

# The Land Waits

by **Liseli Haines**

## Mohawk Valley Meeting

I have a Haudenosaunee friend in Ontario who lives on Six Nations Reserve. He talks about the land near the river as the land he takes care of. He never talks about it as the land he owns. I began to wonder, do I own this land here, in what is now New York State?

From time immemorial it was the land of the Oneida of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. A part of their seasonal livelihood, it was used for hunting, fishing, farming, ceremony and carrying on their lives. In 1794 George Washington and the Haudenosaunee made the treaty of Canandaigua and the Oneida were granted federal protection to 300,000 acres of what had originally been more than 6,000,000 acres. By the time I moved to the area only 32 acres was left. Many Oneida had been encouraged, by settler pressure, to move on to Wisconsin, some to what is now Ontario. So many people leaving this land where their ancestors were buried and where they had sunk their feet into the earth for thousands of years.

And then my mother lived here. She would say she owned the land, having bought it from the previous owner. And when she died, I inherited it, this beautiful land of rolling hills and streams, now dotted with farms, pastures and woodlots. But I didn't feel as if it really belonged to me. There was something else that needed to be done. It took me years to figure out what that was.

When I heard a Tuscarora man at a panel I attended say, "If you have 40 acres you don't know what to do with, you can give it back" my heart jumped. I could give it back! I could give it back to the Oneida. But that was more complicated than I first realized. The Oneida Nation is not unified in one place with one government. It is divided by geography, and by internal politics. I did not know any Oneida. The land waited.

Then, at Fall Gathering 2018, I heard an Oneida woman speak about the indigenous women's responsibility for the land. She spoke about a group of Traditional Oneida women from their territories in what is now New York, Wisconsin and Ontario who had started to meet together for the first time in two hundred years; building friendships, renewing traditions, and longing together for a piece of land in their homeland. A place where they could plant traditional plants and medicines and hold ceremony. Again, my heart jumped. Was this it?

Over the next eight months, we met together, talked, ate food, got to know each other. I met her sister, her mother and her auntie. The details were complicated, but the desire was there on both sides. We stood on the land and these women sang to the Land in the Oneida language. And the land

answered with a wind that came across the field. I was awed and wondered how long it had been since the Land had heard that song. And I was glad.

And it came to be. We had a celebration at the Quaker Meeting House, which adjoins the Land. There were women there from the three Oneida communities, neighbors of the Land, Friends, dancers in regalia and much excitement. As is traditional it started with the Words That Come Before all Else. The words that open each gathering and are said to name what is important to us and bring us into agreement on those things before meeting together on other issues. The women created a feast of traditional Oneida foods and fed the people. They spoke what was on their hearts. There were tears and laughter and good food. And we went out into the rain and were led in a stomp dance on the Land, covering our feet and shoes with parts of the Land to take home.

Land everywhere was lived on and loved by Indigenous peoples. Finding out who they were and where they are now may take some time. But it can be done. And then starts the building of relationships, the slow process of getting to know other people and building the trust that had been shattered so long ago and continues to be shattered in daily life for Native Peoples. Learn about the Native Peoples where you live. Learn the history. Learn how to be an ally. Build relationships. Then think. Do you have 40 acres that you love? The land is waiting.

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