

❖ Seeds of Wisdom: Keepers of Life on Earth ❖

The Corn Spirit

(Tuscarora—Eastern Woodland)

Long ago, they say, there was a village of people whose cornfields were blessed with good harvests, year after year. They had so much corn each year that they began to take it for granted. They stopped weeding the fields and the children trampled the cornstalks as they played. When harvest time came, the people picked, but they did not do it well. Much of the corn was left unpicked and only the birds ate it. The people wasted more than they ate. They threw ears of corn to their dogs. As they had always done, they dried some of the corn to eat in the winter and use for seed corn the next spring. They placed this corn in storage baskets to bury for the winter, but they did everything carelessly. The corn baskets were not well made. The storage holes were not dug deeply or well covered.

“There is much game in the forest,” the people said. “We can always hunt to survive, even if the stored corn spoils.”

So the people went on without showing respect for the corn that gave them life. They even forgot to say thanks to the Creator for their good fortune.

Only one man remembered to show respect. His name was Dayohagwenda. Dayohagwenda cared for his fields and weeded them. He harvested his corn carefully and gave thanks for his good harvest. He stored his corn with great care. He was sad about the way the others acted.

That autumn, after the harvest moon, the people went hunting. But the hunters had bad luck. Animals were hard to find. It seemed that the deer and moose and even the rabbits had all disappeared from the forest. The people tried to fish, but the streams and lakes were empty. Finally, the people dug up their stored corn. But the poorly made baskets had fallen apart. Much of the corn had been eaten by mice. The rest had rotted away.

“What shall we do?” the people said. “We will starve.”

Meanwhile, Dayohagwenda was walking in the forest. He was thinking about the way his people no longer showed respect for the corn or gave thanks. As he walked, he found an old trail. It led to a clearing in the forest. In that clearing was a lodge made of elm bark and built on top of a mound of earth. Weeds grew all around the lodge. In front of the lodge, an old man dressed in torn clothing sat weeping.

“Grandfather,” Dayohagwenda said, “why are you weeping?”

“I am weeping because your people have forgotten me.”

“Why are your clothes torn?”

“They are torn because your people threw me to their dogs.”

“Why are you so dirty?”

“I am dirty because your people let their children trample me.”

“Why are there weeds around your lodge?”

“Your people no longer take care of me. Now I must go away and I can never return again to help them.”

Now Dayohagwenda knew who the old man was. He was Corn Spirit.

“Grandfather,” Dayohagwenda said, “do not leave us. I still respect you. I will go back and remind my people how to treat you.”

The old man stopped weeping. “Grandson,” he said, “I will stay with *you*. If your people show me respect, I will not leave them.”

Dayohagwenda went back to the village.

“We are going to starve,” the people said. “Our corn is gone and we have no other food.”

“Listen,” said Dayohagwenda, “I have been in the forest. There I found a lodge surrounded by weeds and an old man wearing torn clothing the color of cornhusks. He said his people deserted him and he was going to leave forever.”

The people understood. “It is Corn Spirit,” they said. “He has left us and now we will surely die.”

“No,” said Dayohagwenda, “I spoke with Corn Spirit. I told him we would treat him with respect. He said that if we respect him, he will help us through the winter.”

Then Dayohagwenda dug up his own stored corn. His baskets had been well made. He had dug his granary deep and covered it properly. All of his harvest was there. There was more than he had remembered storing, much more. There was enough to feed the whole village through the winter. There was even enough left to use as seed corn for planting in the spring when the leaves of the maple tree were the size of a squirrel’s ear.

From then on, Dayohagwenda’s people always showed respect for the corn. They planted with care and hoed and weeded. They sang songs of thanksgiving as they harvested. They made strong baskets and deep storage pits for their granaries. Most of all, they remembered to give thanks for the blessing of corn and all of the other good things they had been given. They taught their children and their children’s children to do the same. So it is to this day.

Stories are the living legacy of a people by which the wisdom of the ages is passed to each new generation. The germ of the seed corn in “The Corn Spirit” contains the genetic memory of countless generations, which ensures that the nascent plants possess the traits needed to survive; in the same way, a story is part of the cumulative, collected wisdom of the ancestors that teaches each new generation how to live in balance. In these tenuous times, when the survival of Earth and humankind is being pushed to the brink, we need to visit the storehouse of oral tradition, to retrieve and cultivate the ancient seeds of wisdom contained in the stories of Native North Americans and to combine these lessons with the knowledge of ecological science.

The traditional Native North American relationship with nature is one of dynamic balance, of sacred respect and

worship, of practical give-and-take in response to changes in population levels and habitat conditions. Survival exists along a continuum between the spiritual and the pragmatic. The Native way of conservation “has worked longer than any modern conservation programs.”¹

Mother Earth hears the call; she awakes; she arises; she feels the breath of the new born Dawn. The leaves and the grass stir ... all things move with the breath of the new day; everywhere life is renewed. This is very mysterious; we are speaking of something very sacred, although it happens every day.²

—The Kurahus, *Hako, Birth of Dawn*
Paunee