

GRANDMOTHERS'



LIVING
PORTRAYALS
from the
INTERNATIONAL
COUNCIL
of THIRTEEN
INDIGENOUS
GRANDMOTHERS

WISDOM



GRANDMOTHERS WISDOM

Reverence for All Creation

Living Portrayals from the
International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers

COMPILED AND PRODUCED BY MÄ CREATIVE

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*Dedicated to
the Divine Mother,
Her children,
and
the future generations.*

Calling All Grand Mothers

Alice Walker

We have to live
differently

or we
will die
in the same
old ways.

Therefore
I call on all Grand Mothers
everywhere
on the planet
to rise
and take your place
in the leadership
of the world

Come out
of the kitchen
out of the
fields
out of the
beauty parlors
out of the
television

Step forward
& assume
the role
for which
you were
created:
To lead humanity
to health, happiness
& sanity.

I call on
all the
Grand Mothers
of Earth
& every person
who possesses
the Grand Mother
spirit
of respect for
life
&
protection of
the young
to rise
& lead.

The life of
our species
depends
on it.

& I call on all men
of Earth
to gracefully
and
gratefully
stand aside
& let them
(let us)
do so.

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Foreword

I first met the Thirteen Grandmothers in 2004 at their very first conference, conceived as the Global Women's Gathering: Indigenous and Western Women Align Their Wisdom. Among the Western women were notable American feminist pioneers Alice Walker and Gloria Steinem. This gathering took place at Menla, a pristine 325-acre nature preserve and Tibetan retreat in the Catskill Mountains. My husband, Robert Thurman, and I steward this valley under the auspices of the Dalai Lama's nonprofit cultural center, Tibet House US. This timely event was coordinated by Menla's current Managing Director, Lynn Schauwecker, and the Center for Sacred Studies.

These elders shared their ancient wisdom traditions and compassionate prayers in this time of urgent need for healing and restoration of balance worldwide. The gathering at Menla was quickly recognized by some of the Grandmothers as being the fulfillment of various signs, visions, and prophecies from their own elders. The essence of these visions and prophecies was that thirteen tribal Grandmothers from all four directions would align themselves in a time of great planetary distress. In one another, they recognized that the time is now and that they were those very Grandmothers. They realized they had a shared mission to instruct the younger generations in their ancestral wisdom and spread a message of peace, love, and hope.

Most people recognize that our current era is marked by many growing crises and impending challenges. It will be defined by whether or not people from all around the world unite, despite our many differences and self-inflicted problems, to work energetically toward a positive outcome. The present situation of runaway greed, collective hopelessness, climate change, and the unsustainable consumption of resources, biological and mineral, will otherwise destroy the natural balance of life on Earth.

The Grandmothers were deeply moved by their experience at Menla and pleased to meet there. Menla's geomantically ideal land, still known for its extraordinary energy, was used primarily for ceremonial and spiritual purposes by countless generations of Native Americans. Viewed as a place of the spirits, like much of the Catskills surrounding it, Menla's land was never permanently settled by the indigenous Esopus-Lenape and Mahican peoples.

Interestingly, it was the social, political, and spiritual principles of the nearby Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy that provided Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and others with the initial ideas and inspiration for the U.S. Constitution. Especially significant to the Founding Fathers of the United States was the Iroquois Great Law of Peace, a harmonizing pact that brought together previously warring tribes in a mutually beneficial union of sovereign nations. In making

each major decision, the Iroquois elders would deeply consider its impact on the next seven generations.

Unlike the sanghas and ganas of India in Buddha's time, and also unlike the republics of Sparta and Athens in ancient Greece, this well-known Native American democratic confederacy was not based on a subservient slave class and defined only by free men. Although it was still not a fully democratic society with universally elected representation, the tribal chiefs were selected by councils of elder women in consultation with other women in the tribe. In addition, the women helped ensure that the chiefs fulfilled their responsibilities, making the confederacy likely one of the first proto-democracies to formally include women's voices in its protocols.

Like many other Native American societies, the Iroquois nations were matrilineal, and women held a level of social equality and respect not shared by women in colonial America and most other parts of the world. In such a culture valuing harmony with nature and balance of gender power, it was natural that women elders were looked to for spiritual guidance, social decision making, mediation in conflicts, and generally keeping the culture healthy. It was therefore quite fitting that the region that gave birth to such a groundbreaking proto-democratic model was the very place where the Grandmothers Council was conceived.

After the Grandmothers' initial meeting at Menla, they went on to visit each of their homelands, holding prayers, sacred ceremonies, healings, and teachings from the dense Amazon rainforest of Brazil to the Four Corners of Southwest America, from Nepal to Africa. One of

the highlights was a meeting with His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama in India, which was arranged through Tibetan Grandmother Tsering Dolma Gyalton.

His Holiness shared his belief that to develop truly compassionate societies, the role of mothers, grandmothers, and women in general is critical. He stated emphatically that women will need to take a much greater role in all fields of leadership for a sustainable future. He urged the council to share widely their own experiences and to do all they can to promote the basic human principles of affection, compassion, community, and a sense of universal responsibility.

Ancient wisdom traditions are natural, woven into the fabric of daily life, and based on common sense. Such cultures hold the primary values of how to wisely caretake our home—Mother Earth—and how to live harmoniously with one another and respect all other life forms as sacred. Long before modern technology and telecommunications, indigenous peoples lived relatively healthy lives imbued with this sense of reverence for all things.

Our wise Grandmothers have much to teach us, and this book is for everyone who is concerned for the future of our endangered planet and the many generations of beings who inhabit it. The Grandmothers' stories are shared in their own words as a lasting legacy to inspire future generations of people to continue the many efforts needed to restore ourselves and our world to a sustainable path, before it is too late.

NENA V.S. THURMAN

Introduction

The Earth is our loving grandmother. For all time, Cheyenne storytellers, generation after generation, have repeated this belief with both their minds and their hearts. As they say, The Great One, Everywhere Spirit, created the universe and all life with power so vast it defies human imagination. Entirely with the force of thought, the four powerful spirit beings came into existence to witness creation and to eventually safeguard and shelter all life, especially human beings. Next came the water of life, the fire and light of the sun, the infinite sky air, and compassionate Earth. The Great One, Everywhere Spirit, contemplated creation and thought the Earth to be the most beautiful of all, then declared that the Earth be known as our grandmother.

Grandmother Earth is also, more commonly, referred to as Mother Earth. Indeed, she is first woman, first mother, first teacher, oldest mother, and oldest grandmother. The Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers whose magnificent lives are encapsulated in the chapters of this book represent Earth's titanic spirit, power, beauty, and love. Individually and collectively, they are rooted in the Earth and carry her wisdom as a perpetual trust. They are committed to sustaining their Earth home and to educating and defending the hearts of all the world's children.

The Grandmothers are border crossers. They have crossed cultural boundaries, language divides, unique spiritual traditions, and con-

tinents to visit each other in their respective homelands and to offer collective prayer at their sacred places. Their homelands and inherited knowledge sustain them as the Keeper Women of Earth, who hold a reverence for all creation. They are symbolic of the great love and constant, peaceful devotion of Earth.

These sister grandmothers are the brave-hearted voices of their ancestors, who entrusted them with their strong indigenous ways of being and of seeing. With clarity, they see a world irrationally off balance, rapidly consuming the precious resources of Earth, a one-time gift of The Great One, Everywhere Spirit. They see many people who have lost respect for life and who have abandoned their divinely mandated stewardship responsibilities for the Earth, which the Grandmothers are prepared to defend.

With heavy hearts, the beloved women elders observe the greed of the corporate world, with its blatant disregard for the health of Earth as they drain her life-sustaining blood-water and vital organs, such as fossil fuels. In early 2016 thousands of indigenous protesters, high-profile individuals, Indian organization representatives, and allies converged at Standing Rock to dispute the construction of Energy Transfer Partners' underground Dakota Access Pipeline. They were there to protect the tribe's drinking water source and cultural resources.

The pipeline would pass under the Missouri River and Lake Oahe near the Fort Laramie Treaty lands of the Standing Rock Sioux. The tribe was concerned about a possible crude oil spill, which Senator Bernie Sanders described as the dirtiest oil on the planet. Such a spill would contaminate their water supply, posing grave danger to reservation residents: their mantra is “Water is Life.”

Energy Transfer Partners hired TigerSwan, a private security firm, to quash the protesters, and they used military-style counterterrorism tactics and guard dogs. There were 300 injuries and more than 487 arrests. President Barack Obama directed the Army Corps of Engineers to conduct a further environmental impact assessment, but President Donald Trump subsequently reversed this directive. The Dakota Access Pipeline was opened on May 14, 2017.

This was a desecration of sacred ground that could only intensify the heartbreaking grief of the Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. To their unimagined horror, they saw their beautiful Earth Mother, Grandmother to all, under relentless attack from culturally materialistic resource extractors. Seventy-five percent of Indian sacred sites are located on federal lands, and the federal government all too often works with pro-development entities. Although the U.S. Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978, it has no legal enforcement remedy. Thus, this country’s indigenous population has yet to enjoy First Amendment protection, especially as it relates to their sacred sites.

Sacred sites are critical to the continuity of indigenous ways of life. Like those who walked before them, indigenous people continue to make pilgrimages to sacred sites to pray, make offerings, engage in cere-

mony, renew and strengthen their spirits, seek guidance for the heart and spirit, revitalize their healing gifts, and maintain their accountability to their ancestors. This concisely describes the spiritual heart of these grandmothers, especially their reverence for creation.

They regularly visit their ceremonial gathering places, altars, temples, or other prayer places, such as sweat lodges, Sun Dance arbors, Native American Church tipis, or churches. They pray in their homes to greet the morning sun and at night to express appreciation for the day. As contemporary prayer women who carry valuable ancestral knowledge, they each maintain an active prayer life.

As articulated in their Mission Statement, the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers are spiritual activists, prayer women oriented toward peacemaking, galvanized by their suffering. India marked a significant event on their earth journey when they had a private meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a like-hearted spirit, and blended the messages of compassion and peace.

They are troubled by the state of the world, global warming, and the defilement of the four basic elements of life—earth, air, fire, and water—brought about by human activity. Indigenous life has always been about the children, and they see the obligation to nurture and educate them. Through them they seek to sustain the strength of indigenous ways of knowing and their profound teachings, which are desperately needed in the world today.

Thirteen grandmothers answered the call for spiritual activism. They brought their knowledge and expertise with them as spiritual keepers, visionaries, spirit travelers, healers, sweat lodge leaders, Sun

Dancers, and water women in the Native American Church. They combined their strong individual prayer lives into a colossal collective prayer, which has to be mighty to restore oneness and a just and peaceful world. Though their lives are big, they are humble about the places they occupy on the sacred circle of our one Earth. They work for the good of humanity, especially its health, physically and spiritually. They honor indigenous wisdom, especially in the original sacred languages in which it was initially expressed.

Some may wonder about the number of sister grandmothers, which corresponds to the thirteen cycles of the moon in a year. The moon, “night sun,” second only to the light of the sun, is another powerful grandmother. She lives in the distant night sky and revolves around the Earth, controlling the ocean tides and sacred menstrual cycles of all the Earth’s daughters. Thus, the number of council Grandmothers is culturally congruent with indigenous worldviews.

The grandmothers’ lives are perfect studies for all the generations, male and female, and for the universal community of the world that

is disturbed by the disoriented state of contemporary life. This book would have been a perfect textbook in my Native American Studies classes, were I not retired from Montana State University. It should be embraced by academicians and those concerned with today and all our tomorrows, especially the quality of the life that our children will live.

The Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers walk in the footsteps of all indigenous grandmothers who have ever lived within the sacred embrace of our first grandmother. These grandmothers carry their combined wisdom and reverence for all life. I thank them and I honor them from my heart. They have embraced the teachings of our one Grandmother Earth and are her wisdom keepers. They just do what grandmothers do.

HENRIETTA MANN, P.H.D.

Tsetsehestaestse (Cheyenne)

Hoostah-oo-nah’e

The Woman Who Comes to Offer Prayer/Prayer Woman
Professor Emerita, Montana State University, Bozeman



