



## Spiritual Reflections

# The Oka Crisis: Light and Darkness

By Pierre Goldberger

*It's not only a question of human solidarity but also a spiritual one.*

*Underneath the deceptive appearances, do we not have to live the Encounter with oppressed and stigmatized groups and people, to open us and seek truth and justice?*

During the two months of the crisis in Oka, made up of comings and goings, of presence, of mobilization, my spiritual experience in that place is twofold and linked: that of the organized, intentional lie, based on ignorance, stereotypes and hostility spread in our society. We have so much justice to do!

My most fundamental, illuminating, and deepening discovery is that of respect and solidarity for the resilience, dignity, courage, and spiritual depth of the Mohawk and Indigenous Nations. My spiritual experience was woven into the lived depth of these conflicting relationships, which I am now recounting. I also realized that this "Never again", "*Nunca mas*", shouted in the face of the repressions and genocides that I had encountered in Latin America, was being experienced here, at home. A struggle also rooted in a deep spirituality that fed my own, challenged me and transformed my relationships here on the ground. Here, we are at the core of dealing with questions of values and spirituality.

The trigger: the decision by the Municipality (Oka) to expand the golf course, to cut down the trees of the Pine Grove planted by the Mohawks and to eliminate the Elders' cemetery, a sacred place if ever there was one. This blind decision tramples on the Mohawks' ancestral relationship with the land, their vocation to protect it, their respect for the Elders and their spiritual traditions. We realized the price that Mohawks and other supportive nations were willing to pay to protect "all their relationships". I am immersed in a holistic cosmovision...

We have Communities in Kahnawake and Kanesatake. We have to go there. It's not only a question of solidarity but also a spiritual one. Underneath the deceptive appearances, do we not have to live the Encounter with oppressed and marginalized groups and people, to open up and to seek truth and justice?

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We pass through the roadblocks, Civil Code book in hand, to go to the church. Harvey Gabriel, a respected member of the community, leads us through the woods behind the barricade. The Mohawks welcome us simply, as allies. It is a gift of trust that will not be scorned!

A Warrior even shows us the perimeter and their defenses - sandbags, some cut trees. And we talk to the sentries: young men exhausted by long shifts, one of whom, Kevin Deer, a pacifist, will keep his gun magazine empty...

We enter the community center, quiet : women and children, men in camouflage, conversations contained; in the corners AK4s. On the television, a general explains, with photos, that there are up to 200 Warriors, equipped with heavy weapons capable of piercing armored vehicles! A danger for the whole country!

Yet we had counted only about thirty men - that would prove to be correct - and no heavy weapons! The natives noted the enormity of the lie and



ironically said: "We didn't know we had such a well-equipped army! It is good to be informed! Lies and misinformation... We are stunned.

Defending a legal municipal decision for financial gain against a sacred native place and their right and duty to protect the land. We were indeed in a "Canada-Quebec" crisis, emblematic of our ignorance and contempt for the First Nations.

I was experiencing here the great divide between our country's values and spirituality and the foundation of our colonialist system: between the "We own the land" versus the foundation of Aboriginal spirituality "We belong to the Earth and we will take care of it"

The Oka crisis was to deepen and seal in me three elements of spirituality experienced with Indigenous People. The encounter with the Other as a necessary, unavoidable passage, questioning our prejudices and dismantling the stereotypes we have been fed in the past. It invites us to a co-humanity in mutual respect and a new understanding of the other and of ourselves.

Listening to the life stories of the First Nations people in the Talking Circles, sharing ceremonies under the stars, to the rhythm of the drum... Sacred stories, interwoven with suffering. Struggles to regain one's dignity, one's obscured history, one's spiritual roots, one's place as guardian of Mother Earth. This is what I was caught up with in Oka. All of this is turning my consciousness around. My understanding of the Divine in Creation is expanding.

Responsibility. Once one has experienced this encounter, can one pretend "not to know" and give up "making the Truth"? I am responsible to seek in my commitment a restorative Justice that opens up on the Future. To know without acting? Isn't that turning off the voices of our conscience? It is up to us to raise our voices and make room for the indigenous voices.

The way out of the crisis was becoming more and more dangerous, uncertain. Inside, I listen and learn ; outside I work to alert all possible networks.

Faced with the advances of the military - four thousand men and armor - and the shrinking of their space, the Mohawks retreated. The army increased its pressure: searchlights at night, deafening music, raids and beatings of sentries. The First Nations people in Canada were mobilizing, as well as civilian groups, including my Church.

The army said they wanted to avoid bloodshed that would taint Canada. Were they surrounded Warriors preparing for the final sacrifice? Were they going to defend this sacred place from the "invaders" who had come to subdue them? The situation was becoming more and more explosive. The face-offs became more and more risky.

A solution emerges for Mohawk negotiators and their allies: enlist the guidance of traditional spiritual leaders, including Lorin Thompson. During a night of starlight vigil, I was taught that a Warrior offers his life in defense of the endangered community in profound ceremonies and lays down this responsibility during other spiritual ceremonies.

This appeal is also strongly supported by the authorities, including Mr. Ciaccia, Quebec's Minister of Indian Affairs, by Ms. Rouso of the International League of Human Rights (FIDH) from Paris, with whom the *Ligue des Droits et Libertés du Québec* and I work closely. The Mohawks are successful: Lorin Thompson will be allowed to enter.

When Lorin Thompson began the ceremonies, the army sent a helicopter over the sacred fire, drowning out any possibility of listening and meditating with an infernal noise, showing a scandalous lack of respect! After an outcry of protest, these provocations cease.

Lorin Thompson continues his accompaniment and the ceremonies each evening.



Light, the Warriors enter another spiritual space, choose life, and continue the struggle in other forms. In doing so, they are aware that they would be singled out, criminalized, vilified.

The Mohawk negotiators seek a respectable and dignified "disengagement," not a surrender. In the final negotiation, Six Nations member Mikes Myers, a negotiator with a proven track record of advocating for Indigenous rights in high conflict situations, engages in a lengthy telephone conversation with a senior military officer to review and set the terms of a "Disengagement" agreement. We are the listeners, Pastors Frank Giffin, Faye Wakeling and I.

The terms are as follows: Six Nations leaders will collect the "Sacred Objects" of the Mohawk ceremonies during a prayer. The Warriors will place their guns in a container that will remain in the hands of the army, allowing them to lay down their arms with dignity and the army to obtain an end to the armed conflict without bloodshed. Two lawyers and two pastors will be present to accompany the women and children on the one hand and the men on the other in buses to the military base in Farnham. Both parties seem to agree.

The disengagement was set for 6 p.m. that same day. We hurry. Our prayer: "Thank you Creator, you are our help".

We are about fifty people, natives of the Peace Camp, people in solidarity, who are waiting for this crucial moment, in the presence of soldiers blocking the way up. At 5:50 pm, a military commander calls us: "The agreement is cancelled! Shouting and astonishment... "No! it is not possible! We are still betrayed!" The night falls, waiting, anguish... Suddenly the Warriors come running down, unarmed.

The soldiers jump on them, throw them to the ground, indescribable melee in our midst. Some Indigenous women try to pull off the soldiers, grab them and shout "Let them go". Several of us shout

« Don't hit them! » How long... I don't know. Maybe twenty minutes.

For us, time is suspended, like an eternity of injustice, of unkept word, which is prolonged and replayed. Bitter tears flow. Later we will learn that faced with the unilateral breaking of the agreement, the Warriors burned their guns and decided to run together to try to pass through the lines. Many thought they would be killed.

The military put everyone on a bus, without a lawyer or pastor. Experience of the "forked tongue", betrayed word, the unfolding of the crisis has deepened the lie and duplicity of the beginning. We rush to the Farnham military base. Families are there to collect Mohawk children and women. Beyond the gates an officer tells us: lawyers will not be admitted and you will be kept informed.

Two hours later, shocked women and children are still sitting in the bus, while the men are being questioned. Shortly before midnight, a polite officer announces that no one will be released until the next day. The families leave. We stay with some of them. Late in the evening, a new turn of events. The children were left alone, "liberated" on the side of the road. The parents shout « What if we had left! You are heartless! » That night carries a bitter taste of betrayal, like a Good Friday... We have prayed a lot during this crisis, indignant, repentant, resistant, praying against all hope for right relationships.

A few weeks later, a Mohawk messenger came to the Synod office with a two-row Wampum to invite half a dozen of us to a closing ceremony, around the sacred fire. Grateful and with heavy hearts, we bring our tobacco offering... Prayer to the four corners of Creation and all that it contains.

Thanks to the Creator who has given strength and courage to his children and kept them alive, dignified, determined, and looking to the future. And for us, these words that soothe us: "Thank you. We will continue together on the great river. Side by side.



We in our canoe, you in yours. Connected by the rope of friendship and respect, untied when necessary...". We stay a long time around the fire which is burning. The breeze blows... Hugs. A few precious words: "See you soon. Goodbye."

Needless to say, this spiritual adventure has transformed my wife and me. It led us to accompany the Maya in Guatemala for six years, then on our return to work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and today to continue the search for right relationships. Things have evolved since that crisis... but not much, not enough. And in Oka, the land issue remains unresolved.

I have learned that it is the ancestral stories, the spiritual traditions of ceremonies, of holistic vision of Creation, in hiding, sheltered from destruction and transmitted by the Elders, that today are surfacing in the open and give strength and inspiration to the younger generations who appropriate them and live by them! All this was below the surface in the Oka affair and the weapons, and our ignorance could not undo it.

Over time, this Oka crisis has become for many Nations in Canada, emblematic of resilience and courage to assert themselves to choose the "other path of resistance". I was nourished by it.

We must hasten the day when all of us,  
our children  
and non-Indigenous grandchildren,  
will join the circle of right relationships  
and Reconciliation,  
to the sound of the drum,  
the heartbeat of the Creator  
and Mother Earth.

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*Involved in solidarity with the peoples of Latin America, from 1997 to 2004 Pierre and his wife (the late Faye Wakeling) responded together to the call to accompany the Mayan populations of Guatemala, struggling to painfully emerge from the civil war. Pierre then served as the leader of the French language ministries unit of the United Church of Canada. He is still active in St. John's United Church in Montreal and in the Latin American community Camino de Emmaus.*

## Questions for Reflection

1. What struck you most?
2. Goldberger states, [The]Oka crisis has become for many Nations [...] emblematic of resilience and courage to assert themselves to choose the "other path of resistance". Can you think of other paths of resistance that have happened/are happening near you?
3. Share a quote or idea that is important to you.