KATSI COOK

Remarks [10:33 AM]

Welcome to a Native Place!

_Sewa tah honh si iohst._
Sharpen your ears.

_Onkwa ro:ri_
I will tell you all.

As Native peoples, we still remember the original instructions of our cultures. Our ancient teachings are ripe with wisdom.

I am Tekatsitsiakwa Cook Barreiro. I belong to the Wolf Clan of the Mohawk Nation, and I am a traditional aboriginal midwife. I am humbled today to represent my ancestors. But for their love and devotion to us and to our Mother Earth, we would not be here today.

As a Mohawk midwife, it has been my privilege and honor to help our mothers bring their babies into this world, to greet the new faces emerging from the First Environment—the mother's womb.

In our ancient instructions, the mothers of our clans are taught to continually remind the leaders of our Nations that in all their deliberations, they must consider the effect of their decisions on the Seventh Generation yet to come. Do not think of one season they said—do not think of a year or a decade—consider the effect of your decisions for Seven Generations to come.

Standing here on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., my message to all of the world's leaders is simple and clear. Think not only of today—think of your grandchildren—think of your great-grandchildren. Think of the impact of your decisions on the Seventh Generation yet to come.

We have another ancient instruction. It teaches us that before every important gathering, we must express the words of gratitude—in our language the Ohenten Kariwahtehkwa—our Thanksgiving Address. This teaching forms the essence and core of our value system.

We are instructed thus to remind ourselves that as human beings, we must gather our minds together and express Thanksgiving for the gifts of the Natural World.

From the hidden life of the soil, to the pollinators, to the medicine plants, the trees, the animals, the birds, the Four Winds, the Thunders, to all life we give thanks. To the Cosmos, the realm of the Sky World and the life-giving elements created there—to the cosmic family that is our common lineage and about which we learn much from cultural and scientific inquiry—we give thanks. To the Father Sun, Mother Earth, Grandmother Moon, to the faces of our ancestors.
reflected to us in the stars, we give thanks. To all of them, we are instructed to express our gratitude.

As they remain true to their original instructions, so, too, must we—the human beings who walk about on this Mother Earth—remember that our survival depends on our humility, depends on our ability to express our love for Her, and to do everything in our power that our future generations will enjoy the benefits of this wonderful Earth.

I turn now to the young people, those of you beginning or about to make families. This day is not for us who are already elders. It is for you—and—it is for your children. This day is about the world your children will inherit.

One of my teachers likes to remind me that, “The basis of our unity is the love of our children.”

Today, from this special place, the National Museum of the American Indian, we CALL THE WORLD TO CONSCIOUSNESS.

Ionkenistenha ohontsia enta onk en kie thi’ hnhe.
Our Mother the Earth, it must be that we defend her.

Niawen kowa.
Thank you.
Woman is the First Environment [12 NOON]

In my experience as a Mohawk midwife, women’s health advocate, and activist for environmental justice in my tribal community—the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne—reproductive justice and environmental justice intersect at the nexus of woman’s blood and voice; at the very centrality of women’s roles in the processes and patterns of continuous creation. Of the sacred things that there are to be said about this, that woman is the first environment is an original instruction. In pregnancy, our bodies sustain life. Our unborn see through our eyes and hear through our ears. Everything the mother feels, the baby feels, too. At the breast of women, the generations are nourished. From the bodies of women flows the relationship of those generations both to society and to the natural world. In this way is the Earth our mother, the old people tell us. In this way, we as women are earth.

In the Mohawk language, one word for midwife is iewirokwas, which means, “she’s pulling the baby out of the Earth, out of the water, or a dark, wet place.” It is a word full of ecological context. As Henrietta Mann said, the waters of the Earth and the waters of our bodies are the same water. Because our nursing infants are at the top of the food chain, they inherit a body burden of industrial wastes from our blood by way of our milk; thus we become part of the industrial landfill.

The words and the teachings that have been shared with you throughout the morning belong to the air and the winds that own our breath as human beings. In the same way that we can use the gift of our breath to coach a spark into fire, each of us today must commit and devote ourselves in whatever way we can to use the power of our human capacity for connectivity to breathe life back into our Mother Earth, who owns our bodies.

The integration of multiple bases of knowledge and the translation of knowledge across collaborative bridges—such as the emergent Women’s Health and Environment Initiative — engages each of us as members of social networks, organizations and agencies to attempt to understand each other’s language, culture, and issues. It requires a willingness to see through one another’s eyes to overcome limited perspectives of what is possible; to hear through one another’s ears to develop joint strategies for action.

Neh toh. That is all.