigkwanong* Island, in one word, carries an entire history of observation of the morning star, of ancient canoe navigation reference points, of a specific observation location to view a sacred site on the shore across the lake, and of the spirit name of a revered elder. A check of mainland shorelines adjacent to Ojigkwanong Island led to discovery of one of the highest concentrations of archeological sites in the region. As a follow-up, these sites get additional protection in a park plan. At one property, a new park facility was due to be constructed. “Misho’s Clearing,” a long-forgotten entry on a 19th-century surveyor’s map, was central to the naming of the Misho Stone on the property. In Anishinaabemowin (the Ojibwe language), *Mishomis* means “Grandfather.” Such stones are thought of as living and are called “Grandfathers.” Discovery of the Misho Stone led to authorization of an archeological assessment during which ancient pottery sherds were discovered and recovered before the new park building project was allowed to proceed at an adjusted location. Another case in a different park centered on a nuanced message in a letter written in 1868 by an Anishinaabe chief and filed with government authorities at the time. An explanation of one term was freely offered to an archeologist who had previously developed a relationship and some shared experiences with the current-day chief of the community. The outcome was the locating of an important archeological site that was about to be logged over. With knowledge of the fresh archeological discovery, the foresters, showing outstanding sensitivity, quickly aborted their harvesting plan. A photograph of their inspection of the site with the archeologist became the

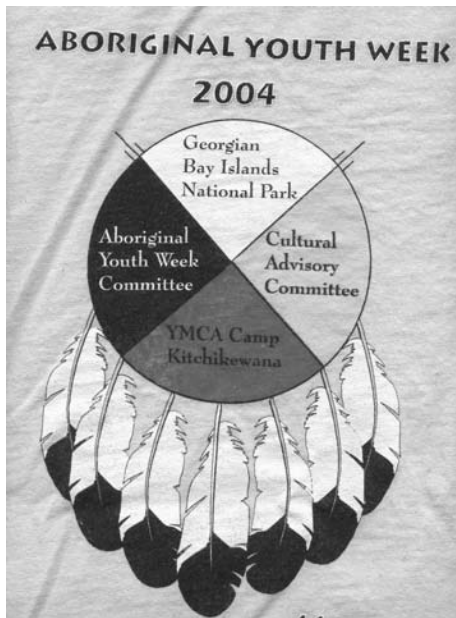


image on the cover of the province-wide *Forest Management Guide for Cultural Heritage Values 2007*. A potential grievance turned into a good news story.

Aboriginal naming of archeological sites is serious business and is undertaken with a keen sense of responsibility. Language is part of the identity of any people. For aboriginal people who have endured loss of language through residential school policies, the resuscitation of the language of the ancestors at locations occupied long ago by those ancestors is a resurrection experience.

I have told a story. The story is about relationship, shared experience, the role of story, and the importance of traditional language in dialogue with Native American elders. In a changing world the story has application for one way of helping to protect special places. The Algonquin Dome is not the only place where dialogue with the elders can enrich the protection of the land. Those who engage the elders in sincere and thoughtful dialogue, listening carefully, respecting silence, and contemplating the sacredness of the land, are sure of a rich and rewarding journey.

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