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Speaking For Creation: Tom Sakokwenionkwas Porter

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

If you were to describe Tom Porter as a writer to his face, he would probably laugh. That is, in part, because the several books he's "written" were largely dictated by him or drawn from his speeches and interviews with him over the years. Despite his deep well of wisdom, Tom doesn't regard himself as an "educated" man. In fact, some of his "writings" describe in great detail his struggles within a Eurocentric education system that regarded his people as worthless savages and led to his leaving that system before high school.

He might be happier to be described as a keeper of oral traditions, a storyteller whose words are at times funny and even corny, at other times deeply philosophical, and at all times filled with messages that we human beings need to hear.

He would also probably laugh because laughter always seems to come easily to him. He recognizes it as a sacred gift.

All of that is obvious in the following quote from the chapter entitled "Turtle Island" in his 2006 book *Kanatsiobareke: Traditional Mohawk Indians Return to Their Ancestral Homeland*:

When you read this Iroquois Mohawk Creation Story, I hope that you will bear in mind that all races of the world have Creation stories. This particular one belongs to the Mohawk. The Creator gave it to us. It is not a garage sale or second hand story; it is Mohawk through and through. Sometimes, it is funny and hard to believe. If it is funny, then laugh. The one thing I ask you to do is realize that the Creation Story of all races of People throughout the world are equally as funny and hard to believe as well. When human beings laugh, the Creator is pleased. (Porter 2006, 12)

It also may make clear to you another aspect of Tom Porter as storyteller, as elder, as wise teacher and, yes, as writer. He has the sort of down-to-earth humility that only those who are sure of themselves and their beliefs can show.

Few people are as respected as Tom is by the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee—or Native American and other indigenous people in general throughout the world. It is no wonder that his Mohawk name Sakokwenionkwas means "The One Who Wins." A director and

teacher at the Akwesasne Freedom School, he held the title of chief for 21 years among his Akwesasne people before moving to the Mohawk Community of Kanatsiobarkeke, that he established in 1993 on 332 riverfront acres near Fonda, New York. Even before his adult years, I've been told, people would come to listen to this boy who spoke like an elder.

Cataloguing his many accomplishments would take far more space than I have in this column. So I'll only mention two more things. The first is his role as the organizer of the "White Roots of Peace" several decades ago. The objective of that group, a traveling multimedia collective, was to revitalize Native traditions and beliefs in North America. As its main speaker, Tom lectured at universities and colleges all over the US and Canada.

The second is his work as the Native American consultant for the New York State Penitentiary system, where he served as Chaplain for all the Native inmates in New York's prisons.

All of this ties into one of the main objectives in Tom's life, as he explained it to me 20 years ago. That objective was to create a Carlisle Indian School in reverse, a place that would be the opposite of Carlisle and all the other American Indian boarding schools and residential schools in the US and Canada, where the stated objective was to destroy Native American cultures to "Kill the Indian and save the man," as voiced in 1892 in a public speech by Richard H. Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.

In the 2008 collection of Porter's speeches and interviews *As Grandma Said, Iroquois Teachings As Passed Down Through the Oral Tradition*, he shared these words in the chapter titled "The Future":

We must teach our people, our children, and teach them how to be mothers and fathers, give them back their ceremonies, give them back their language, give them back their spiritual history and their history altogether, teach them how to be wholesome family members, ambitious, honest, and morally good. That is what Carlisle took away from the Indian nations. (Porter 2008, 389)

That is a mission carried on to this day by Tom and by the supporters of Kanatsiobarkeke,

a place where the Mohawk language is taught, where seasonal festivals of thanksgiving (such as their annual Strawberry Festival in early summer) are open to all, and where the Earth is treated with the respect deserved by a mother.

So it is that, to this day, if you are fortunate enough to hear Tom, you will recognize his voice as one speaking for Creation. When he stands up to speak the traditional Thanksgiving Address in Mohawk and then in English, sharing those words that come before all others, giving greetings and thanks to our Creator, to our Mother Earth, to the waters, the plants, the animals and birds, the winds, the sun, moon, and stars, you may feel as moved as I always am. You may agree with what one of my Onondaga friends and teachers, Alice Dewasentah Papineau, the Head Clan Mother of the Eel Clan, said to me one day at Kanatsiobarkeke after Tom spoke the Address:

"It seemed as if even the grass was listening." ▼

For Further Reading:

Porter, Tom. 1993. *Clanology: Clan System of the Iroquois*. Native North American Traveling College.

Porter, Tom. 2006. *Kanatsiobareke: Traditional Mohawk Indians Return to Their Ancestral Homeland*. Greenfield Center, NY: Bowman Books.

Porter, Tom. 2008. *As Grandma Said, Iroquois Teachings As Passed Down Through the Oral Tradition*. Philadelphia: XLibris.

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He is the author of over 120 books for young readers and adults, including the award-winning volume *OUR STORIES REMEMBER, American Indian History, Culture and Values through Storytelling*. Photo by Eric Jenks.



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