

the words of the grandmothers

'When the Grandmothers from the four directions speak, the earth will heal.'

Hopi Prophecy
Suzanne Duce



The Council of 13 Grandmothers in Assisi Italy 2008

Back Row (from left to right): Margaret Behan (Cheyenne-Arapaho : USA) * Agnes Baker Pilgrim (Takelma-Siletz : USA)
Bernadette Rebienot (Omyene : Gabon, Africa)

Middle Row (from left to right): Flordemayo (Mayan : USA) * Beatrice Long-Visitor Holy Dance (Oglala Lakota : USA)
Rita Pikta Blumenstein (Yupik : USA) * Tsering Dolma Gyaltong (Tibetan : Canada)
Clara Shinobu Iura (Mapia : Brazil) * Aama Bompö (Tamang : Nepal) * Julieta Casimiro (Mazatec : Mexico)

Front Row (from left to right): Maria Alice Campos Freire (Mapia : Brazil) * Rita Long-Visitor Holy Dance (Oglala Lakota : USA) * Mona Polacca (Hopi-Havasupai : USA)



Since my childhood I have enjoyed being in the presence of elders, listening to them.

In the easy company of my grandfather Harry, I would sit dreaming by the fire, listening to his stories of the days when foxes ran through nearby fields. He was a down-to-earth man, typical of the no-nonsense stalwart North, not given to fanciful esoteric explanations. Yet he could communicate with the spirit world and had a spirit guide. It was simply an ability he had, along with his carpentry skill, and we never thought it remarkable. I learned from him that this reality is not the only one.

My other grandfather Charles had knowledge of healing plants and would point them out to me as we walked by a hedgerow. He was sought out by neighbours to heal physical ailments with herbal medicines, often dispensing his insightful wisdom as well.

Listening to grandmother Caroline, singing as she worked, is one of my earliest memories, linked forever to the scent of lavender polish.

My earliest memory is of being in the arms of grandmother Lily before she died; with a pervasive feeling of her unconditional love. I was told that I could not possibly have remembered this as I was only a few weeks old. But I've learned, since following a path to the Thirteen Grandmothers, that many things are possible that we can't explain.

It took me many years before I realised that these experiences with my own grandparents are all aspects of shamanic practice. Communing with spirits, working with healing plants, singing (in ceremonies, prayers, and to the invisible world of spirits), and holding the intention of love for all that is.

The thirteen indigenous grandmothers incorporate all these healing practices, and more. My journey to them, my awareness of being compelled by something I couldn't name, has been lifelong.

It was only after my parents and I emigrated to Canada in 1966, that I began to connect with native people and to understand my affinity for spiritual beliefs and practices that were aligned with the natural world.

Propelled by an inner knowing that 'this is not all there is,' in the 1990's I met grandmother Sarah Smith, a Mohawk elder of the Turtle Clan, and keeper of the dreamtime spirituality.

I participated in a ceremonial circle she held to honour a woman who had died in prison. After the outdoor ceremony, she came around to hug each one of us. It was when I looked into her eyes that a new world opened up for me and I was drawn into it, knowing that it would lead me to what I needed.

I began to dream of grandmother teachers, and to find my way to reclaiming creativity as a healing practice, and to an understanding of the healing aspects of shamanism. I discovered intuitive painting, five-rhythms dance, and the art of dreaming awake.

Inspiring teachers came into my life, and one of them spoke of a circle of powerful women who were teachers and guides for dreamers, and those who walked the 'good red road' to power. The heart of their teachings was, she said, unconditional love.

Dreams began to manifest, culminating in 2010 with a dream of meeting the Tibetan grandmother, Tsering Dolma Gyaltong. I picked up a newspaper I didn't usually read, seeing an announcement that she was coming to a local Tibetan Buddhist meeting.

I met her and saw part of the film about the Thirteen Grandmothers. I knew that these were the teachers I had been searching for and I prayed to meet them in this reality, face to face.

The coming together of 13 indigenous grandmothers was foreseen in visions, dreams, and prophecies, heralding a time of transformation. A time of cataclysmic change not only for the earth, but for human consciousness

In the Hudson River valley of New York State, only three hours from bustling New York City, is a gem called The Omega Institute for Holistic Studies. It was here, in October 2010, that my dream of meeting the Thirteen Grandmothers came true.

I didn't know that hundreds of others have felt this call to meet them, it is a worldwide phenomenon of being called to serve and not knowing why or how. Just by being in their presence people are changed positively, becoming more conscious. That is what the Grandmothers do, they facilitate change and transformation on every level. They work in a non-linear experiential way that confounds the skeptic and the believer alike. Their appearance as innocuous amiable grannies is the perfect disguise for shamanic practitioners of the highest degree.

Top left: Yupik grandmother Rita Pikta Blumenstein drums and sings and (below) kisses a young Tibetan girl during a visit to Dharamsala



Right: smudge smoke swirls around the hands of a grandmother as she performs a ceremony

THE GRANDMOTHERS SPEAK

'When the Grandmothers from the four directions speak, the earth will heal.' These words from a Hopi prophecy foretell a time when a council of wise women elders would be vital to the world's continuance. That time is here.

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According to the Grandmothers, the changes are not only planetary, but cosmic. They are not doomsayers, nor fear-mongers, they are truth-tellers who enlighten.

Each draws upon her lineage, the wisdom of the ancestors; oral teachings that have been passed down only within that culture, until now. These chaotic and uncertain times are a prelude to a new way of living with all of Creation, that is focussed on unity, not division. It is referred to by the elders as a birthing process, with a difficult labour, which is our resistance to change.

As we bear witness to massive losses of species, forests and clean water, it is imperative that we stop, look, listen, and change course. Some say that it is already too late, that we've gone far beyond any hope of reclaiming earth-centred values and reverence for nature, but into this discord of chaos and fear comes the bell-like clarity of the voices of the Thirteen Grandmothers.



They do not advocate violent revolution, but peaceful awakening, an awareness of where our choices have led and will lead, if we refuse to change. They bring hope in dark times. The vision of a new dream of the world, and the luminous being that is being birthed within human consciousness.

The Thirteen Grandmothers are not what one typically associates with elderhood. They are vibrant presences, alert, powerful, and respected in their communities for their wisdom and gifts of healing.

There is a mystique around these women, a sense of being in the presence of almost archetypal energies. Face to face, they emanate a deep calm, like ancient mountains. Their eyes probe intensely, and you know that they see who you are, flaws and all. Nothing escapes their attention, they become mirrors of learning for all who go to meet them.

A MISTY WALK TO BREAKFAST

A Mohawk woman I walked with one morning had come to, as she put it, "release all the pain and anger I've carried for years."

She had been in the residential school system, not allowed to speak her language, and subject to the many abuses of spirit, mind and body, that frequently occurred in that setting.

"Good morning," I said. "Skona," she replied, "that is my language and it means peace."

I spoke of meeting Mohawk grandmother Sarah Smith, and how much I respected her, and as we talked, we realised that each of us had carried a great weight to this gathering, and that we were united, rather than different, in our sense of grief at past personal histories.

"The Grandmothers help us to release all that no longer serves us," I said, saying how I had felt my heart open on seeing them all enter the gathering around the fire, and the Mohawk woman I walked with agreed.

The 'grannies,' as they call themselves, are from many different cultures, each with its own language. They have all suffered in various ways, some through the ignorance of the dominant culture, some through exile from their homeland, some through torture, attempted genocide, the anguish of loss and the abyss of addictions.

Yet they are filled with loving compassion, it flows out of them like a river - everyone is touched by it; and, it was working on the two of us, the Mohawk woman and I as we walked to breakfast that day.

We all barricade ourselves against being hurt, and add to the larger wars 'out there' by keeping the small ones active within. That morning, as we walked, we both agreed that we were in some small way, changing that, and when we parted, something had shifted within us and we each put a hand

Below: the dining hall at the Omega Institute in NY



over our heart, no words necessary. Later on when we reconnected, she thanked me for my friendship. I realised that she had gifted me with a new concept of friendship. That it can mean simply walking with someone in the same direction, for a few minutes on a misty October morning, each opening their heart to the other, knowing that their paths may not cross again.

WOMEN OF POWER

That is the gift that the Grandmothers bring to all who gather around them. A feeling of unity in our shared humanity, not separation, to be in their presence is enough to heal the deepest divisions.

Their message is simple, 'love one another,' put aside self-importance and be of service; step out of self-pity and into the power of your dream, your unique gifts.

The Thirteen Grandmothers are all wounded healers, who have walked through their pain and emerged as powerfully gifted teachers, elders who know how to shift others out of victimhood, disease, and apathy. The Grandmothers belie that title, with its connotation of fragile little old ladies, they have more stamina (even though some of the women are in their 80's) than I had in my twenties.

Takelma elder Agnes Baker-Pilgrim zoomed around on her motorised scooter. She is 86, a bear-like presence, humourous and kind. She told us of the sacred salmon ceremony which she performed at Ti'lomikh, on the Rogue River in Oregon, near to where she lives.

The salmon season in 2010, not

only in the northwest US but Canada's west coast as well, was one of the most prolific ever.

Scientists had predicted a decline in the annual catch and a commission had been convened to look into that, and yet fishermen were reporting a record number of fish. According to the Vancouver Sun newspaper (August 25, 2010), 'the huge salmon run, ironically, comes during the \$15 million Cohen Commission of Inquiry into the disappearance of Fraser river sockeye.'

We all laughed when grandma Agnes told us of receiving a visit from representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service asking, "what have you been doing?"

She told them that she had spoken to the salmon people and asked them to come back, and that cleaning up the river system was what had been asked in return.

All things in nature have spirit, we were told, so everything listens. When we speak truth, and the intent behind our words is love and appreciation, the water, the earth, stones, trees, plants, animals, birds, receive that communication.

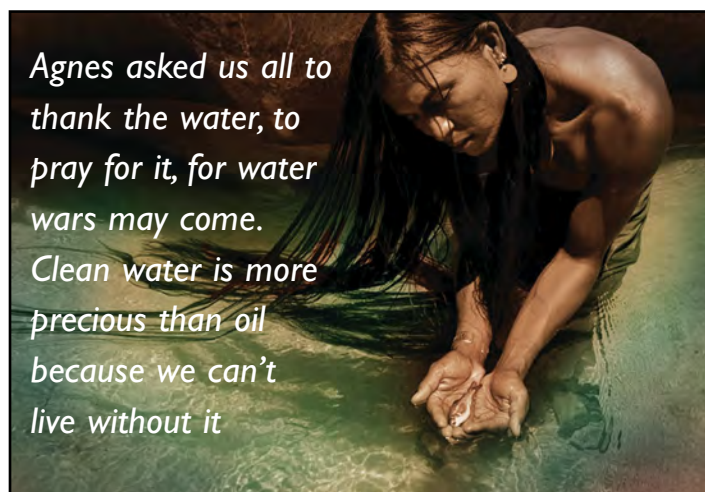
We live in relation to all other lifeforms, and to the spirit beings who live alongside us, say the Grandmothers. Elders of the indigenous peoples around the world have not lost touch with that view. Communication through prayer, singing, drumming, and blessing of the natural world, keeps us in right relationship with it.

Awareness of the spirit world



Agnes asked us all to thank the water, to pray for it, for water wars may come.

Clean water is more precious than oil because we can't live without it



Above: Diné (Navaho) man Rex Bizahaloni stands in the waters of the Colorado river which passes down the Grand Canyon - a sacred place to many Native American people

and how to positively interact with it, is also vital to our well-being and that of the planet. Shamanic cultures - and we all came from a shamanic culture originally - have always understood these connections. Each of the Grandmothers represents ancient teachings that they are now willing to share with everyone.

Agnes asked us all to thank the water, to pray for it, for water wars may come. Clean water is more precious than oil because we can't live without it. She said: "Know where your water comes from and what's in it. It's easy to go to a water source, a river, lake, ocean, and say a prayer of thanks. It's a way of giving back to the earth."

Reciprocity, balance, is the way of creating a viable future for all, understanding how everything is connected. All the Grandmothers encourage prayer and gratitude, communication with the world around us, and as Agnes told us a story of how her tribal

ancestors had transformed into dragonflies, suddenly many dragonflies flew among the gathering, landing on people, like blessings.

Flordemayo, a Mayan curandera, describing her origin as being "from Central America and the Pleiades," shared her vision of the shift in human consciousness. Her intensity and eloquence riveted the audience. She is a passionate speaker,



Takelma elder Agnes Baker-Pilgrim zoomed around on her motorised scooter. She is 86, a bear-like presence, humourous and kind

Grandmother Tsering, humble, graceful, without a shred of self-pity, encouraged us all to recite the Tara mantra as an effective protection against all harm

often emotional, as are all the Grandmothers when they are moved. She showed us that it's alright to express our feelings as they occur, helping us to understand the power of emotion when it moves into the words we speak and the prayers we make.

Words have power, the Grandmothers told us, adding we should be careful how we use them, as the intent behind words can harm, or bless.

Right: Tibetan grandmother Tsering Dolma Gyalton

Inset: a Tibetan statue of Green Tara (Dolma) the Saviouress

TENDING THE SACRED FIRE

During the time I spent with the Thirteen Grandmothers, each morning, noon, and evening, we would gather around the sacred fire which was tended twenty-four hours a day by John, the firekeeper, and his helpers.

At these times, one of the Grandmothers would pray in her traditional way. Margaret Behan, Red Spider Woman, (Arapaho-Cheyenne), prayed while standing on a bearskin, asking us to join with her chanting. She spoke of her awareness of the web of energetic connection between us all.

Grandmother Margaret works with the peyote plant and emphasised the importance of

working in a sacred way with all plant medicines; not treating them as recreational drugs, but approaching them with respect, as one would approach a great teacher.

Tibetan grandmother Tsering Dolma Gyalton, prayed indoors at an altar dedicated to the Buddhist goddess Tara (called Dolma in Tibet), and we recited the Tara mantra along with her.

Grandmother Tsering is humble, graceful, without a shred of self-

deities who work through her, blessing all present with water. Grandmother Maria works with the powerful healing plant, Santo Daime, also known as ayahuasca, and provides other plant medicines and her healing abilities, to her community deep in the Amazon rain forest. She told us of her experience of torture when she was a young woman, and how it had broken her open not in hatred, but into an awareness of compassion.



Mexican Mazatec grandmother Julieta Casimiro sang her prayers, then walked around blessing everyone with water on a spray of leaves.

Grandmother Julieta is the personification of humility, with a poignant child-like innocence in her singing, that breaks through any residual cynicism and doubt.

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Brazilian grandmother Maria Alice Campos Freire, created an altar of flowers and plants by the lake, singing with her exquisitely beautiful daughter songs of invocation and thanks to the

She laughed readily, even when standing in line at the ladies! I opened the door and there she was, this little powerhouse who is a respected curandera and works with the *niños*

Below: Yupik grandmother Rita Pikta Blumenstein prays by a sacred fire



When Nepalese grandmother Aama Bombo prayed, she spontaneously shifted into channeling the healing deities who work through her

santos, the holy children, which is what she calls the psilocybin (magic) mushrooms which help her in her healing work.

What was remarkable at this gathering is how approachable the Grandmothers were, even though no photographs or recording devices were permitted - as we were asked to respect the oral traditions through which the Grandmothers received their teachings, and to really listen, instead of writing it all down.

We were asked to become aware of deep listening, not only to words, but to nuances of meaning within them.

When Nepalese grandmother Aama Bombo (whose name means, 'Mother shaman'), prayed, she spontaneously shifted into channeling the healing deities who work through her. Kali, and Hanumanji, the monkey god, are significant deities in her healing work, as is the spirit of her father, who was a Nepalese shaman.

Resplendent in her peacock feather headdress and wearing ancient bells on leather straps around her body, she sat and played her shaman's drum and chanted. Deep in trance, she began to move, to shake. Watching as she morphed into a tiger-like big cat, stretching, rolling, growling as a huge tiger would, was spellbinding.

As she worked, two vultures circled overhead. Kali, like the vulture, devours darker energies, the dead places within, and protects her devotees. Kali is a beloved goddess, reflecting the complexity of the life-death-life cycle, dismembering all that is of the ego-identity, so that the true self shines through.

When the energy settled within her, and she became calm, grandmother Aama offered all present the healing ability that was coursing through her right then. Fifty or more stood in line. She used a fan which appeared to be made of hair, fanning it over people, and spoke in her own language.

One man who arched backwards in the chair, appeared to have been

struck unconscious, and Aama spoke to him in what sounded like English words saying, "heart! heart! open heart!" She usually speaks only in Nepalese and requires a translator. A murmur of apprehension moved down the line,



but no-one left. When I sat with her, I felt a surrendering of any fear and a trust of her, as she held me with her gaze. The hair fan felt heavy, almost like being physically struck, as if I was being admonished to let go of all my egocentric self-importance.

A purring sound came from her. She pulled me into her and I felt her working at the assemblage point at my back. My friend who was watching said that she had removed something from my back, and I had to admit that I felt lighter, as if a weight had gone.

Each Grandmother shared her ways of healing, her wisdom, and answered all questions.

The two Lakota grandmothers, sisters Rita and Beatrice Long Visitor



Holy Dance, received news of the death of a young relative. They allowed us all to witness their grief and how they honour the dead through prayer and ceremony, with their personal chanupa (sacred pipe), while seated on a buffalo hide.

Rita's son sang a mourning chant, and as we all focussed on the passing of the young man, a large hawk flew low over our heads, so everyone saw it. It flew into the West, which is considered by some native elders, to be the direction of death, transformation, and the sacred dream, signalling that our prayers had been taken to the spirit of the departed. Such occurrences were common, during the five-day gathering.

Above and left: Tamang grandmother Aama Bombo from Nepal

Below: His Holiness the Dalai Lama meets the Grandmothers on their visit to Dharamsala





Above: Across the generations - grandmother Rita greets and blesses a grandmother of the future

Hopi-Havasupai-Tewa grandmother Mona Polacca spoke of her Havasupai heritage, of the people of the blue-green waters who live in the Grand Canyon, and shared stories of her ancestors.

In a spontaneous very emotional talk, she spoke about Tibetan Grandmother Tsering, about how she had been forced to leave Tibet and walk at night through treacherous mountains with her young children and mother, leaving behind one of her children for fear of arousing the suspicion of the Chinese.

"Do you know who is standing here before you," grandmother Mona asked, inspiring us to see the courage and tenacity of her sister grandmother.

LOVE AND UNITY

What is so evident when watching

how the Grandmothers interact with one another, is how much they revere and love each other, across the divides of culture and language.

Near the end of the gathering we were each led to one of the Grandmothers to receive their blessing. We didn't know which grandmother it would be, and I found I had been led to Lakota grandmother Rita Long Visitor Holy Dance. Her home is in the Black Hills in South Dakota, the home of the Lakota. It is one of the poorest areas in the US, and the location of one of the most horrendous mass killings in history, Wounded Knee. Yet here I stood, a white person, receiving the blessing of a woman whose ancestors had been slaughtered by whites.

Even in their recent grief over the death of a family member, she and her sister Beatrice had made us all laugh whenever an infusion of energy was needed to lift us all - such was their generosity of spirit.

The Grandmothers do not discriminate about who receives their teachings, their blessings, or their powerful healings. Their example teaches us to work with whoever is in front of us, without prejudice and without blaming.

As I stood there, looking into the eyes of this dignified elder, all I could do was cry, not in sadness, but with great joy, as if she had unlocked that early memory of the unconditional love I had felt from my own grandmother, when I was just a newborn. As I felt the eagle feathers of grandmother's fan gently move over me, I knew what a blessing I was receiving. I felt humble and thankful.

I heard many people recount how moved they had been; how many there had experienced life-altering moments. The Mohawk woman I had talked to on the way to breakfast that misty morning a few days earlier, said how thankful she was to all the Grandmothers, and to all the people who had shown kindness to her and had said, "I'm sorry," when they had heard about her experiences.

We all returned home from that gathering with a sense that the message of peace that the Grandmothers are carrying around the world reaches deeply into everyone who meets them.

And I still marvel at the sheer physical energy of these 'grannies,' as after they had been with us some of them were travelling to Japan, to visit the ancestral home of another of the Grandmothers, Clara Shinobu Iura; while Grandmother Tsering was returning home to Toronto, to host the visit of the Dalai Llama there.

Their commitment to their calling to be messengers of hope, was, and still is humbling. Those fortunate enough to look into their eyes, see the possibility of a new world that is taking shape, where harmony is the key word.

When the Grandmothers speak, those who listen become messengers for them and their work, and it is an ever-widening circle of light.

Further Reading: 'Grandmothers Counsel the World: Women Elders Offer Their Vision For Our Planet,' by Carol Schaefer (Trumpeter Books, Boston, 2006)

www.grandmotherscouncil.org

Most of the photos in this article are by Marisol Villanueva, courtesy of The International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers. Sacred Hoop Magazine wishes to thank Laura Jackson for her help in obtaining them.

Suzanne Duce was born in Sheffield, England, but now lives in Burlington, Ontario, Canada. She paints, writes, and facilitates workshops on creativity and shamanic healing practices. After meeting Mohawk grandmother Sarah Smith in the 1990's, Suzanne began to dream of native grandmother teachers, which has led her to focus on the wisdom of the Thirteen Grandmothers. Suzanne practices the art of dreaming, and participates in the 'Circle of Dreamers' founded by the UK writer and dreamer Manda Scott. azensun@sympatico.ca

For details of the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies www.eomega.org

See the review of the film 'For The Next Seven Generations' about the work of the Thirteen Grandmothers in this issue of Sacred Hoop.



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