



## **2014 *Circle of All Nations* 'Portal to Peace' Commemorative Note Honouring the 100<sup>th</sup> year of the Birth of William Commanda**

### **A Note on the Peace Building Work of Grandfather (Dr.) William Commanda, Indigenous Elder, OC.**

William Commanda was born on the eve of the First World War, on what has come to be known as Remembrance Day – 11 November. This year we celebrate his hundredth year as we also acknowledge the hundredth year of the commencement of the Great War.

His ancestors were not unacquainted with war and near genocide, and he was fully aware of the history of oppression of his people across North America, and of strife and warfare elsewhere, both of the past and throughout his long life. Ever conscious of his rights and responsibilities, he committed his adult life to both acknowledging hardships and conflict and also to peace building at multiple levels. This complex work took formal shape in his animation of *A Circle of All Nations, A Culture of Peace* – a global eco-community unified by his fundamental and unshakable conviction that as children of Mother Earth, we all belong together, irrespective of our individual colour, creed or culture; and dedicated to advancing racial harmony, peace building, social justice, respect for Mother Earth and Indigenous wisdom.

Entirely unfunded, with no organization, staff or formal team of volunteers, he connected with people at local and global levels, and co-created with them this compelling, intangible notion of the possibility of deep peace – one grounded in individual spiritual growth, responsibility for Mother Earth and all life in the natural world, as well as respect for all people, irrespective of culture, race, religion, social standing, occupation, education or status of any sort. Many continue to work to see the manifestation of his vision in their own ways – as such, his tapestry continues to be a work in progress, one that attracts the efforts of old and new partners in the evolution blueprint he evoked. Many touched by him years ago or in the briefest of encounters, and some who never even met him, are still drawn to the energy he exuded.

In this paper, we reflect on the multiple threads that create the foundations of this peace tapestry.

William Commanda was born into a community and family that had contended generations of colonization, historical oppression, racism, poverty, abuse, social and family disruption, division and dysfunction. But his heritage also gave him a strong grounding in values immanent in and inspired by the world of nature, with the four chief elements and with a foundational knowledge of interconnection at multiple levels. This earth-based philosophy was manifested in peace building work unpinned by his prayer, *Ginawaydaganuc, We Are All Connected* – with each other and with Mother Earth and all her forms and creatures.

He commenced his formal efforts at peace building in his work with late Indigenous activist, Jules Sioui, in the creation of the North American Indian Nations Government, unifying Indigenous tribes across Canada and the United States, and asserting their presence at the United Nations from the mid forties, the fledgling effort that only finally took tangible form in the endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007. He became Supreme Chief of this organization in 1952, a title that he held till his death; though it did not continue as an organization, its principles guided his work and relationships throughout his life, and thus touched many. He served his own community as chief for almost 20 years, serving as an old time chief, fighting for Indigenous rights, negotiating differences internally and externally as well as building bridges. Mindful of the historical divisions between the Algonquin and Iroquois people after Samuel de Champlain's introduction of lethal warfare in 1609, even more so following the 1959 350 year Champlain celebrations in Vermont, which included the production of a movie, he engaged in more formal efforts to rebuild relations with the Iroquois, participating in numerous gatherings. Eventually he organized two of significant proportion, the first in Eganville, in 1967, with people of all backgrounds, and the next in 1969, at his point of land at Bitobi Lake, where 1500 Indigenous Peoples from across North America gathered; here a key partner of Mohawk roots was his friend Beaman Logan. It is interesting to note that his first two formal gatherings took place in Ontario and Quebec, on both sides of the Ottawa River – even then, he was asserting his connection with land “without borders”.

Two significant things happened during these early years – in 1961, he experienced a profound spiritual awakening, during a period of serious illness, around the age of 48/49. Diagnosed with terminal cancer, he was reduced in weight to 98 pounds. It was at this critical time that he made a commitment to his Creator to work consciously to promote racial harmony and peace building. About a decade later, he was presented with three Sacred Wampum Belts of mnemonic, sacred and historical importance. His new identity as carrier of these critically important representations of his spiritual and cultural heritage imbued his life with a broader purpose, and as he grew into his new responsibilities, so his global stature grew. Increasingly he saw the need to include people of all races in his outreach and gatherings.

This outline of his formative experiences suggests the springboard from which his larger profile as peace-builder was projected on the world.

His peace work can be viewed from several perspectives and an outline of his efforts in two categories is offered to illustrate the range of his outreach.

### *Circle of All Nations Work*

Annual *Circle of All Nations* Gatherings (global outreach, 1996 – 2011)

1997 – Thirteen Moons Gathering at Victoria Island

1998 – Lighting Candles for a Culture of Peace (with Indigenous Prophecy Holders)

2000 – *Circle of All Nations* Millennium Peace Gathering

2002 - Lighting Candles for a Culture of Peace Two

2006 – WaterLife Workshop

2007 - The Awakening Gathering

2009 – March and May Sustainable Relations Workshops, Victoria Island

Annual June 21 Pipe Ceremonies at Victoria Island (1990s – 2011)

Annual March 21 Equinox and Racial Harmony Gatherings (1997 - ...)

Annual September 21 Equinox/Paddle for Peace/UN/Peace Gatherings (1997 - ...)

### United Nations/International Outreach

1970s – Indigenous messages to France, including opening of a Tour de France event

1981 – Canoe building and Indigenous outreach to Queen Marguerita in Denmark

1991 – Pre-Rio United Nations Earth Conference Pipe Ceremonies in France

1990s –Moral Rearmament Peace building conference at the Caux, Switzerland

1993 – United Nations Cry of the Earth Conference of Indigenous Peoples

1990s –Prayer Vigil and related events, Washington DC and Virginia Beach

1996 – Indigenous Gatherings, Mexico

1998 – Funai Conference, Japan

2000 – United Nations Millennium Peace Conference, New York

2001 – United Nations Second Anti-Racism Conference, South Africa

2001 – Hellinger Systemic Constellation Conference, Germany

2001 - Shivananda Yoga Retreat Centre Peace Conference, Bahamas

Ongoing support/linkages with international organizations – National Association of Child Care Workers, and Umtapo Peace Centre, South Africa; Auroville, India, Wittenberg Centre, United States; Holotropic Organization, Japan; FANCV (Fundacion Argentina A Las Naciones Camino A La Verdad (Argentina).

In addition to formally organized *Circle of All Nations* activities, William Commanda participated in all events he was invited to if he possibly could, irrespective of how high profile or how humble, locally, nationally and internationally, typically funding his own travel and expenses; he did this unceasingly till his death at the age of 98, linking with Indigenous Peoples and organizations, on and off reserve, with federal, provincial and municipal governments, with the Office of the Governor General, UNESCO, universities, foundations, community groups and individuals. As such, his outreach and interaction

A Circle of All Nations Report

---

September 1, 2014

was phenomenal, and he somehow managed to establish a thread of intimate connection with a vast number of people of tremendous diversity.

In part, it was his deep humility that drew people to him; they were frequently astonished by his knowledge (a case in point was when he met the Queen Elizabeth at the 2010 Garden Party at Rideau Hall, and showed her his coronation medallion – *You have that old thing!* she said, looking at him sharply – she recognized that amongst the hundreds present there, it was he that she had the longest and most fundamental relationship with); they were overwhelmed by his wisdom; they were taken aback repeatedly by how he could discuss painful or challenging issues, yet remain respectful and diplomatic; but especially, people were touched by his love, warmth and humour. He took great efforts to communicate with all – fully trilingual, during formal events, he spoke first in his Algonquin tongue, then translated himself into English and French, to reach all equally.

People were also drawn to his obvious spiritual strength – as directly as he communicated with all people, so too did he communicate with his Creator – so many people came to him requesting prayers for healing, and for a period of time I made a list of them and kept track of their progress; only one person died, and she had actually come for help to make that journey on. I began to call him the DC elder – Direct Connect. Countless people were transformed by his pipe ceremonies; people would line up for ages waiting to be smudged by him. This special spiritual quality was acknowledged by His Holiness the Dalai Lama on two occasions – the first with the opening of the Human Rights Tribute in 1990 when video footage captured His Holiness holding the hand of the Indigenous Wampum Belt carrier to his lips; the next, in a meeting on Parliament Hill, when the presence of the Indigenous elder obviously reminded him of deeper connections and His Holiness *banged* his forehead against the older man's.

In this context of greetings, it is interesting to note that William Commanda was carrier of the Three Figure Wampum Belt, which represented the welcoming of the newcomers by the First Peoples, and their commitment to share their land, grand natural resources and values with the newcomers, a sacred agreement, acknowledged in the symbol of the Vatican. He welcomed two great world leaders to his land – the Dalai Lama, and President Mandela, at the Human Rights tribute in Ottawa; (he actually also contributed to the planning of the tribute, a globally significant edifice, inclusive of Indigenous language); and in the last years of his life, he acknowledged the Queen (Prince Philip envied Grandfather his wheel chair!) and Prince Charles (with the Three Figure Wampum Belt). He offered the same greeting to all peoples, noting that, despite all that had befallen his peoples, (since not all the newcomers had honoured the commitments of the original agreements), he would remain steadfast in affirming the friendship his ancestors had offered. I, and many others, began to see him as the elder sibling of humankind, patiently teaching and affirming the original laws of relationship, against all odds.

This in part also explains why so many non-Indigenous Peoples call him zgrandfather – it is both a statement of respect and relationship. Some believe that there is a deep restlessness amongst many newer inhabitants of this continent – somehow, folk are not, in the Grandfather words, “at home”; we have observed that it has taken the relationship

with him to introduce many people to a relationship with land; many have articulated this very poignantly.

For him, this introduction to his Mother Earth and her waters was critically important – only by developing a deep relationship with her could people be expected to animate a responsibility to her and her resources. That is why for him, the greater focus was always on responsibility versus rights – he took it for granted that his rights were unquestionable and irrevocable. In accepting a relationship with his penultimate mother, people could also claim kinship and belonging with him.

This sense of belonging is an indelible part of the peace offered by his prayer, *Ginawaydaganuc*. Thus it becomes clear that there are multiple layers to the notion of peace that William Commanda envisioned.

With respect to the United Nations International Day of Peace, September 21, it is noted that William Commanda acknowledged this date initially in the context of the autumn equinox – an important time of thanksgiving (for harvests and summer) in nature's twice annual time of perfect balance. In 2000, he hosted a global *Circle of All Nations* Millennium Peace Gathering, which was to usher in the UN Decade for a Culture of Peace. At his own cost, he went to the 2001 UN Conference on Racism and Xenophobia in South Africa, and 9/11, a most definitive moment for obscuring global peace, kept him stranded in South Africa for several gut-wrenching days. A striking moment came on that infamous day, when he was sitting in the outside café at the Sandton Centre, outside Johannesburg, noticed the whirlwind in the leaves, and said to his friend, something bad has happened to the world; shortly after, the television announced the disaster in his homeland. A Citizen newspaper interview upon his return home describes him exhorting people to make peace and not war. He continued his annual efforts to draw people together in peace, and inspired several grassroots organizations to take this commitment to the UN in New York; in 2005, he received Pacifist Award in Montreal, from *Cercle de Paix*, an organization inspired by his gatherings and work, which continues to take his peace message to the UN, including via programs with Indigenous Elders and Youth. UNESCO has been represented annually at his own September 21 Peace event in Ottawa.

In the context of peace, it is relevant to note several other of his activities in South Africa in 2001. He participated in a grass roots Race Relations Conference, offered peace ceremonies at training workshops of the National Association of Child Care workers and Umtapo Peace Centre; conducted a talking circle on forgiveness and peace building at Steve Biko commemorative conference, which included participation by members of the Biko family; met Zulu shaman, writer and prophecy holder Credo Mutwa, adding his prayer for a return to Indigenous medicine plants with the HIV-Aids epidemic; as requested, he conducted new and full moon ceremonies in the mountains and on the ocean; and finally, a strange event – he visited a resort out side Johannesburg; he did not like the energy there, and then was told it had been the site of a concentration camp a hundred years earlier. He was asked to offer a prayer there, and it appeared that it was well received by the land or restless energies there: the few participants heard a loud

thump, and afterward, he informed us that he had felt a thump on his back – he felt it was a thank you acknowledgement of his prayer.

This was not an unusual part of William's peace making efforts – he took his prayer for peace to many parts of Mother Earth, both those deemed sacred sites and those that had been sites of unrest, desecration, or blood shed.

In fact, William Commanda's participation in the SunBow Five Walk for Mother Earth, from June 23, 1995 to February 3, 1996, from First Encounter Beach on Cape Cod, to Santa Monica, California, (site of a mission with a history of much abuse of peoples), included stopovers and prayer ceremonies at many sites marked by war, death and abuse, including the site of the Oklahoma Center bombing and the Martin Luther King shooting. Thus peace-making on the land itself was also a part of his work.

He animated this conviction most profoundly at the Sacred Chaudiere Site, initially with his canoe making cross-cultural bridge building at Victoria Island, with his wife Mary, in the eighties, and then with his ceremonies and gatherings over the past two decades. From time immemorial a sacred meeting place of his ancestors, he breathed life into a vision for peace building that continues to inspire diverse people across the world.

### **Acknowledgements for His Peace Building Work**

As indicated above, William Commanda's peace building efforts were growing, evolving and impacting diverse communities, locally, nationally and internationally over many decades, and he was recipient of many honours and tokens of appreciation and respect. In 1998, he was nominated for a **Wolf Project Award** ([www.wolfproject.com](http://www.wolfproject.com)) and over 300 hundred people endorsed the nomination. Unlike other efforts focused on dismantling the ugliness of racism, this grassroots, unfunded organization founded by Heather Acres, placed the emphasis on honouring those who took action to advance racial harmony; and presented Wolves named after constellations to individuals, communities and municipalities; at one point, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities was an active partner in this work. Amongst the many recipients, national and international, was President Nelson Mandela – his Wolf was named Aurora Australis, the Southern Star; on December 10, 1998, William Commanda was presented his Wolf, Aurora Borealis, the Northern Star, at a gathering of Indigenous Prophecy Holders, (including Hopi Elder Martin Gashwaseoma and Chief Arvol Looking Horse, the 19<sup>th</sup> generation holder of the White Buffalo Calf Pipe, and himself also the recipient of a Wolf Award). Thereafter, William Commanda was invited to join in the work of the Wolf Project, and together with another founding partner, Beatrice MacTavish, became a Special Advisor. In this capacity, he participated in the awards work, initiated a Wolf Certificate Awards category with the National Capital Region Wolf Chapter, and animated Wolf/racial harmony activities in conjunction with his *Circle of All Nations* work.

In 2000, he became recipient of the **Harmony Award** – this being presented to him by the late Honourable Lincoln Alexander, Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, and writer June Callwood – they were both surprised to learn about the influential work of this

A Circle of All Nations Report

---

September 1, 2014

Indigenous leader, the latter saying you could have knocked her down with a feather, when she heard he had one of her books in his home library on the reserve.

In 2003, Grandfather Commanda was presented the first peace award of **Friends of Peace**, at their Peace Prayer Day event – this group has continued to organize annual peace award events, amongst other things, and it now constitutes one of the activities at the **Ottawa Peace Festival**, another peace project, initiated eight years ago by other *Circle of All Nations* colleagues inspired by him. This year, *Circle of All Nations* is being acknowledged for its on-going work by Friends of Peace.

In 2006, he was presented with a significant recognition in the capital city, when former Mayor Bob Chiarelli presented him with the **Key to the City** on June 21, at Victoria Island. This was significant from three perspectives: someone from Quebec was being honoured in Ontario; some one from Maniwaki was being honoured in the capital city; and someone from the confines of the reserve of Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg was being honoured in the National Capital Region – the spirit of the Three Figure Welcoming Wampum Belt and the Jay Treaty Border Crossing Belt resonated with significance for many. The fact that the presentation was made on Victoria Island, within the heart of the Sacred Chaudiere Site, reaffirmed the site as the peace building gathering place of the nation.

Grandfather Commanda supported the efforts of the **National Capital Peace Council** over the years, inspiring their annual river *green up clean up* community activity, and was honoured with the **Universal Peace Federation** Ambassador of Peace Award in 2006; and in 2010, he was presented with the **Martin Luther King Dreamkeeper Award** – unbeknownst to the organizers, Grandfather Commanda had actually conducted a healing pipe ceremony at the site of shooting of that inspirational civil rights leader during the Sunbow Five Walk. He was also presented with the **Bernard Assiniwi Award** in Montreal, the **National Aboriginal Achievement Award** in Regina, both acknowledgments of his peace building coming from the Indigenous community.

In 2009, William Commanda was selected for the country's highest award – the Order of Canada. Though nominated for the order at its primary level, he was actually appointed **Officer of the Order of Canada**; he was not able to attend the planned honour ceremony in May, 2009, sending in this note instead:

“Kwey Kwey: My greetings to Your Excellencies, and Honoured Guests:

I send my deep regrets that I am not able to be with you all on this special occasion. At ninety-five, your body does not always allow you do all the things you might wish.

When I look back at history over the years, I continue to be inspired by those who have contributed to strengthening respect for Mother Earth, promoting harmony amongst peoples and nations, and building a strong social safety net for all. These were the fundamental values of my ancestors, and I bring their dreams for a better

A Circle of All Nations Report

---

September 1, 2014

world for all to this prayer at the May 2009 *Order of Canada* Investiture Ceremony.

I am glad to be the face of the First Peoples amongst so many who serve society with passion and commitment. I offer my congratulations to them and wish them well in the effort to secure a better future for all. Our ancestral prophecies foretold the day when the all the peoples of the world would unite in Turtle Island to create such a world, and on a day like today, despite the darkness that surrounds us, I feel the strength of their conviction that a better world will emerge with the efforts of individuals. Megwetch to you all for this hope. Merci. *Ginawaydaganuc - We Are All Connected*. William Commanda.”

But he was able to attend in person later in the year, and he delivered the prayer for the dinner:

“Your Excellencies and Special Guests,

I am honoured to say a prayer as we gather together for this banquet, and to acknowledge what Mother Earth provides for us – the fish, the meat, the berries that have sustained us over centuries; at one time, these were there just for the asking – we put down our tobacco and the moose presented itself; and we were all strong and healthy then.

Today, we are no longer so close to these sources of life, and many are beginning to worry about our future supplies of healthy food. We seem to have so much, yet everywhere, we worry about obesity, diabetes, cancer and other diseases.

I pray that we all renew our relationship with Mother Earth, the ultimate provider, in the spirit of respect, responsibility and reverence, and ignite a passion for sustainable relationships with all her creation. This will contribute to our collective healing, health and strength.

May I also congratulate the Order of Canada recipients as well as the participants in the Mentorship program on their great efforts and accomplishments. You represent our hope for the future.

*Ginawaydaganuc – We Are All Related”*

The following is an excerpt from his December 2009 letter of thanks to the Governor General:

“I am writing to thank you and your staff for the very gracious manner in which I was received at Rideau Hall during the month of November. ...Needless to say, it was a special moment in my life to be invested as Officer of the Order of Canada; but the experience was made even more meaningful with the invitation to offer the welcome to the traditional territory of the Algonquins of the Ottawa River



Watershed, and to offer the opening prayer for the dinner. This thoughtfulness and kindness has not passed unnoticed.

I was also pleased to be part of the State Dinner for Prince Charles, and after all the years of holding my particular understanding of the history of this country and the relevance of the Royal Proclamation of 1763, it was indeed a significant experience for me to greet the Prince in the spirit of the Sacred Welcoming Wampum Belt of the 1700s; this belt was created before there was a Canada and a United States of America, and at that time, the Indian drew together the hands of the then newcomers, the French and English, in a gesture of friendship. It is this spirit of friendship and conciliation that we work to animate in the *Circle of All Nations*, and which we hope to implant in the Indigenous Centre on Victoria Island.”

Grandfather Commanda supported another special peace initiative – *Children Singing Peace Around the World* ([www.childreningingpeace.com](http://www.childreningingpeace.com)). Already translated into over 30 languages and shared in as many countries around the world, you won't be surprised to hear that the first translation of Dawn Ferguson's song was: William Commanda! So indeed, his prayer for peace is already ignited around the world in the voices of children!

Years ago, Grandfather Commanda planted a peace tree in the capital city, the ancient meeting place of his ancestors, *Nepean* meaning *the place where we sleep*, he told me. We hope always to awaken to the light of the Morning Star, *Ojigkwanong*, leading us out of darkness into the *Waban*, into the light, as was promised by the Ancient Ones. You will note that, right now, the Ancient Ones are awakening us once again, within the sacred heart of this country. Grandfather Commanda's voice undoubtedly resonates with theirs, and, I am convinced, will continue to do so into the future.

After all, *Ginawaydaganuc* is written on his back!

Megwetch!

Romola Vasantha Thumbadoo  
Coordinator, Circle of All Nations  
[circleofallnations@sympatico.ca](mailto:circleofallnations@sympatico.ca)  
[www.circleofallnations.ca](http://www.circleofallnations.ca)  
[www.asinabka.com](http://www.asinabka.com)