

Haudenosaunee Regenerative Leadership: Epigenetics, Matrilineality and How Our Mothers Survive Within Us. Defying the goals of the Sixties Scoop Child Apprehension Program by Iehstoseranon:nha (Dawn)

The invitation to speak to regenerative leadership is both daunting and inviting. From my perspective, the subject matter could appear academic and even political but in truth, everything is organic and everything is personal and to deny our journey as knowledge keepers is an unlawful theft of our own individual intellectual property and the intellectual property of every blood related ancestor that lived before us on this land. The word regeneration is critical because it informs that there is a natural biological process where an organism replaces or restores damaged or missing cells and organs. In contemplating 'regenerative leadership' from a matrilineal Haudenosaunee perspective, it sweetly aligns with our enduring relationships to the women who have walked here before us; the *ihsténha*, the mothers.

I believe that who we are is directly relational to how our lived experiences and senses (sight, sound, touch, smell and taste) collect information and translate that information as it enters the body. The translation of information is entirely dependent on the individual who absorbs it, that is, the individual's observations and participation in events as knowledge bases, their environmental surroundings from conception to end of life and their capacity to listen to both the spirit world and the physical world they live in. We are made from trillions of cells and each one is a cumulative gift from multiple generations of grandparents and if you lean into the western scientific perspective, the study of epigenetics is how the experiences of your ancestors are passed down and profoundly influence how we walk through this world. The academic studies are of course inconclusive because they are limited to evidence-based science or systemic methodologies but it's determined that epigenetic changes influenced by grandparents' experiences are shown to play a role in our personalities. Haudenosaunee concepts of matrilineality considers that the new information is merged into our biological framework and takes a journey inside of us where it meets memories and knowledge from the cells that we've received directly from ancestors.

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Many make the argument that who we are is a balance of nature vs. nurture and while that may be accurate, it skirts the hard conversations of spiritual relationships and genetic or blood memory. If the argument is presented to a Haudenosaunee person who was born with absolutely no physical relationship to their mother, father, siblings or grandparents, it raises a lot of questions about how that person developed into someone who is asked to discuss Haudenosaunee regenerative leadership.

I trust that my grandmothers (*kenha*, in Spirit World) have led me to this moment in time where I can write to you a summary of why I know that regenerative leadership begins in our cells.

In a hospital, at the time of birth, I was taken away from my mother (who was accompanied by my grandmother and auntie) and placed in a non-Indigenous home and community with absolutely no identity, no understanding of Indigenous ways of being nor did I experience any exposure to Indigenous cultures until I was an adult. On Turtle Island ('North America'), this strategy of assimilation (or genocide of Indigenous cultures) was coined the 'Sixties Scoop' and was a government and church program that aligned with the Indian residential school system. The methodology was that stealing newborns from their mothers could be perceived by non-Indigenous Canadians as 'strange, unlawful or cruel' and so an alternative plan was devised that would justify seizing and displacing us. This program was in fact even more widespread than the Indian residential school system simply because it was easier to hide. Even some children who evaded the residential schools were eventually taken as part as the 'Sixties Scoop' and this practice of stealing children succeeded in displacing hundreds of thousands of us. Their reasoning for mass displacement: the 'Indian' mother did not have the means to raise a child in the same sanitary ways and with the same resources as non-Indigenous families so it is best to remove them and ensure their optimum health. In other words, settlers created narratives to disguise genocide by feigning concern for the well-being of the Indian child and proclaimed that the India lifestyle of sharing bedrooms and small homes is unhygienic. The truth is that Indigenous families embraced small spaces as affectionate spaces and *her*storically Haudenosaunee families lived long and healthy lives in longhouses as clan families with the primary focus being unity, ethics and public health.

It should also be explained here that using the word 'displacement' is just a symptom of the devastating realities that resulted from infant theft by governments and churches. I have met hundreds of children like me and through their experiences I've learned that many of our mothers were sterilized immediately after giving birth (a cruel and inhumane solution to the 'Indian problem'), that older children were sold to families for farm work or domestic labourers and that it was not uncommon for us to be sent to the far south and overseas. I have met many survivors who assumed they were Mexican after being transported to southern Latina communities and others that were raised in New Zealand and England. It is also well documented and experienced by my own mother that all hospitals segregated Indigenous women into 'Indian maternity wards' and I have met other survivors whose mothers were in the same ward as mine and our adoption records are signed by the same judge who practiced displacing Indian infants for a period of over 35 years. The 'Sixties Scoop' was not only in the sixties but in fact was a process that lasted a century and exists to this day under the disguise of more subtle systemic secrets now known as 'birth alerts'.

The program of stealing and/or assimilating Indigenous children into non-Indigenous society is said to have begun with the first residential school in 1831 with the last one closing only 27 years ago in 1998. As recently as only 4 generations ago (1920), Canada's Indian Act made residential schools *compulsory* for treaty-status children between the ages of 7 and 15. Treaty-status Indians who those Indians who are numbered and carry Indian Status Cards, like me. Unfortunately, the Sixties Scoop does not rally as much empathetic attention as the schools but it is indeed widespread and some of us have survived to tell you about it.

Did the Sixties Scoop strategy work?

The short answer is yes.

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At the time of apprehension infants and toddlers had no memory of family, many had no birth certificates with their original names and absolutely no resources to find their way home, ever. We were simply given a brand new identity. I was named Mary Francis by my birth mother which is scratched out on my birth certificate and replaced with Dawn Alison - the name applied to me by my new "parents". I was one of the lucky ones. I found my adoption papers at the age of 12 (1982) but the laws would not allow me to access information without the permission of my 'parents' which they denied me. So at the age of 14 I put myself back into foster care after citing and winning an argument with a social worker that the household I was in was harmful to my mental health and well-being. After interviewing my adoptive mother, the social worker agreed wholeheartedly that she indeed was not mentally well and went on to note, "Indian children were placed in homes that were unfit for Caucasian babies". The day I turned 18, I went to what was then called the office of Child Welfare only to find that my records were easily accessible (in minutes) and that my birth family had been visiting and waiting for me. I was reunited with my mother a fast week later. Many survivors are not as fortunate as I was and as adults many still have no identity. The sad reality is that many survivors are dead and many of us are dying from loneliness and preventable illnesses. Often, if a survivor did become reunited with their birth family, the relationships were not successful and resulted in further abandonment and mental distress - which was my experience. To compound the disappointment, we are often not genuinely welcomed back into our community even if we have family living there. In my opinion, both of these disappointments grow from a valid lack of trust both on the part of the survivor and on the individual(s) we are reunited with.



You see, when a people navigate through centuries of violence and harm, the result is likely that they will never trust anyone, including each other. I embrace this as a survival tactic. It's a natural and critical defense mechanism and one that we should be prepared for; I face it with empathy and respect the struggles we have all risen from and continue to heal from.

I choose to turn the rejection into direction. In other words, I trust in my sacred bundle, the one I came here with that was given to me by the ancestors that contains my original instructions. I have peace and love in one pocket, and respect and kindness in the other. I have access to all of these tools and when the wind blows me in the direction of doubt, I can reach in my pockets and embrace my *self* because I know that I was given that kind of power. I wonder if I was sent here to be alone so that I can direct my full attention to the needs of my community? Yes.

Did the Sixties Scoop strategy work?

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The long answer is no.

The story I have told you is imperative to understanding the origins of Indigenous restorative leadership and specifically the power that it carries in Haudenosaunee society since the beginning of time. Revisiting my story also reminds me of why I can effectively speak to regenerative leadership; I have survived solely because of the genetic integrity of the strong Onkwehonwe (First and Original People) women who passed along their seeds through me. It's written in the stars and mapped in my own biological structure and I knew this from the first three breaths that were blown into my lungs by Creation.

Even a child who is physically, emotionally and spiritually removed from her matrilineal legacy retains the capacity to access the cell memories and navigate her way through the darkness to find her way home. Independence, especially when born from loneliness, can be both empowering and isolating. When the world does not provide support, the journey is more complex and the individual develops a unique perspective and deep understanding of self-reliance - I am unique and it's because of my Kanienkehà:ka (Mohawk) lineage. The tools of critical thinking, stewardship, resistance, resilience and leadership were always a part of me and my spiritual grandmothers made sure I could reach them. As a small child, I was aware and reliant on those tools. In my darkest moments of loneliness and in my earliest memories of self-protection, I remember fondly, my deep and comforting relationships with Grandmother Moon, the Stars, Water, Trees and Grass. I knew to watch them all carefully and learn from their changes through the seasons with the most notable lesson being from the Birds who taught me to migrate when the environment gets cold or unfriendly. I was a runner, a hider, a skillful deflector of danger and a shape shifter; I was both invisible and extremely powerful in masterfully subtle ways. Some may argue that the grandmothers who planted themselves in my cells were also invisible, but to me they had faces, voices and memories to share with me. I took this so seriously as a child that I believed they lived in my hair. To this day, I'm gentle with my hair and seldom brush it thoroughly for fear of rejecting or unbinding my grandmothers' love for me.

Regenerative leadership among Haudenosaunee women is indeed a powerful and deeply rooted cultural legacy. We, the Haudenosaunee are renowned for our sophisticated governance systems and were the study of settlers who ultimately modeled the United States of America governmental structure on our astoundingly productive example. Regenerative leadership, in this context, refers to a leadership model focused on sustainability, community well-being, and the continuous renewal of cultural practices, relationships, and ecological balance. Our life giving resource is Tsiokonsaseh / Jikonsasay / Mother of Nations / Peace Mother who was responsible for the inception of our matrilineal society and is a direct descendant of Sky Woman. Sky Woman is the first woman in our origin story who along with the animals is responsible for the creation of Mother Earth. Through the kindest of knowledge keepers, Haudenosaunee women are raised to understand that we are all direct descendants of Sky Woman and as such, we are well equipped to complete our tasks as caretakers of family, earth and laws. As the Mother of Nations, Tsiokonsaseh built a structure where women were the sole counselors or 'the law' at a grassroots level of government. Women then and now are the keepers of peace, caretakers of Mother Earth, keepers of lineage and names. Our governance is based on three acting principles; the sacred will of the united people, high ethics and public health.

The Haudenosaunee's matrilineal legacy means that lineage and clan identity pass through the mother's side, and women hold significant power in decision-making, which also connects to the broader themes of regenerative leadership. This form of leadership prioritizes the health and well-being of the entire community and the Earth, much like regenerative practices in environmental and social contexts that seek to heal and restore rather than deplete or exploit. Haudenosaunee women, particularly those in leadership roles, have historically held great influence in political, social, and spiritual matters. Women are clan mothers, and their responsibilities include the cultivation, selection and removal of chiefs, ensuring the health and welfare of their communities and maintaining the strength and integrity of our culture. These women have led with a sense of responsibility to future generations, which aligns with regenerative principles—focusing on renewal and long-term sustainability.

Since I was 18 years old, I have studied these women, mimicked them and walked invisibly beside them on their journeys. What I know and practice is ka'nikonh:riio (good mind), skennen (peace) and kashatstenshe:ra (power/competency). These 3 critical ethics were learned through my obsession with studying Haudenosaunee Creation Story and Great Law of Peace and were illuminated by quietly and invisibly observing women including clan mothers, faith keepers and the community at large - the feminine stewards of the land, waters and skies. There is no question that the absence of kind and loving women in my childhood is what propels me to emulate my Haudenosaunee relations in adulthood - and I admit that passionately. I have always honoured my original instructions to embrace sisterhood without regard to my deep fear of women, setting aside of my fear of abandonment and in defiance of my anxiety at the thought of rejection. Once I heard the teachings of how to co-exist with grief, I wiped the tears from my eyes so I could see kindness again, I cleared my ears so I could hear the language of love, I rinsed my throat so I could swallow and I burned my wet tissues so the tears would understand that I will not drown in them.

Our legacy highlights the importance of balance, interconnectedness, and respect for the natural world, which continues to inspire many today. Our matrilineity emphasizes roles that are not only about decision-making but about nurturing and sustaining life multi-generationally. The way we move in the world and in every decision that arises, we consider seven generations before us, the present seven generations and seven generations into the future. This model is inclusive of both people and the beings of the natural world because we retain the understanding and gratitude that comes with knowing that if Mother Earth is not healthy, the people cannot survive - in this case Indigenous ways of knowing can translate to simple common sense. We take our responsibilities seriously and walk gently on our Mother. It could and should also be noted here that "leadership" is not an ideal word as it suggests that one person is more elevated than another. We tend to lean into the language of equity and embrace that every person has an individual responsibility to fulfill his or her original instructions. Leadership seems a word elevated by colonialism and to the contrary, we appreciate that we all retain different skill sets and that if one of us does not excel at a task, she will certainly excel at something else and this theory creates a healthy ecosystem of mutual respect, interdependence, strength and sustainability.



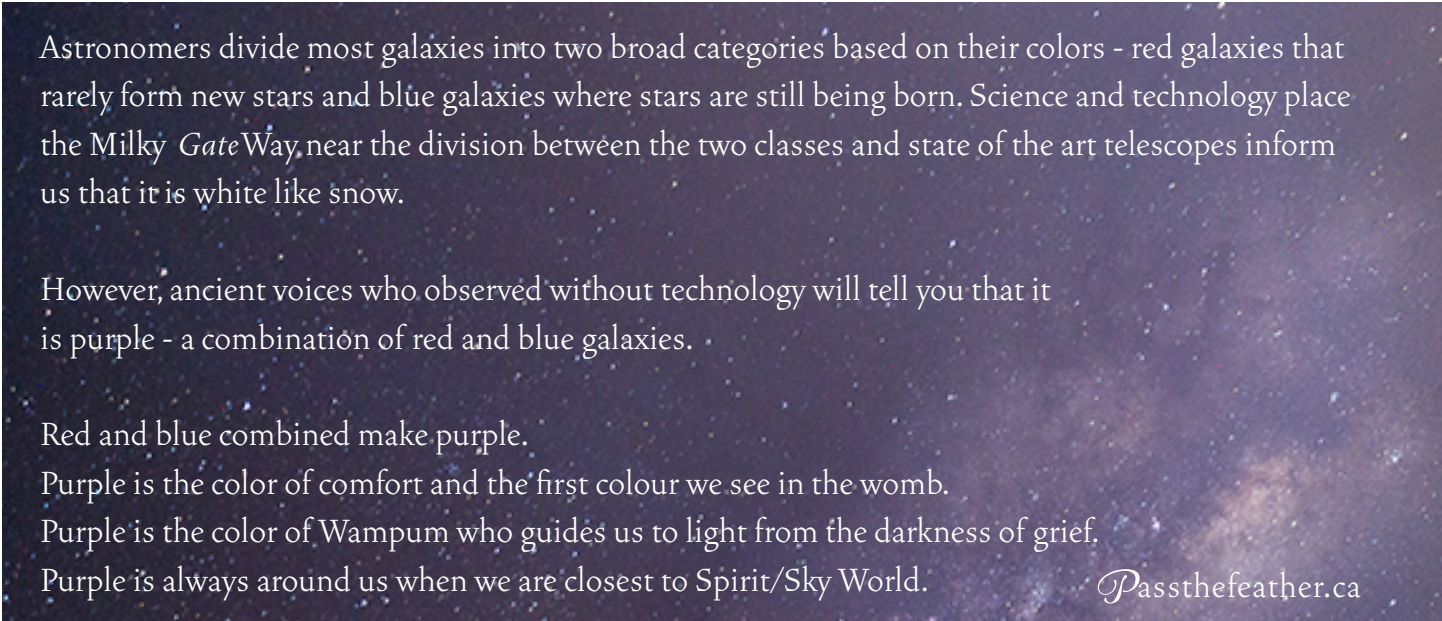
This image speaks to health and medicine through the interconnectedness of all life on Mother Earth and in alignment with celestial relations. She rests under the celestial Sky Dome in the embrace of life givers: Earth, Water and the 3 Sisters (Corn, Beans and Squash). She feels safe; her arms and heart are wide open and in her hands are Tobacco seeds, our first medicine from Sky World. Like all seeds buried in earthly medicine, our Good Mind continues to persevere and we grow. She understands that natural gifts of Creation are relations that give her life and this family makes her happy - it's medicine.

I believe that regenerative leadership begins with allowing ancestral guidance to show up in your life, even when it is invisible to others. It is inner knowing and reliance on the gifts that you arrived here with. It is directing yourself to focus on creating sustainable, life-affirming practices that not only endure but thrive for generations. It's about creating a legacy that ensures the well-being, vitality and protection of your community for the long term.

I was gifted with this knowledge before choosing my earthly mother and it has certainly been nurtured by observing kononkwe (onkwehonwe women) who dedicate their lives to planting seeds of ancient knowledge in me, in the children and in each other. And these are absolutely *not* things I learned from my adoptive and foster families, they are things that I've carried with me since the purple womb. The sacred colour of purple visits us through life and keeps us connected to the stars, the sacred Sky Beings and the Milky *Gate*Way. The Milky *Gate*Way is a magical and magnificent celestial highway and is the portal that transports us between Sky World and Mother Earth. When we were a spirit being about to enter a human womb, we traveled to Mother Earth through the purple portal; at the end of our earthly lives, we will see purple again on our journey back to Spirit World through the same Milky *Gate*Way.

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Whether or not my mother was ready to provide for me, she did deserve a chance to love me and for about 9 months, I knew her from the inside out. When our brother the Sun shines down on a womb he greets us with light that's filtered through our mother's cells, water and blood; it is then that purple becomes the first colour we know and one that will comfort us for our first 200 days here; my purple womb. Purple is also the colour of Wampum (the shells of Quahog Clams) and they carry and protect our stories and promises. Wampum also keeps and preserves our condolence ceremony and guides us from the darkness of grief back to the happiness of the Sun. That is, Wampum is the medicine that accompanies us during moments in life where we are closest to Spirit World. Purple is always around us when we are closest to Spirit World.



Astronomers divide most galaxies into two broad categories based on their colors - red galaxies that rarely form new stars and blue galaxies where stars are still being born. Science and technology place the Milky *Gate*Way near the division between the two classes and state of the art telescopes inform us that it is white like snow.

However, ancient voices who observed without technology will tell you that it is purple - a combination of red and blue galaxies.

Red and blue combined make purple.

Purple is the color of comfort and the first colour we see in the womb.

Purple is the color of Wampum who guides us to light from the darkness of grief.

Purple is always around us when we are closest to Spirit/Sky World.

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Whether we were informed by our living grandmothers or we listened intently to their cell memories is irrelevant because we have learned nothing if not that the wisdom of ancestors can be both tangible and intangible and the Grandmothers themselves can be both visible and invisible. We cannot always see Grandmother Moon, she could be transitioning, she could be new and resting in her darkness or she could be secreted by the clouds but nonetheless with absolute certainty we know that she is always up there watching over us.

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It's okay to believe in things you cannot see but it's vital to believe in what others tell you they *can* see. Humility is embracing that there may never be proof that something you do not understand does not exist; hope is wishing that someday you will not be waiting for proof.

See each other the way the Moon sees the Sun; vastly different and equally important.

Dawn Iehstoseranón:nha (She Keeps/Protects The Feathers), Birth name: Mary Francis Akwesasronon (Akwesasne), Kanienkéha'ka (Mohawk), Wakhskaré:wake (Bear Clan)

Owner, [Pass The Feather](#) • Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) Feather Keeper and Graphic/Web Design

President & Founder, [Indigenous Arts Collective](#), An Indigenous women led non profit and National Arts Service organization, Registered Charity #801401274RR0001

[IndigenARTSY](#) Your Indigenous arts shopping mall

[National Day of Truth & Reconciliation](#), Parliament Hill, Ottawa, September 30th, • Orange Shirt Day

[Indigenous Women's Arts Conference](#)

[Peace-Mother.com](#) – Haudenosaunee Research Project • 2024 Eclipse, Tsiokonsaseh (Jikonsaseh), Great Law & Matricentric Democracy

Further reading and exploration:

[Indigenous Arts Collective of Canada - Prioritizing Survivors](#)

[Pass The Feather - A Survivor's Mission to Keep The Knowledge Accessible](#)

[Creating Ethical Space for First Nations-led biological research, © 2023, Amy Bombay](#)

[Epigenetics and Child Development: How Children's Experiences Affect Their Genes, Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child](#)

[Adopt an Indian or Métis Program](#) - Media Advertising Project to Increase Inter-racial Adoption of Native Children, Gladue Rights Research Database, gladue.usask.ca

[Indigenous children for sale: The money behind the Sixties Scoop](#), Adoptive U.S. parents paid thousands for Indigenous Manitoba children, CBC.ca

[History of Forced/Coerced Sterilization](#), Survivors Circle For Reproductive Justice

[Extensive Haudenosaunee Resource List](#) Including Women's Roles, Great Law of Peace, Teachers, Speakers and Links

Matrilineality refers to the system of tracing kinship, descent, and inheritance through the female line (mother's lineage).

Matri- (mother)

line- (line/lineage)

ality (state or condition)

Synonym/Variant: Matriliny.