

Haudenosaunee Confederacy

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In anti-racism trainings when talking about cultural differences, I often lift up the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which has existed for a thousand years. Joined together by The Great Law of Peace, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy began with these original member nations: Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga Onondaga, and Seneca; the Tuscarora later joined in 1713.

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy has worked out accountability within its communities, making it integral to peaceful functioning for centuries. Inherent in The Great Law is an explicit acknowledgement of the power wielded by the people, and the potential for misuse of power by individuals and groups, leading to war and destruction. Thus The Great Law defines the inter-relationships of the nations, and is the foundation of law and justice among them. It spells out a system of checks-and-balances on power, clear lines of accountability, and ways to solve differences peacefully.

Fundamental to this system is leadership as a collective enterprise. While some individuals are empowered in specific leadership roles, the primary focus of decision making lies with various councils charged with regulating specific parts of the Confederacy's collective life. Also, these councils must answer to one another for decisions made and actions taken. For example, male delegates to the central council are chosen and advised by women's councils. Historically women's councils also held the final sway over decisions to use the military power of the Confederacy, and modify relationships with other tribes.

I am not the first person to have glimpsed the liberating power that accountability provides all members of the Confederacy, or to observe and admire its intelligence and sensibility. Ben Franklin was inspired by The Great Law to envision three branches of the federal government of the United States, each branch having checks-and-balances of power on one another. And the White women who started the Women's Suffrage Movement were inspired by their observations of the roles and position of Seneca women within both Seneca society and the larger Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

We can learn much from The Great Law about living peacefully with one another in relationships of accountability. A key component of anti-racist transformation is reshaping systems of accountability. Acknowledging the reality that

racism forces power to be misused by and within institutions means we must find ways to check-and-balance institutional power. That's where accountability comes in – making our institutions have “to answer” to constituencies that it never had to consider before. This is one of the important reasons why racial group caucusing is vital to transforming institutions. It provides a means “to answer” to People of Color.

The first lesson from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy is transparent decision making by collectives of people, rather than by individuals. The group process itself can serve as a way for individuals “to answer” to others who are impacted by leaders' decisions and actions. In our anti-racism work, the People of Color caucus helps shape and guide People of Color leaders and the White caucus serves the same role for White leaders. The People of Color caucus also provides accountability with an “answering to” place for the White caucus. The two caucuses check the system's default setting, which provides power and privilege to White people, and victimizes People of Color.

Ultimately as we do our work in caucus – whether it's the People of Color caucus or White caucus – we are sorting out as individuals how we wield power in our institutions, and how that is impacted by our racial identities. But even more importantly we are learning what it means to break the white institution's habit of relying solely on individual leaders, and our addiction to acting strictly as individuals within institutions. By caucusing we are learning to build collective strength and to act through the wisdom of the group in relationship to other groups in the institution.

This means we have “answer to” relationships across the institution, not just to the traditional power hierarchy of the institution. Thus caucusing is not “just another meeting” for anti-racism team members to attend, but rather an opportunity to implement new anti-racist institutional structures and practices – that are actually very ancient tried-and-true ways to carry out anti-oppressive community life. And when we caucus beyond our teams with others in our institution who share a power analysis of racism, we are building our institution's capacity for anti-racist, justice-making structures and practices by being accountable to People of Color. ❖

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