



Who Speaks for Wolf?

Oneida (Iroquois) – USA / Canada

Almost at the edge of the circle of light cast by Central Fire –Wolf was standing. His eyes reflected the fire’s warmth with a colder light. Wolf stood there, staring at the fire.

A boy of eight winters was watching Wolf –as **immobile** as Wolf–fascinated. Finally, the boy turned to Grandfather, warming his old bones from winter’s first chill.

‘Why does Wolf stand there and only watch the fire?’

‘Why do you?’ Grandfather replied. And then the boy remembered that he had sat there, ever since the fire was lit, watching the flames – until Wolf came. Now, instead, he watched Wolf. He saw that it was because Wolf was so different from him, yet also watched the fire, and that there seemed no fear in Wolf. It was this the boy did not understand.

Beyond where Wolf was standing there was a hill –still so close to the Central Fire that the boy was surprised to see the dim outline of another Wolf face. This one was looking at the moon.

Moon-Looking-Wolf began to sing her song. More and more joined her until at last even Wolf-Looks-at-Fire chortled in his throat the beginnings of a song. They sang for the Moon, and for each other, and for any who might listen. They sang of how Earth was a good place to

be, of how much beauty surrounds us, and of how all this is sometimes most easily seen in Moon and Fire.

The boy listened and –and wanted to do nothing else with his life but listen to Wolf singing.

After a long and particularly beautiful song, Moon-Looking-Wolf quieted, and one by one her brothers joined her in silence, until even the most distant –crying ‘I am here! Don’t forget me!’– made space for the night and watched–and waited. Wolf-Looks-at-Fire turned and left the clearing, joining his brothers near the hill.

‘But I still don’t understand,’ the boy continued. ‘Why does Wolf look at Fire? Why does he feel at home so close to our living space? Why does Wolf Woman begin her song on a hill so close to us who are not Wolf?’

‘We have known each other for a long time,’ the old man answered. ‘We have learned to live with one another.’

The boy still looked puzzled. Within himself he saw only the edges of understanding.

Grandfather was silent for a time –and began at last to show cadences of a chant. The boy knew with satisfaction that soon he would understand –would know Wolf better than before– would learn how it had been between us.

LONG AGO... LONG AGO... LONG AGO...

Grandfather chanted, the rhythm taking its place with Wolf’s song as something appropriate for the forest.

LONG AGO

Our People grew in number so that where we were

was no longer enough

Many young men

were sent out from among us

to seek a new place

where the People might be who-they-were

They searched

and they returned

each with a place selected

each determined his place was best

AND SO IT WAS

That the People had a decision to make:

which of the many was most appropriate

NOW, AT THAT TIME

There was one among the People

to whom Wolf was brother

He was so much Wolf's brother

that he would sing their song to them

and they would answer him

He was so much Wolf's brother

that their young

would sometimes follow him through the forest

and it seemed they meant to learn from him

SO IT WAS, AT THIS TIME

That the People gave That One a special name

They called him WOLF'S BROTHER

*and if any **sought** to learn about Wolf*

if any were curious

or wanted to learn to sing Wolf's song

they would sit beside him

and describe their curiosity

hoping for a reply

‘Has it been since that time that we sing to Wolf?’ the boy asked eagerly. ‘Was it he who taught us how?’ He clapped his hands over his mouth to stop the tumble of words. He knew he had interrupted Grandfather’s Song.

The old man smiled, and the crinkles around his eyes spoke of other boys—and other times.

‘Yes, even he!’ he answered. ‘For since that time it has pleased many of our people to sing to Wolf and to learn to understand him.’

Encouraged, the boy asked, ‘And ever since our hunters go to learn to sing to Wolf?’

‘Many people go, not only hunters. Many people go, not only men,’ Grandfather chided. ‘For was it not Wolf Woman who began the song tonight? Would it then be appropriate if only the men among us replied?’

The boy looked crestfallen. He wanted so much to be a hunter—to learn Wolf’s song, but he knew there was wisdom in Grandfather’s words. Not only hunters learn from Wolf.

‘But you have led me down a different path,’ the Old One was saying. ‘It would please me to finish my first song.’

The boy settled back and waited to learn.

AS I HAVE SAID

The People sought a new place in the forest

They listened closely to each of the young men

as they spoke of hills and trees

*of clearings and running water
of deer and squirrels and berries*

They listened to hear which place

*might be drier in rain
more protected in winter
and where our Three Sisters*

Corn, Beans, and Squash

might find a place to their liking

They listened

and they chose

Before they chose

they listened to each young man

Before they chose

they listened to each among them

he who understood the flow of waters

she who understood Long House construction

he who understood the storms of winter

she who understood Three Sisters

to each of these they listened

until they reached agreement

and the Eldest among them

finally rose and said:

‘SO BE IT–

FOR SO IT IS’

'BUT WAIT'

Someone cautioned–

'Where is Wolf's Brother?

WHO, THEN, SPEAKS FOR WOLF?'

BUT

THE PEOPLE WERE DECIDED

and their mind was firm

and the first people were sent

to choose a site for the first Long House

to clear a space for our Three Sisters

to mold the land so that water

would run away from our dwelling

so that all would be secure within

AND THEN WOLF'S BROTHER RETURNED

He asked about the New Place

and said at once that we must choose another

'You have chosen the Center Place

for a great community of Wolf'

But we answered him

that many had already gone

and that it could not wisely be changed

and that surely Wolf could make way for us

as we sometimes make way for Wolf

*But Wolf's Brother **counselled–***

*'I think that you will find
that it is too small a place for both
and that it will require more work than—
than change would presently require'*

BUT

THE PEOPLE CLOSED THEIR EARS

*and would not **reconsider***

When the New Place was ready

all the People rose up as one

and took those things they found of value

and looked at last upon their new home

NOW CONSIDER HOW IT WAS FOR THEM

This New Place

had cool summers and winter protection

and fast-moving streams

and forests around us

filled with deer and squirrel

there was room even for our Three Beloved Sisters

AND THE PEOPLE SAW THIS WAS GOOD

AND DID NOT SEE

WOLF WATCHING FROM THE SHADOWS!

BUT AS TIME PASSED

They began to see—

for someone would bring deer or squirrel

and hang him from a tree

and go for something to contain the meat

but would return

to find nothing hanging from the tree

AND WOLF BEYOND

AT FIRST

This seemed to us an appropriate exchange–

some food for a place to live

BUT

*It soon became **apparent** that it was more than this–*

for Wolf would sometimes walk between the dwellings

that we had fashioned for ourselves

and the women grew concerned

for the safety of the little ones

Thinking of this

they devised for a while an agreement with Wolf

whereby the women would gather together

at the edge of our village

and put food for Wolf and his brothers

BUT IT WAS SOON APPARENT

That this meant too much food

and also Wolf grew bolder

coming in to look for food

so that it was worse than before

WE HAD NO WISH TO TAME WOLF

AND SO

Hearing the wailing of the women

*the men **devised** a system*

whereby some ones among them

were always alert to drive off Wolf

AND WOLF WAS SOON HIS OLD UNTAMED SELF

BUT

They soon discovered

that this required so much energy

that there was little left for winter preparations

and the Long Cold began to look longer and colder

with each passing day

THEN

The men counselled together

*to choose a different **course***

THEY SAW

That neither providing Wolf with food

nor driving him off

gave the People a life that was pleasing

THEY SAW

That Wolf and the People

could not live comfortably together

in such a small space

THEY SAW

*That it was possible
to hunt down these Wolf People
until they were no more*

BUT THEY ALSO SAW

That this would require much energy over many years

THEY SAW, TOO,

*That such a task would change the People:
they would become Wolf Killers*

*A People who took life only to sustain their own
would become People who took life
rather than move a little*

IT DID NOT SEEM TO THEM

THAT THEY WANTED TO BECOME SUCH A PEOPLE

AT LAST

*One of the Eldest of the People
spoke what was in every mind:*

'It would seem

that Wolf's Brother's vision

was sharper than our own

To live here indeed requires more work now

than change would have made necessary

Grandfather paused, making his knee a drum on which to **maintain** the rhythm of the chant, and then went on.

NOW THIS WOULD BE A SIMPLE TELLING
OF A PEOPLE WHO DECIDED TO MOVE
ONCE WINTER WAS PAST
EXCEPT
THAT FROM THIS
THE PEOPLE LEARNED A GREAT LESSON
IT IS A LESSON
WE HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN
FOR

At the end of their Council

one of the Eldest rose again and said:

*'Let us learn from this
so that not again
need the People build only to move
Let us not again think we will gain energy
only to lose more than we gain
We have learned to choose a place
where winter storms are less
rather than rebuild
We have learned to choose a place
where water does not stand
rather than sustain sickness*

LET US NOW LEARN TO CONSIDER WOLF!'

AND SO IT WAS

*That the People devised among themselves
a way of asking each other questions
whenever a decision was to be made
on a New Place or a New Way
We sought to perceive the flow of energy
through each new possibility
and how much was enough
and how much was too much*

UNTIL AT LAST

*Someone would rise
and ask the old, old question
to remind us of things
we do not yet see clearly enough to remember*

‘TELL ME NOW MY BROTHERS

TELL ME NOW MY SISTERS

WHO SPEAKS FOR WOLF?’

And so Grandfather’s Song ended... and my father’s voice grew still.

‘Did the boy learn to sing with Wolf?’ I asked.

‘All may,’ my father answered.

‘And did the People always remember to ask Wolf’s Question?’

My father smiled. ‘They remembered for a long time... a long time. And when the wooden ships came, bringing a new People, they looked at them and saw that what we accomplish by much thought and

considering the needs of all, they accomplish by building tools and changing the Earth, with much thought of winter and little of tomorrow. We could not teach them to ask Wolf's question. They did not understand he was their brother. We knew how long it had taken us to listen to Wolf's voice. It seemed to us that These Ones could also learn. And so we **cherished** them... when we could... and held them off... when we must... and gave them time to learn.'

'Will they learn, do you think, my father? Will they learn?'

'Sometimes wisdom comes only after great foolishness. We still hope they will learn. I do not know even if our own People still ask their question. I only know that at the last Great Council when we talked about the Small Ones in their wooden ships and decided that their way and our way might exist side by side—and decided, therefore, to let them live... I only know that someone rose to remind them of the things we had not yet learned about these Pale Ones.'

He rose and he reminded us of what we had already learned, of how these New Ones believed that only one way was Right and all others Wrong. He wondered out loud whether they would be as patient with us—once they were strong—as we were now with them. He wondered what else might be true for them that we did not yet see. He wondered how all these things—seen and unseen—might affect our lives and the lives of our children's children's children. Then to remind us of the great difficulties that may arise from the simple **omission** of something we forgot to consider, he gazed slowly around the Council Circle and asked the ancient question:

'TELL ME NOW MY BROTHERS

TELL ME NOW MY SISTERS

WHO SPEAKS FOR WOLF?' □

From *Who Speaks for Wolf*, by Paula Underwood, 1984, San Anselmo, CA: A Tribe of Two Press. Copyright 1984 by Paula Underwood. Reprinted with permission.

Comments

This story is a masterful adaptation of the Oneida tribal elder Paula Underwood, with which she intended to preserve as a gift for the children of the Earth the legacy left by the grandmother of her grandfather, Tsilokomah, the Keeper of the Old Things, an oral tradition with more than 10,000 years old, according to her.

Interestingly, Paula Underwood participated as a tribal representative at the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Summit of the Earth, where the possibility of creating a Charter of the Earth was collectively discussed for the first time. Later, she would impart a master's degree in peace studies in the same place where the Earth Charter Secretariat is located, at the United Nations' University for Peace, in Costa Rica.

For Paula Underwood, the stories she had received from her ancestors were perfect vehicles for education, to the point that, for her, they were nothing more than 'Learning Stories;' that is, stories that teach how to live.

Sources

Underwood, P. (2002). Who speak for Wolf? In *Three Native American Learning Stories* (pp. 13-41). Bayfield, CO: A Tribe of Two Press.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 3: Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable, and peaceful.

Other passages that this story illustrates

This story by Paula Underwood covers all the categories of complex-systems thinking and those of the principles and values of the

Earth Charter, so it is able to illustrate a large part of the text of the Earth Charter. In this sense, it is an essential story in any educational programme in which you want to make known the Earth Charter.

