

Smoke Signals Radio Archive Episode 1992-12-19

Segment 2

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*Mary Lou Smoke shares a story from Richard Wagamese about truth in storytelling and how it is important for storytellers to pass on knowledge and to learn their craft well. John Turner reads an excerpt from one of Oren Lyons' speeches, and Dan Smoke shares knowledge and insight from Thomas Banyacya.*

Host(s): Dan Smoke, Mary Lou Smoke, John Turner

**DAN SMOKE:** Boozhoo, shekóli! You're listening to Smoke Signals, a First Nations radio program here at Radio Western, CHRW 94.7 FM—changing the face of radio. And we are heard every Saturday from 1:00 to 3:00. And just after the *Spirits of the Present* concluded, you heard a commercial for the **Atlohsa Native Family Service** organization located here in **London**. Atlohsa is presently in operation to help the cyc...help stop the cycle of violence, to start the beginning of healing, and to initiate the healing in...within individuals, within families, in our community here in London and the outlying communities, and hopefully onto the healing of our Nations. And it is with great honour that we play their...this commercial, because of the good work that Atlohsa provides within our community. And just...the last song that you just heard was one of our **Mi'kmaq** brothers, **Willie Dunn**. The song was entitled, "**The Ballad of Crowfoot**," and it comes from the album entitled *The Ballad of Crowfoot*. Willie Dunn is a Mi'kmaq singer-songwriter of great repute. He's been singing for a number of years now since the late 60s. And he himself has been active in a...action of activism, political activism, and this is reflected in the music that he writes. And he was recently a visitor to London, courtesy of **Oxfam**, where he performed for the **Oxfam Benefit**. It was a supper and it was a benefit concert, where both himself and **Alanis Obomsawin**. Alanis is an **Abenaki filmmaker** who works for Native people and the **CBC** and she has a number of films that she has produced and made over the course of 15-20 years.

So that we're...we're grateful to be able to play Willie Dunn. Ok now we're going to hear a story from **Richard Wagamese**. Richard Wagamese originally hails from northern **Ontario**. He is currently a staff writer with the **Calgary Herald** and he also writes a feature column for the **Windspeaker Publication**—and **Mary Lou's** going to share that with us now.

**MARY LOU SMOKE:** Tunngasugitsi, aanii, and hello. This is storyteller time. "These long, cold moons of winter were the times when the storytellers would gather their people around those old tribal fires. This was the time the legends came alive again. Tales of **Wisakedjak**, **Nanabush** and **Goose Camp** and **Raven**, across the length and breadth of **North America** the stories were told. Sitting here in the early morning darkness of my room, it's easy to reflect on those times. The candle behind me in the pale blue light of the computer, giving another worldly quality to everything. The smell of **sweetgrass** and the peace of early morning adding to the atmosphere. The storyteller moons in those old tribal days stories were only told in winter. It was

believed that the spirits would be sleeping through those long, frosted months, so if the story was told about one of them, they would be asleep and miss it and not become offended.

The other side of that thinking is less obvious. The Elders knew that storytelling in the summer months would be futile. In the depths of winter, there wasn't a whole lot that people could do. The temperature kept them inside for long periods of time so they had more time to reflect on the teachings in those stories. More so than in the summer when there was plenty to do to distract the mind. So these winter months became the time of the storyteller. They call me a storyteller these days. They have for a few years now. I've told my stories in newspapers, on radio and TV, from conference podiums, and on couches in friendship centres. Now as I prepare to put the finishing touches on my first novel, I'm telling them in a book. I thought about that recently. I was asked to speak to a group of students who are putting out a newspaper here in **Calgary**. It's a Native newspaper, much like this one except not as directed. At this point, it's a hodgepodge. From one issue to the next, there's no consistency, and the practice eye can discern the tremendous amount of work that needs to be done.

The practice eye best...the crux of it really. The practice eye. Those of us who grew up in a media career can spot the glaring errors in their storytelling. But for the everyday members of the community who tend to see a newspaper as a newspaper, these errors aren't obvious. That's what makes it essential for storytellers to learn their craft well. Because the people we offer these stories to are depending on us to be good storytellers. Whether they're writing the news, making films, or giving speeches, storytellers everywhere need to adhere to the tradition of storytelling—that means honesty. In media terms, it's called objectivity, but it's really just honesty. Writing another way, good stories are honest. Because of that inherent honesty, they offer the listener or reader the freedom to choose—choose to believe or disbelieve. They also empower people. Good stories well-told empower people with the ability to find balance within them; their own decision, their own conclusion, and their own identity. They become empowered with the ability to think and decide for themselves—**self-government** in action. Whether you tell your stories in books, newspapers, radio, TV, film, or living rooms, the tradition is still the same and needs to be honoured. Because the bottom line is this: the stories belong to the people. Once you offer that story to the public, once it leaves your desk and hits the streets and communities, it belongs to the people; it's no longer yours.

It's the same with a collection of stories like in newspaper. It belongs to the community once it goes out the door. That's why the elements of good storytelling need to be followed. The people who hear our stories are depending on us to be good storytellers. When we publish a newspaper, especially an Aboriginal newspaper, we're offering them a blanket of trust. A paper blanket filled with stories they trust. Trust because of the tradition of newspapers and trust because of the tradition of storytelling. I offered that insight to those students; whether it's followed up on or not is dependent on whether they can remove their egos from the process. There's no room for ego in storytelling, you see, because there's no room for...there's no room for ego and honesty or in any process that's meant to empower people. The storytelling tradition is rich and a vibrant one. It's responsible for the passing on of ancient knowledge. Knowledge that's sustained and defined Aboriginal people for hundreds of generations and will continue to

do so if it's honoured and followed. As storytellers, we carry ancient embers. Embers from those old tribal fires that burned on winter nights. Fires that were stoked by the spirit of the people; the people of the dream; the people of the story. Whether we tell them in media or in living rooms, the tradition and the responsibility are the same."

**DS:** Niá:wen, miigwetch, Mary Lou. Yes, storytelling is a...is a very highly regarded honour within Native society, mainly because of the lessons and the teachings that are in the stories. And as Mary Lou said, these stories are passed on from generation to generation, in much the same way that the Native philosophy is coexisting with the peace and harmony of all **Creation**. When you have a tree die, it refertilizes the ground for new trees, in much the same way as older people, as Elders, that wisdom and knowledge and these stories are passed onto younger people. It is our duty as young people to absorb that wisdom and knowledge and those stories from our Elders so that when we become, and enter into the **thunder stage** of our life—the Elder stage—then we will have that...those stories to pass on to the future generations. And that is very much the words that one of our Elders, **Oren Lyons**, speaks of when he talks about the seven generations. And Oren is—as we stated at the beginning of the show—he is one of our respected **Onondaga Chiefs** of the **Iroquois Confederacy**. He lives down in **Onondaga** reservation near **Syracuse, New York**. Mary Lou and I, when we were present, when we were just recently down in Syracuse, we tried to get in contact with Oren, but he was at the **State University of New York** in **Buffalo**, where he teaches **Native Studies**. He is director of the Native Studies program there. And he was unavailable to speak with us at Smoke Signals. So...when we...we're going...we're planning on going back down to Syracuse on January the 2nd to the 8th. And at that time, we hope to be able to have some words shared with us from Oren Lyons. But right now, we're going to listen to a transcript of a message that he gave that was recorded by the **Northeast Indian Quarterly**, now known as the **Akwe:kon Journal** out of **Cornell University**, edited by **Jose Borrero**. And this is a story that Jose himself wrote on the lessons that Native people have to teach. And John is going to read an excerpt from one of Oren Lyons' speeches.

**JT:** "We were told that as long as we carry on our ceremonies and as long as we give thanks and perform our duties, life will continue. The old people said when you give it up, or when it's taken, then will begin the end. We are gathered here in response, then, to an exploitation of those thanksgiving ceremonies. This is why we are here. And we know that some of what our Elders say will hurt some people in some respects. People will say: they're picking on us, it's not fair. You'll say: why can't you share? And we say: to help you understand that when we give the prayer, like what you heard this morning, you were included, you're all included to the four corners of the earth. All are included, no one is left out. Especially at this time when the harvest is coming and has come and ceremonies are taking place and have been taking place. And I dare say at this moment are taking place. Many great thanksgiving ceremonies around this **Turtle Island** are taking place right now on your behalf. You are also included; you should not feel excluded. And you should not feel it is necessary to be there to be included; be secure and feel good that it's occurring. That's good news to you. It should be good news to you that there are people looking out for your welfare; truly concerned. I will explain a little. Even among our own Nations, there are societies that have certain duties; we don't all belong to these societies;

we don't know who's in these societies but we know they exist. And we are secure knowing that they exist; we're not curious. And we don't think that we must be there; this is fundamental what I'm talking about, it's very important to understand this. We don't have to be there and we don't have to know. Because there are certain duties to these people who have this power, who have to do these ceremonies that, unless you were initiated, become a part of it, you would be disruptive. There are ceremonies that would not include people until they are Elders because of the importance of that particular doing. You don't know how they're going to turn out. It is about respect, respect for everybody. In our understanding, the **Creator** made everything, that's all we're told. He made everything. And since he made everything, then you must respect everything, that simple. And so as I look upon you, I know that the Creator made you, I know that you're equal. You're equal in every way to us. And I respect you because you're a manifestation of the Creation. But the law says that you must respect as well. And this basic respect is peace. That's what is called community. Unfortunately, in today's time, this does not occur. And so what I'm talking about now is respect for our people's ways; our land, our language, and our culture have been taken. Don't try to take our religion, we need that respect."

**DS:** Miigwetch, John. Yeah, those are very powerful words from a very powerful man, Oren Lyons. This is...this following excerpt is from a talk that was given by **Thomas Banyacya** at the **Unitis House in Berkeley, California** on Sunday, December the 6th. It was just prior to his opening speech at the **General Assembly of the United Nations**.

"It's very important to me to be able to get here and to see you people here. I'm always reminded of my old people who are 80-90 years old that I've met in the **Second Mesa Shungopavi Pueblo**. Some of you perhaps have been out there. **Shipaulovi** and **Oraibi** are the other villages. In 1992, they still have their own spiritual ceremonies. They've been there a long time and they still have their initiations. Just a week ago, they had the [to be translated] Society; the highest **Hopi** religious society still performing and initiating young people. It takes about a week to go through that very important ceremony. It involves a **one horn** and a **two horn societies**, who are the foremost societies, to take care of this land for the **Great Spirit**. And when they have this initiation, they close all the roads going into the Pueblo. Down below to the north and south but they leave the west trail open, because in the middle of the night when they have a ceremony, the **Spirit People** will come. And they will eat first; no sign of relatives, and then they will go on the housetop and watch the ceremony. But the living people in that village all move to the southside and they'd be watching the dances. They know that the Spirit People are there, and if you cross the roads that are closed by the **sacred cornmeal** with the **sacred prayer feathers**, something happens. If it's animal or cryptic thing or human thing, if you cross that, something happens. One man-a white man married to a **Navajo** lady that lived close to **Window Rock** area-crossed that road. They didn't know that a ceremony was going on and they went up to the village. And the two horned, one horned society caught in that place. And the two horned society rushed up and told them to get in the house right away, knock on the door, but they didn't know what was going on. They locked the door, they didn't want to get out. And they told them to get out fast."

“But the one horned society, if they get ahold of them, there’s no way to help them out. But somehow they don’t want them so they went out and crossed another line again. The Navajo lady realized what happened, so they went to one of the Hopi who had a little gas store, a little food villa place, and went and filled their tank, and went to **Tuba**, they went to **Flagstaff**. They went to a restaurant to eat. When they came back out, their car was all burned up; everything was burned up. There was no fire or anything, no alarm or anything, but their car was all burned up; they lost everything. Many things happen to people who crossed that line. So that’s a very powerful thing. So we always announce to the people not to cross that line. And they have police now to tell them there’s a detour around it; that they have to go around. These are some of the things the Hopi has, and other religious societies, like the **Kachina Society**, which some of you seen. Perform their ceremony, they have to fast for three days and perform their ceremony on the fourth day. Then after that, they gradually cut out their fasting and then they eat in the morning and after eight days, they complete their fast; they have a feast day. But that is a part of the system we go through; every month there are certain ceremonies that go on. And the Hopi say that that’s the only way we keep this land alive and in balance, because it’s the law of nature. The Great Spirit told us how to take care of it; use our songs, use our ceremonies, use our languages. And sit in certain ways in a circle; in a circle fashion so that we can communicate with everything around us. Because as you know, our thoughts are in a circle shape. Earth is in a circle; moon; the sun; the trees; the animals. Everything that contributes comes in the shape of a circle. And the circle is always a part of the spirit that’s in us. So every one of you have that spark or soul within you; and we’re all related to each other; we’re not separate. Because we’re breathing the same air, so powerful, living power in there that we’re breathing. It keeps us alive, and we’re all one. And that goes into **Mother Earth**, it goes through the rock, goes to the trees, goes to the animals, the birds. This whole universe filled with this power that’s flowing through this air that we’re breathing, so we’re not alone, we’re all related together. But we are all supposed to have this responsibility to take care of Mother Earth. And then the baby...when...and then the...when they get hungry, they look for the mother’s breast for food. And we’re like that, children of this Mother Earth, we all came from this Mother Earth, and the way we walk on this Mother Earth every day looking for food. But we don’t think of this land as our Mother, this earth is a living being, a powerful being, and taking care of us, growing things—food, everything. But we don’t seem to respect our Mother—we’re just destroying it.

Things that were put here for a bunch of reasons, to keep this land in balance. We’re chopping trees every day to make more money, accumulate the material things. We don’t care what we do to the universe or the plant life. We’re digging holes for coal, uranium, iron, and things to get more money and power. But we’re disturbing Mother Earth in the process. And we’re so caught up with making money and power that we’ll do anything to just get that money quickly. And our old people, it is said in 1948, that our Native people with this colour, brown, red people call us, we spread out in the four directions. We spread out in four directions to the edge of this planet to keep this land in balance that way. This circle represents that, represents the four corners area, represents the points out of this world. There’s another side of the world that’s like this so that we, the Native people, continue to perform the ceremonies—we drum, we sing, we go fast, we go to the **sweat lodge**, we go to the **sun dances**. Other ceremonial plants are here for us to use. We kept this land—called the **Western Hemisphere**—beautiful. We kept it beautiful, we

kept it clean, like they mentioned someplace in the **Bible**—it's like the **Garden of Eden**. It was like that—long grass, flowers, plant life, all kind of things was here. And we, the human beings, were supposed to take care of it for the Great Spirit, from the heart with a prayer. And appreciate something, and take only what we need. We offer prayer, we fast for it to thank them for these things. But we today don't seem to understand that. And we are just about destroyed; *destroying* this world.

The night before, we had a big meeting in **Northern Arizona University** about the so-called **Hopi-Navajo Land Dispute**. That was cooked up by big, political figures because they wanted to get ahold of the metal resources and take it away from the Native people—the Navajo, **Apache, Paiute**, and others, by law. They created that, passed by **Congress**—your citizens, your taxpayers, you sent those men into Congress and they passed this law that said you will have to be moved, to be relocated. They put fences in between this Hopi and Navajo. They said, “this is Hopi land and this is Navajo land.” If the Hopie get caught in Navajo land, they must be relocated. If the Navajo get caught in Hopi land, they must be relocated. The government says they have to be relocated. But those Hopi area created by law. Before that, we shared that land together—Hopi and Navajo, Paiute, **Havasu, Pema, Papagayo**—all the Pueblos of **New Mexico**, we shared that together. We followed the law of the Great Spirit, we performed the ceremonies. And there was trouble at first between the Apaches and Navajos, first time when they came there, but we made a sacred covenant, an agreement. We exchanged our **sacred bundles** that we designed in a spiritual way. And if any one of us violated that, then something is going to happen to those people, so we kept the **sacred covenant**. We lived there peacefully and shared land and took care of it. Then the government came up with this law. Without our knowledge and consent, they passed this law. They said this is the law; we have to relocate you. And then they said they have to put fences between the Hopi and Navajo, the barbed wire in between us. And I don't know whether they made an intermarriage between the Hopi and Navajo and a lot of them had children. The children don't know which tribe they belong to. Maybe the babies will have to be...hanged on that wire...barbed wire because they don't know which way they belong to. The government says, “this is Hopi land, this is Navajo land,” but people say this land belongs to both of us.

This is an excerpt from a speech that was given by Thomas Banyacya. And as you heard in the *Spirits of the Present*, Thomas Banyacya was also quoting some of the wisdom of the Hopi people. And the Hopi people have always been known to be in Indian country, the center. It is here where we believe that our Native peoples were created and that we migrated from—here in Hopi land. And Thomas Banyacya has been given permission to recite and translate the **Hopi Prophecy** to all...all human beings, to all Creation, so that we might learn from the wisdom of his people. And it is...it...we just think that here at Smoke Signals, we think that him speaking at the United Nations to kick off the league of Indigenous Peoples, 1993, was a great honour to bestow upon Thomas Banyacya.