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## THE TREE OF PEACE: SYMBOLIC AND SPIRITUAL VALUES OF THE WHITE PINE

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**ABSTRACT.** The original meaning of the word "spirit" (i.e., breath or wind) suggests an experience in which one feels touched or moved by something that can be felt but cannot be seen or grasped. The experience of spirit is often depicted through the use of symbols. Symbolism allows a concrete object, such as a tree, to represent an experience that is intangible and hard to describe. Trees have been important spiritual symbols in many human cultures. Evergreens often symbolize immortality and eternal life because they retain their leaves throughout the winter. To the Iroquois people, the white pine is a symbol of the Great Peace that united their separate nations into an enduring League. The Peace Tree is related to the Tree of Light, a central symbol in Iroquois cosmology. Similar mythological trees are found in European traditions, including the Norse World Tree and the medieval Christian Tree of Life. The World Tree symbolizes the unity of all life, and the struggle of order and growth against chaos and disintegration. The white pine is thus linked to one of the most universal spiritual symbols of the human species.

### INTRODUCTION

I spent 11 years in classrooms and laboratories at the University of Arizona, learning how to do science. As an undergraduate, I learned the basics of physics, chemistry, and biology. As a graduate student I went more deeply into the social sciences, especially psychology and economics. I learned how to design experiments, how to collect data, and how to perform statistical analyses. But I did not learn anything that can help me now in speaking about the spiritual values of the white pine. When it comes to spiritual values, science seems to have a major blind spot.

Fortunately, while I was in school I didn't spend all of my time attending lectures and labs. I spent a lot of time walking through the mountains, canyons, and deserts of southern Arizona. I did a lot of reading beyond the textbooks and articles required in class, and I joined an informal workshop with a group of local poets. That was the beginning of a different kind of education, one that has perhaps prepared me better for speaking on the topic of spiritual values.

What is spiritual value? How can we talk about the spiritual value of a species of tree, such as the white pine? According to the dictionary, the word "spiritual" means "relating to or having the nature of spirit". But "spirit" itself is a difficult word to define in any precise way (Jung 1958). My dictionary lists 14 different meanings of "spirit", ranging from "a supernatural being" to "an alcoholic beverage". Clearly, there is a lot of opportunity for misunderstanding and confusion in using this word.

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## THE EXPERIENCE OF SPIRIT

When I talk about spirit, I am not referring to supernatural beings or metaphysical essences. Rather, I am speaking about a certain kind of experience that people have. In many ancient languages, the word for spirit is the same as the word for wind or breath, and this gives a clue as to what the experience of spirit is like. The wind is invisible. You cannot see it or take hold of it, but you can feel it and be moved by it. So an experience of spirit is one in which a person feels touched or moved by something that they can feel but cannot see or grasp. It is a very intuitive and emotional kind of experience, in which a person may feel caught up and carried along by a feeling, an idea, or a creative impulse.

The experience of spirit can be evoked in many ways. People often associate the word "spirit" with religion, and many people experience spirit in religious rituals and disciplines. But the experience of spirit can also occur in the absence of any religious belief or practice. Some people experience spirit in creative processes such as art and music. Still others find this kind of experience through falling in love, or through being a part of their family or their community. And many people experience spirit through contact with forests and other natural environments.

Like the wind, the experience of spirit can vary in intensity from a barely perceptible stirring to a powerful storm. At its gentlest, we are hardly aware it is there. At its strongest, it can whirl us around and turn our lives upside down. And like the wind, the experience of spirit is unpredictable. We can never be exactly sure where, when, or how it will arise.

Although it is difficult to define and predict, the experience of spirit is not rare or exotic. In fact, some psychologists have concluded that spiritual experience in one form or another is a normal function of the human mind and an essential factor in health and well-being. Through the experience of spirit, a person may come to feel deeply connected or related to a reality that is greater (or at least other) than they are, and that gives a strong sense of meaning or purpose to their life.

## SYMBOLISM AND SPIRIT

The experience of spirit is difficult to talk about in precise scientific terms. It arises from an unconscious, intuitive level of the mind and may be very difficult to express in words. There is something mysterious about the experience that seems to elude rational definition and analysis. For that reason, the experience of spirit is more often expressed in the symbolic language of art and poetry than in the literal language of science.

A symbol is a word or an image that stands for something other than itself. Symbolism allows a concrete object, such as a tree or an animal, to represent an idea or an experience that is intangible, indefinite, or only vaguely understood. The human imagination has a natural capacity for forming symbols. When we dream, our minds spontaneously create symbolic images and stories about the things that concern us as individuals. Similarly, myths and religions use symbols to express the basic issues and questions of a whole culture. The symbols in dreams and myths point to things within or beyond ourselves that may not be consciously understood, but that have tremendous importance for our sense of who we are and how we relate to the world (Jung 1964). These symbols speak directly to the intuitive level of the mind, and can evoke strong feelings of awe, wonder, and fear. It is not surprising, then, that symbolism and the experience of spirit are closely linked.

## TREES AS SYMBOLS

Much has been written about the symbolism of trees. Trees and forests have been important in the mythology and religions of many cultures. Trees have been used to symbolize fundamental values and beliefs relating to life, growth, health, fertility, regeneration, wisdom, enlightenment, strength, and steadfastness. With its many branches and leaves, all originating from a single stem, a tree is a natural symbol for the unity that underlies the diversity of living things. (Eliade 1959, Karas 1991).

Evergreens, in particular, have come to symbolize immortality and eternal life, because they retain their leaves and their appearance of life in the winter, when other trees are barren and appear to have died. To ancient people, this made it seem that the power of life was stronger in evergreens than in deciduous trees. In ancient Europe an evergreen tree was placed inside the house at the winter solstice - the longest night of the year - as a sign of hope and a reminder of the continuity of life through the darkness of winter. This custom is preserved today in the form of the Christmas tree (Karas 1991).

Large ancient trees have been especially important as symbols in many religious and spiritual traditions, probably because they so effectively evoke the experience of awe. To appreciate this, it is not enough to read lists of symbolic meanings in scholarly books. You have to go outdoors, stand under the trees, and experience them firsthand. Even scientifically trained people are apt to experience something of spirit when entering a grove of very large trees. In reference to the giant sequoia, Harlowe and Harrar's (1958) textbook of dendrology says, "... a feeling of reverence comes over one upon entering a grove of these patriarchs whose gigantic red trunks are like the supports of some vast outdoor cathedral (p. 202)." John Muir (1989) was similarly impressed with the sugar pine: "In approaching it, we feel as if in the presence of a superior being, and begin to walk with a light step, holding our breath (p. 123)."

The eastern white pine, the largest conifer in the northeastern part of our continent, can evoke a similar feeling. Earlier this year, I visited some of the last remnants of virgin white pine in the Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania. The oldest of these trees approach 400 years in age and 200 feet in height. At first glance, they look strangely out of proportion. Their diameter appears too small for their great height, and it seems remarkable that anything so tall and slender can remain upright. The tops of the largest trees float in the air, far above their smaller neighbors. At eye level, the largest trees are 3 to 4 feet in diameter. From this modest base, the trunk seems to shoot into the sky like a giant rope, gently curving as it rises. A tree this tall seems to inhabit two worlds. The roots and the base are close at hand, solid and tangible. But the top of the tree is adrift in the sky, ethereal and beyond reach. It is easy to see why trees such as these have been viewed in many cultures as a link between earthly life and the realm of the divine.

## THE TREE OF PEACE

The white pine plays an important role in the history and traditions of the Haudenosaunee, the Iroquois people who once occupied most of New York State and part of Pennsylvania. In the mid 1400's, the Seneca, the Oneida, the Cayuga, the Onondaga, and the Mohawk nations were engaged in constant wars and bloody feuds among themselves. According to Iroquois tradition, a man known as the Peacemaker came from the north shore of Lake Ontario and traveled among these five nations. He convinced them to stop their fighting and to form a League that for many years dominated the northeastern part of North America. The story of the founding of the Iroquois League is described in Paul Wallace's (1986) book The White Roots of Peace (originally published in 1946).

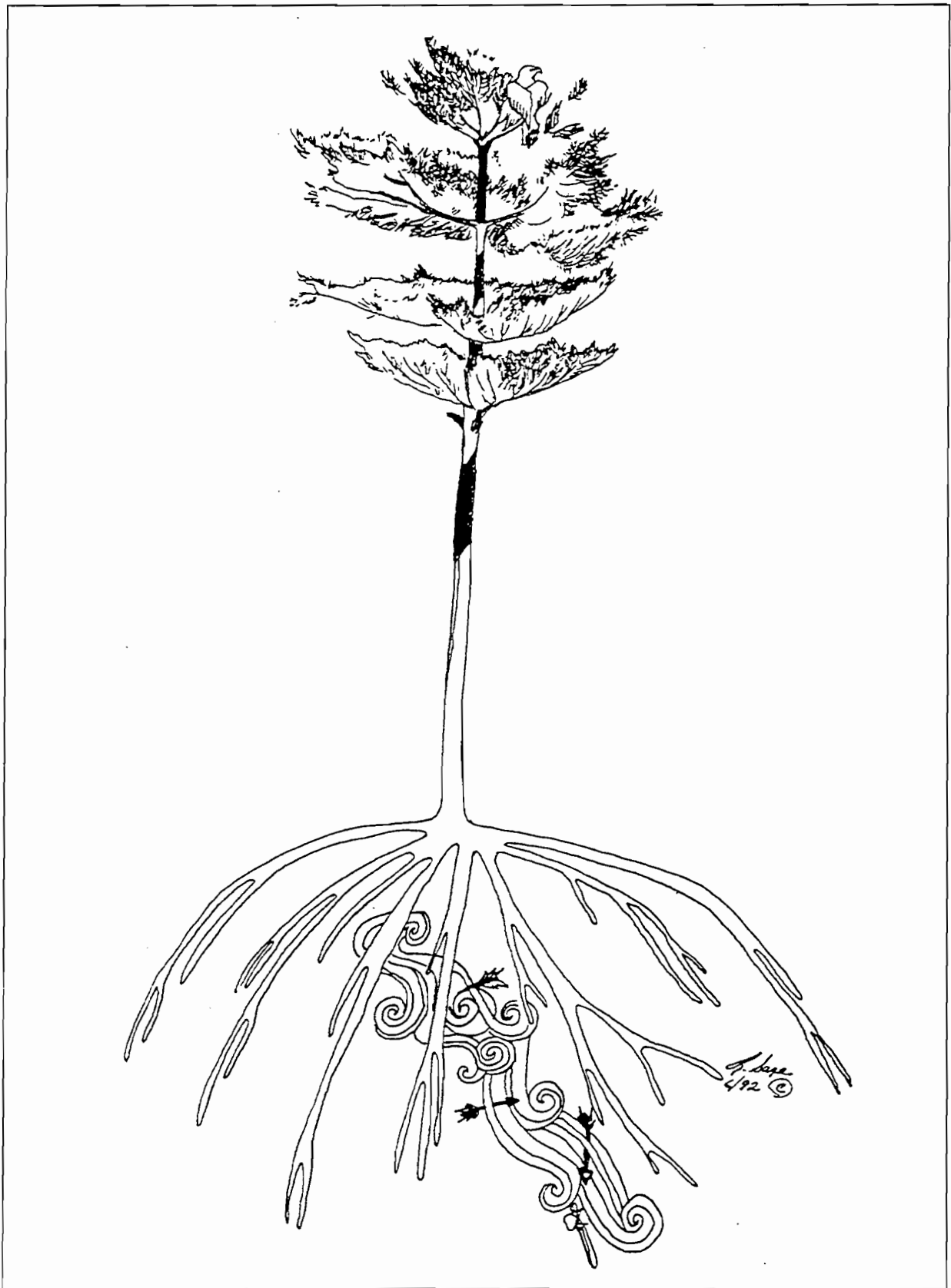


Figure 1. The Iroquois Peace Tree.

At the council which established the League of the Iroquois, the Peacemaker declared that he had planted a white pine, which he called the Tree of the Great Peace (Figure 1). Beneath the shade of the Tree of Peace, the leaders of the five nations would sit to conduct the affairs of the League. The Peacemaker told the lords of the five nations that the Peace Tree had sent out great white roots in all directions, to bring the Peace into the territories of nations beyond the original five. The white roots of peace would guide other nations back to the tree, where they would be welcomed into the League. An eagle kept watch from the top of the Peace Tree, and if any evil approached the League, it would scream to give the alarm. Then, according to the tradition, the Peacemaker uprooted the Peace Tree and exposed a cavern, through which a river ran down into unknown regions under the earth. He cast the weapons of war, the hatchets and war clubs that had divided the five nations, into the river. Then he replaced the Tree and declared that the Great Peace had been established.

The union of the Iroquois tribes was a carefully thought out political system, which preserved the diversity of the separate nations while providing the strength and security of union. According to Wallace (1986) The Peace Tree symbolized the law that governed the League of the Iroquois. Its branches represented shelter and protection in unity under the law; its roots represented the extension of law and peace to all nations; and the eagle represented watchfulness in the defense of peace. These vivid symbols "seized the imagination and so gave both interpretation and example a power to drive the human will (Wallace 1986, p. 4)."

For the Iroquois, Peace and Law were one and the same. Peace was not an abstraction, but a way of life, embodied in social institutions. The white pine became the symbol of Peace, both as an institution of government and as a way of life. The League itself was named the Great Peace, and was sacred. After years of bloodshed, Peace was a gift from the Creator, brought to earth by the Peacemaker. The towering white pine, which "pierces the sky" and "reaches the sun", was a natural symbol for this sacred gift of Peace (Wallace 1986, p. 8).

### THE TREE OF LIGHT

Symbolic trees, such as the Peace Tree, are prominent in many aspects of Iroquois tradition, ritual, and art. Tree symbolism is perhaps more fully developed in this region than anywhere else in North America (Bierhorst 1985). The Seneca creation myth tells of a celestial tree that grew in a world above the sky. A luminous blossom at the top of the tree gave light to the sky world, and its fruit fed the beings who lived there. The tree was supported by great white roots that extended out in the four directions. The chief of the upper world one day became angry at his wife because he thought she had deceived him. He uprooted the celestial tree and pushed his wife through the hole left by the roots. She fell into the world below, which at that time was entirely covered with water (Parker 1989).

The animals of the lower world created a place for the Sky-woman to live, by placing dirt on the back of a turtle. The turtle grew larger and larger, and in this way the earth was created. The creation of the world was completed by the Sky-Woman's eldest grandson, who is called Good-Mind. He traveled around the earth, creating the plants and animals. His brother, Evil-Mind, followed him and tried to undo the good things that Good-Mind had created.

In the version of the creation story told by Parker (1989), a root of the celestial tree was planted at the center of the newly formed earth. From this root grew the Tree of Light, so called because an orb at its top illuminated the earth before the sun was made. Good-Mind and Evil-Mind struggled against each

other, and in their fighting Evil-Mind injured the Tree of Light, whose branches had supplied them with food. After this, Good-Mind overpowered Evil-Mind and imprisoned him in a cave.

Iroquois mythology and art sometimes depict the Tree of Light as a flowering tree, with the light coming from its blossoms (Parker 1989). Other traditions, however, seem to associate the Tree of Light with the pine. For example, in the tradition of the Peace Tree, the white pine is referred to as the "Tree of the Long Leaves", and Parker (1989) notes that the Tree of Light in Iroquois art was generally depicted with long, sword-like leaves.

The Tree of Light at the center of the world is important in Iroquois ceremonial rites. The top branches of this Tree touch or pierce the sky and its roots run down to the waters of the underworld. Because it connects the earth and the sky, the Tree at the center of the world is a source of great power. This Tree is guarded by an invisible giant, who fills his turtle-shell rattle with the power of the earth and the sky by rubbing it against the trunk of the Tree. The members of the Iroquois False Face Society imitate this act in their healing rituals by rubbing their rattles against pine tree trunks (Parker 1989).

The role of the pine tree as a link between the earth and the sky also appears in the Iroquois legend of the star dancers. In this story, seven dancing brothers were lifted into the sky to become stars. Their mother saw them leaving the earth and began to cry. One of the star dancers heard her voice and looked back. In so doing, he fell down from the sky and into the earth. From the place where he entered the earth a towering pine tree grew up, pointing toward the other brothers in the sky (Karas 1991). According to Bierhorst (1985), the Iroquois associated pine trees with starlight, because of the latent fire in pitchwood. In Huron embroidery, the topmost flower of an emblematic tree is called a "star", and Parker (1989) regards this as a reference to the Tree of Light.<sup>2</sup>

The white pine as the Peace Tree is more than just a convenient symbol for a political system. The Peace Tree reflects the mythic image of the Tree of Light, which stands at the center of the world and connects the earth with the sky. Thus the story of the founding of the Iroquois League reflects the creation and the unity of the universe itself, and this reinforces the sacred nature of the Great Peace.

### THE WORLD TREE

As a child, I lived in New York State, near where the Genesee River flows into Lake Ontario. The countryside where I played was once the home of the People of the Great Hill - the Seneca nation. The tradition of the Peace Tree grew from the land that I call my home, but by the time I was born there were no more great white pines there. My roots in that land are shallow compared to the Haudenosaunee who lived there and planted the Tree of Peace among themselves.

My family's roots go back to central and northern Europe. My great-grandfather moved to New York State from Germany in the middle 1800's. The ancient spiritual traditions and myths of his homeland had been swept away centuries before, but some record of them was kept in the writings of the Roman conquerors and Christian missionaries. The best preserved of the northern European traditions are found in the Norse myths, which were among the last to be replaced by Christianity.

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<sup>2</sup>It is an interesting coincidence that Henry David Thoreau, in his famous essay "Walking", compares a flower at the top of a white pine tree to a star. Thoreau climbed to the top of the pine and found "on the ends of the topmost branches only, a few minute and delicate red cone-like blossoms, the fertile flower of the white pine looking heavenward." He carried the topmost spire of the tree to the village and when he showed it to the people there, "not one had ever seen the like before, but they wondered as at a star dropped down (Thoreau 1981, p. 412)."

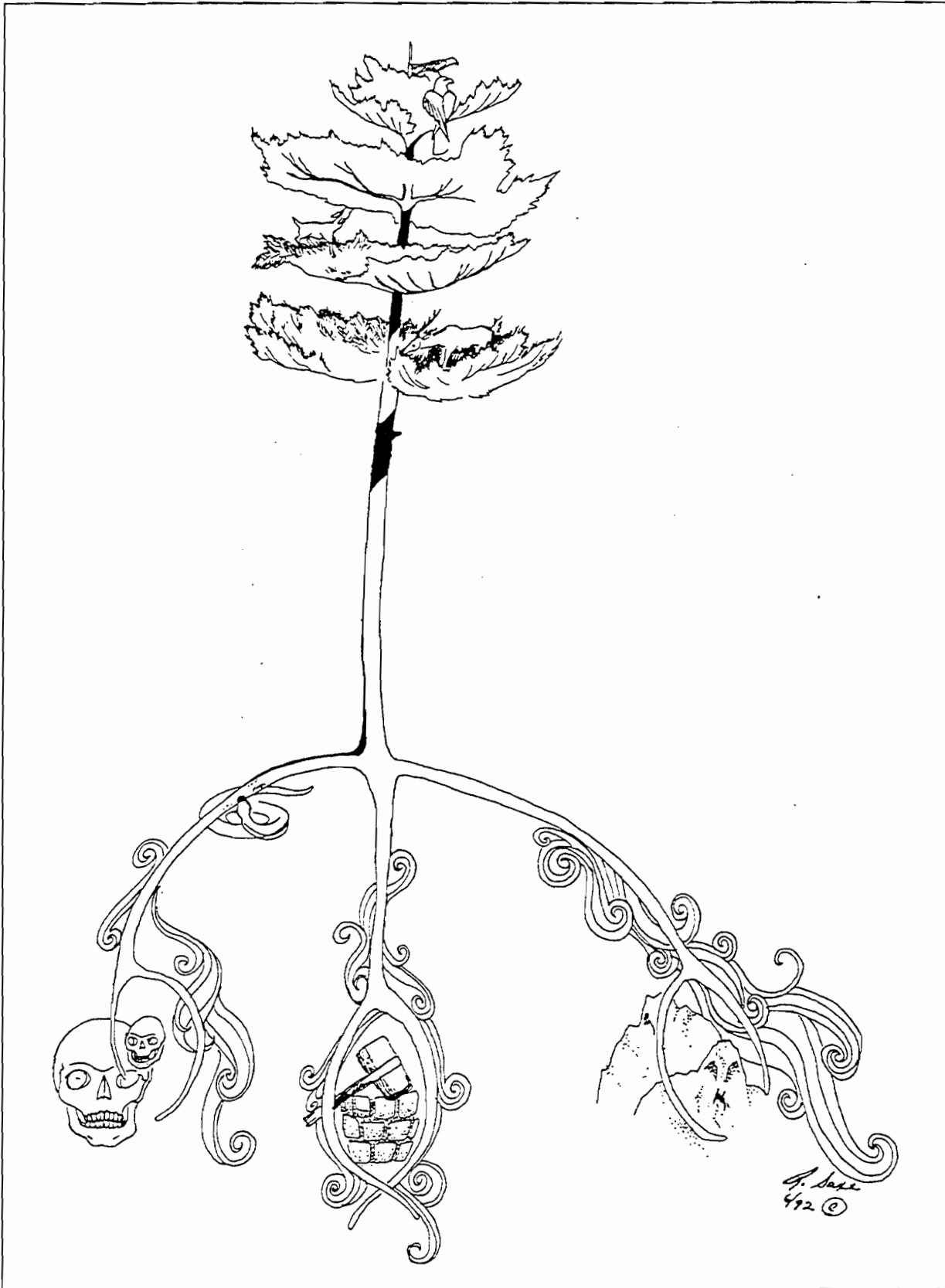


Figure 2. Yggdrasil, the Norse World Tree.



Like the Iroquois, the Norse traditions tell of a tree at the center of the world (Figure 2). According to these myths, the giant tree named Yggdrasill existed before the world was made, and will survive beyond the end of the world. Yggdrasill is generally considered to be an ash tree, although in solstice rituals it is often represented by an evergreen. It is so huge that its branches stretch out over heaven and earth. It has three great roots, which link together the worlds of the Norse cosmos. One root extends into the realm of the gods, one into the realm of the giants, and one into the realm of the dead. Springs of water with special powers are found at each of the roots. On the highest branch of Yggdrasill sits an eagle, and on the brow of the eagle perches a hawk, keeping watch over the world. A cock in the top of the tree will crow to warn the gods when their realm is under attack (Davidson 1964, Karas 1991, Jordan-Smith 1989).

The tree Yggdrasill has the power of healing and is a source of life for the world. The fruits of the tree feed the gods and according to one myth are supposed to aid women in childbirth. But the tree is also continually threatened. Deer and goats leap among the branches, devouring the leaves and shoots. A great serpent lies beneath Yggdrasill and gnaws at one of the roots, trying to destroy the tree. The eagle at the top of the tree and the serpent beneath the tree are constantly at war. A squirrel runs up and down the tree carrying insults from one to the other (Davidson 1964, Jordan-Smith 1989).

The Iroquois Peace Tree and the Norse Yggdrasil stories contain many elements that are remarkably similar -- roots that reach out to link separate worlds or nations, vigilant birds in the top of the tree; and flowing water associated with the roots. Both stories are examples of a myth-pattern that occurs in many places around the world. Many cultures believed that there was a tree at the center of the world, which connected the world of human beings with spirit worlds that lay above and below the earth (Eliade 1976). This mythical tree, called the World Tree or the Tree of Life, can be interpreted as symbolizing the principle of order, life, and growth; and the unity and interrelatedness of all things in the universe. Order and unity are constantly threatened by the forces of disintegration and chaos, symbolized in the Norse tradition by the serpent that tries to destroy the tree. In the Iroquois traditions similar forces of strife and disunity are represented by the weapons cast into the subterranean river beneath the Peace Tree, as well as by the evil brother who is imprisoned in the cave after he damages the Tree of Light.

Similar themes can be found in Hebrew and Christian stories of the tree of life, which grew in the garden of Eden and later became identified with the cross of Jesus. The Hebrews probably thought of the Tree of Life as a pine, because their story of Eden was drawn from Indian and Babylonian traditions about a sacred pine (Karas 1991). In the medieval European Legend of the True Cross, Adam's son Seth returns to Eden. There he sees the Tree of Life, a magnificent evergreen tree standing before a fountain that gushes forth in four streams. A great serpent coils around the base of the tree, scorching the bark with its breath and devouring its leaves. Beneath the tree is the pit leading to Hell. The branches of the tree reach up to heaven, and are covered with green leaves, flowers, and fruit. At the top of the tree a radiant woman holds a small baby who glows like the sun and is encircled by seven doves (Karas 1991). In this image of the Tree of Life we see several elements that are similar to the Iroquois Tree of Light and the Norse Yggdrasil -- in particular the light at the top of the tree; and the flowing water, the cave, and the devouring serpent at the roots.

These similarities show that the World tree is a truly universal symbol. The symbol of the white pine as the Peace Tree is thus linked to one of the most fundamental myths of the human species, a myth that represents the underlying unity of all living things, and the struggle of light and order against darkness and chaos.

## THE PEACE TREE TODAY

The League of the Iroquois flourished in the northeast of this continent for almost three centuries. In the early 1700's, the original five nations were joined by the Tuscarora, to make six. The Six Nations lost most of their lands during and after the Revolutionary War, but the tradition of the Peace Tree survived, and the founding of the Iroquois League is still celebrated today. Along with the Turtle on whose back the earth rests, the Peace Tree is a principal emblem of the modern Iroquois Nation (Bierhorst 1985), and appears frequently in contemporary Iroquois art. Paul Wallace's 1946 book on the Peace Tree was recently republished, with a new prologue and epilogue highlighting the struggle of contemporary Native Americans for sovereignty and protection of their treaty rights.

Ironically, even as the Six Nations were being forced from their lands, the Tree of Peace and the political system it stood for served as an inspiration for the newly forming union of English colonies. A resolution of Congress passed on September 16, 1987 acknowledges that the United States constitution was explicitly modeled after the Iroquois confederation.

The Iroquois once hoped that their Great Peace would extend to include all the nations of the world (Wallace 1986). Today, the Peace Tree might once again serve as a symbol for the hope of world peace. Enos Mills, a government lecturer on forestry under Teddy Roosevelt could have been speaking about the Peace Tree when he said,

Enter the forest and the boundaries of nations are forgotten. It may be that some time an immortal pine will be the flag of a united and peaceful world (quoted by Becknell 1991, p. 68).

Paul Wallace begins and ends the original 1946 edition of his book about the Iroquois Nations by drawing a parallel between the founding of the Iroquois confederation and the establishment of the United Nations. We must recognize, however, in this 500th year after the voyage of Columbus, that if we desire peace with other nations then we must also honor the sovereignty and treaty rights of the native nations on our own continent, as they struggle to preserve their languages, traditions, and lands.

## CONCLUSIONS

Resource managers understand very well the economic and environmental importance of trees such as the white pine, but they often do not seem to grasp the cultural and symbolic significance of trees and the traditions that surround them. The Tree at the Center of the World is a symbol that is rooted deeply in the human imagination. The Iroquois traditions of the Peace Tree and the Tree of Light, as well as the European myths of the World Tree, express an experience of wonder at the beauty and diversity of living things, and an intuition of the unity that lies beneath that diversity.

Symbolic stories and images, such as the Peace Tree, can help to channel the spiritual and emotional energy of the human mind in positive directions. In the book Black Elk Speaks, an Oglala holy man describes a vision of a Sacred Tree that he had as a child:

Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. ... And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father (Neihardt 1932, p. 43).

Like the Peace Tree of the Iroquois, Black Elk's Sacred Tree is a symbol of unity and peace among the people of many nations. This Sacred Tree has been adopted as the central symbol in a modern educational program developed by a Native American inter-tribal group to teach spiritual values and combat addiction among indigenous peoples of the world (Four Worlds Development Project 1984).

We should not underestimate the emotional power of this kind of symbolism and its ability to motivate and inspire people. In our scientific and technological culture we too easily forget that the connections between humans and the natural world involve more than just physics and biology. The human mind and heart evolved out of the natural world, just as did the human body. The emotional, symbolic, and spiritual connections between people and trees are therefore just as real and just as important as the physical and biological links. If we treat the white pine as simply an object or a commodity to be managed for economic and environmental benefit, then we miss what may be its most important contribution to the ecological community of the earth -- a symbol of the unity of life, and an image of peace which the world so desperately needs.

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