



# Grandmothering the world

## International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers

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In October 2004, an historic event took place at the Menla Center near Woodstock, New York, USA. Thirteen indigenous Grandmothers, spiritual elders from tribes around the world, were brought together by the Center for Sacred Studies. The inspiration for this meeting came from Bwiti elder Bernadette Rebienot: *"In Gabon women regularly gather together in the forest to share their visions, and pray for world peace and for the well-being of their people. And when the grandmothers speak, the president listens!"* For the first three days, the Grandmothers sat in Council with each other. This was followed by a four-day Global Women's Gathering.

The meeting began with the lighting of a sacred fire, a ceremony central to all indigenous cultures. The Grandmothers ranged in age from 51-81, all of them literally grandmothers, some great-grandmothers. As well as being healers, tradition-holders and women of prayer, all of them have fulfilled practical leadership roles at local levels. Many are educators, and several travel internationally to do their work.

During the Council the Grandmothers talked about their traditions, visions and prophecies, and decided how they wanted to align themselves together to have a voice in the world. Most important, they shared their ceremonies and ways of prayer with each other.

### Reawaken the feminine spirit

The Council was very intimate. Many of the Grandmothers wept from time to time just to be able to sit together at the round table, because they had had dreams and visions of such a Council of Grandmothers, some of them decades before, with no idea how to bring it about. They spoke about what their own grandmothers had taught them. They shared their concern that today's children are being wooed away from learning the ancient ways by television and the superficial, materialistic values of modern culture. This ancient wisdom, though it differs in particulars

from tribe to tribe, centres on the interrelationship between all life forms and the interaction with the spiritual dimensions of life.

At each session a general question was posed, such as: Where are we now? How do our prophecies, stories and medicines help us meet today's challenges? How do we want to work together? Besides more particular global issues, major and recurring themes were the role of women in nurturing the gift of life through the generations, and the reawakening of the feminine spirit, foretold by many prophecies.

All the Grandmothers spoke of their concerns about war, violence, the desecration of life and the environment; many of them about laws aimed at preventing the use of traditional medicines. The Grandmothers from North America spoke of the problems of alcoholism, addiction and ill health that are ravaging the indigenous peoples; the Grandmothers from Central and South America about the money interests that are destroying the rainforests where their medicinal plants grow; the Grandmother from Tibet, who lives in Canada, spoke about not being able to return to her homeland, and about the dumping of nuclear waste there.

### The spiritual level first

At the heart of all their messages was the belief that the overwhelming prob-

lems we are facing today can only be solved by working first on the spiritual level. Each of the Grandmothers stood very simply and matter-of-factly in her connection with the invisible forces of life and her own spiritual strength, in her confidence in the power of prayer, ceremony and intention. They were also very much heartened by the prospect of combining their energies and creating new ways for the timeless wisdom of the Grandmothers to influence the world. It was decided by the end of the Council that the Grandmothers would form an alliance as an NGO under the non-profit umbrella of the Center for Sacred Studies, in order to publicly address their common goals and particular local issues.

### Education based on traditional wisdom

Of concern to all is the present lack of basic education that prepares a person to live with compassion, in balance with the forces of life. As Grandmother Tsering of Tibet pointed out: *"Meetings of women together are extremely important. It's human beings who create peace, and human beings who create the suffering. A mother spends the most time with children. The present mothers are creating future mothers. It's important to teach mothers to raise children well. If we create good, motivated human beings, we'll be able to*

find peace on this planet.”

A small taste of their education: On the last day of the three-day Council, the Grandmothers asked if there were any questions. A young woman of 20, Sophia, stood up and spoke of her fears about what's going on in the world, and her confusion about what she could do about it. She began to weep.

Cheyenne/Arapahoe Grandmother Margaret got up from the table, saying, “Fear can destroy you - we don't want our young people to deal with these things alone.” She led Sophia around the circle of Grandmothers, who each took her hand and comforted her. There was the incredibly moving sense that Sophia represented not only those of her age, but each one of us. In the blessing and encouragement they gave her, they were healing, empowering, and in fact *grandmothering*, every confused, despairing person alive today with the wisdom of the Grandmother spirit.

### Remember who we are

On the last four days, the Global Women's Gathering was opened to about 300 people, including well-known women from western culture who have spent their lives pioneering modern understanding of the feminine while effecting change in the world. Honoured with the title 'western elders',

these women included the well-known American writers, social activists and spiritual explorers Gloria Steinem, Alice Walker, Luisah Teish; former US senator and stateswoman Carol Moseley Braun; international ecologist Helena Norberg-Hodge; British health visionary Teresa Hale; and former Cherokee chief Wilma Mankiller. Each gave a short speech about her work, and some led prayers. Gloria Steinem's opening remark encapsulated, with humour and poignancy, the feeling of many in the audience: “I am from the tribe that has forgotten who we are.”

The remaining days were spent in large meetings and smaller discussion groups, addressing such topics as healing oppression and its accompanying illnesses, restoring the balance of the Earth, women's wisdom, traditional health systems, creating the bridge between traditional and modern medicine, honouring the elders, and preserving and regenerating original culture.

The Gathering ended with a presentation of the Grandmothers' statement (see box 1), ceremony and prayer. Ash from the sacred fire was distributed to all attending, with the request that each participant would use it to light a fire in her own community, pray for world healing and peace, and bring news of this historical gathering.

### Grandmothers continue their job

Since then, the Grandmothers have stayed in touch and visited each other. In May 2005, the Grandmothers' Council reconvened in Pojonque Pueblo, New Mexico, USA, hosted by Mayan Grandmother Flordemayo. They approved the development of projects to further their vision, such as a website to disseminate their teachings to adults and children, a documentary and a book about the Grandmothers Council, local Grandmother Councils, and a pilot project to use permaculture methods to protect their local waters. The Grandmothers resolved to gather in unified prayer in each other's home places, so that by 2011 they will have prayed together around the world. The next meeting will be in Oaxaca, Mexico, in the spring of 2006.

Have any presidents listened? Perhaps not yet. But those of us who met these Grandmothers know without a doubt that they're on the job: guiding us, encouraging us and strengthening us, in the nurturing and humble way Grandmothers do.

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#### Box 1 The International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers speaks:

*“We are thirteen indigenous grandmothers who came together for the first time from 11 October through 17 October 2004, in Phoenicia, New York. We gathered from the four directions in the land of the people of the Iroquois Confederacy. We come here from the Amazon rainforest, the Arctic circle of North America, the great forest of the American northwest, the vast plains of North America, the highlands of Central America, the Black Hills of South Dakota, the mountains of Oaxaca, the desert of the American southwest, the mountains of Tibet and from the rainforest of Central Africa. Affirming our relations with traditional medicine, peoples and communities throughout the world, we have been brought together by a common vision to form a new global alliance.*

*We are the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. We have united as one. Ours is an alliance of prayer, education and healing for our Mother Earth, all Her inhabitants, all the children, and for the next seven generations to come. We are deeply concerned with the unprecedented destruction of our Mother Earth, the contamination of our air, waters and soil, the atrocities of war, the global scourge of poverty, the threat of nuclear weapons and waste, the prevailing culture of materialism, the epidemics which threaten the health of the Earth's peoples, the exploitation of indigenous medicines, and with the destruction of indigenous ways of life.*

*We, the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, believe that our ancestral ways of prayer, peacemaking and healing are vitally needed today. We come together to nurture, educate and train our children. We come together to uphold the practice of our ceremonies and affirm the right to use our plant medicines free of legal restriction. We come together to protect the lands where our peoples live and upon which our cultures depend, to safeguard the collective heritage of traditional medicines, and to defend the Earth Herself. We believe that the teachings of our ancestors will light our way through an uncertain future.*

*We join with all those who honour the Creator, and to all who work and pray for our children, for world peace, and for the healing of our Mother Earth. For all our relations.”*

Margaret Behan (Cheyenne/Arapaho, Montana), Rita Pitka Blumenstein (Yupik, Alaska), Aama Bombo (Tamang, Nepal), Julieta Casimiro (Mazatec, Oaxaca, Mexico), Flordemayo (Maya residing in New Mexico, USA), Maria Alice Campos Freire (Mapia, Brazil), Tsering Dolma Gyalton (Tibetan residing in Canada), Beatrice Holy Dance Long Visitor (Oglala Lakota, South Dakota, USA), Rita Holy Dance Long Visitor (Oglala Lakota, South Dakota, USA), Clara Shinobu Iura (Mapia, Brazil), Mona Palocca (Hopi/Havasupai, Arizona, USA), Agnes Pilgrim (Takelma Siletz, Oregon, USA), Bernadette Rebieu (Omyene, Gabon, Africa).

