

The Legend of the White Roots of Peace

(Summary of the Paul Wallace version by Luigi Morelli)

Deganawidah, the central hero of the history, is born among the Huron, tribe of the north shore of the Lake Ontario. He is a foreigner in relation to the Five Nations. He is the son of a virgin and his name – meaning ‘Master of Things’ – has been revealed to the grandmother by an apparition of the Great Spirit. His declared mission is to bring peace and spread what he calls the ‘New Mind’ among the nations. He wants to turn his back to war and revenge and bring about a new law. Although an exalted being, Deganawidah has a stutter.

When Deganawidah grows to manhood he sets out toward the rising sun, riding in a white canoe made of stone, knowing that he will not return. He arrives on the southern shore in Iroquois territory, at that time ravaged by strife, and goes from one settlement to another spreading the word of peace. After visiting these, Deganawidah goes to the house of a woman ‘who lived by the warrior’s path which passed between the east and west.’ To the woman Deganawidah recites the message of peace that he divides into three parts:

- righteousness, as the desire to see justice embodied
- health, meant as harmony of body and mind and a foundation for peace
- power, based on law that has the backing of force, but a force that translates the desire of the ‘Holder of the Heavens’.

To the woman’s question of which form this word would take in the world, Deganawidah foretells what would later be known as the Longhouse – the house of many fires – symbol of a confederacy of equals. The woman embraces the message and Deganawidah gives her the name Jigonhsasee, meaning the ‘New Face that embodies the New Mind’, and tells her that she would be remembered as ‘Mother of Nations’.

Upon leaving the woman Deganawidah proceeds towards the sunrise, knowing that he will have to meet with ‘the man who eats humans’, in Onondaga territory. Arriving at the man’s hut, Deganawidah climbs on the roof and stands waiting with his head next to the smoke hole. The man returns home with a corpse and sets the kettle over the fire. On the surface of the water he sees Deganawidah’s face and he believes it to be his own reflection. Detecting in it a strength and wisdom that he has never surmised before, he starts questioning his cannibalistic habits. This change of mind brings him sorrow at the realization of the evil he has committed. Thus moved, he ponders what needs to be done in order to compensate for the pain he has caused. At that moment Deganawidah enters the hut, appearing to the stranger. The latter relates his experience and Deganawidah offers him the means of redressing his wrongs by explaining to him the ‘Good News of Peace and Power’. From now on the cannibal will have the name of Hiawatha (which means ‘He who combs’). At the same time he is given the task and challenge of enlisting the wizard Atotarho to their cause.

Atotarho, whose name means ‘Entangled’, is versed in the arts of magic. He has ‘a twisted body and a twisted mind, and his hair is a mass of tangled snakes’. He strikes terror in his enemies and holds great power. His cry ‘Hwe-do-ne-e-e-e-e-eh’, meaning ‘When shall this be?’ is said to be ‘the mocking cry of the doubter who killed men by destroying their faith’. He can strike his enemies even at great distances. Before setting Hiawatha on his new

task, Deganawidah visits the wizard and announces to him the coming of the Good News of Peace and Power, without managing to sway his mind. Still proceeding towards the sunrise, he arrives among the last Iroquois tribe, the Mohawks. They are favorably inclined towards the message but want to receive a sign by testing the messenger. They ask the foreigner to climb a tree next to the lower falls of the Mohawk River. They fell the tree over the river and Deganawidah survives unscathed into the next day. This is the sign they desire and the Mohawks accept the prophet's message. They are the first nation to accept the New Mind.

In Onondaga territory Hiawatha spreads the new message without managing to loosen Atotarho's grip over his people's minds. Three times he calls a council and after each one of them one of his daughters is taken ill and dies, victim of the powers of Atotarho. Finally, the Onondagas arrange to have a game of Lacrosse performed to lift Hiawatha's spirits. During the game a mysterious bird comes down from heaven. The crowd pursuing it causes the death of Hiawatha's wife, who is trampled in the onrush. Unable to contain his grief, Hiawatha wanders away towards the east. He reaches one of the Tully Lakes where the ducks lift the water to leave him a dry passage. On the bottom of the lake he finds shells that he strings together with three ropes. These he sets on a horizontal pole supported by two vertical ones. Holding each string in turn, Hiawatha recites words of comfort that he pledges to repeat to anyone that mourns over a loss. This is the so-called Ritual of Condolence. In vain he waits for anybody to console him. After a few weeks of mourning, he arrives at the village by the Lower Falls of the Mohawk River. Here he reconnects with Deganawidah. The Master relieves him of his grief by using the very same Ritual of Condolence.

At this point Deganawidah and Hiawatha set out to complete their tasks by concretely envisioning the form that they want to give to their message of peace. One after another the tribes accept their message. The final obstacle is Atotarho. The two decide that Deganawidah will sing to him the Song of Peace, while Hiawatha will explain the Words of the Law. They set forth in a canoe across a lake to meet Atotarho. The wizard, using his last magic powers, sends winds and waves against the canoe, but to no avail. Deganawidah and Hiawatha thus bring their message to a skeptical but more receptive Atotarho. To accomplish the great reconciliation he has in mind, Deganawidah invests Atotarho with the highest authority over the Five Nations. In the presence of the Five Nations he tells Atotarho: 'Behold! Here is Power. These are the Five Nations. Their strength is greater than thy strength. But their voice shall be thy voice when thou speakest in council, and all men shall hear thee.' Then Atotarho's mind is made straight and Hiawatha combs the snakes out of his hair. Deganawidah lays his hands on the wizard's body and removes the seven crooks. Then he places antlers on Atotarho's and the other chiefs' heads as a symbol of their new authority.