

Exploring Iroquois Culture in Joseph Bruchac's *Peacemaker*: A Framework for Ethical Decision-Making Rooted in Core Character Value

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Abstract

*Ethical decision-making is deeply intertwined with the foundational cultural values that articulate and embody core character virtues. These values find expression through moral and virtuous principles, shaped by social and cultural constructs, thereby guiding community behaviour. In the realm of environmental ethics, culture significantly influences the placement of the non-human world within various spectra, be it at the pinnacle, bottom, or as equals. Trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, and caring, the core character values, are intrinsically linked to where the non-human world stands in this context. Joseph Bruchac, a revered Native American author, revisits the historical genesis of the Iroquois confederacy, shedding light on the intricate relationship between the human and non-human worlds in his novel, *Peacemaker*. This paper delves into comprehending the Iroquois culture as a foundation for ethical decision-making, with a specific focus on core character values such as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, and caring.*

Keywords: Iroquois Culture, Ethical Decision-Making, Core Character Values, Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Caring.

Introduction

Richard Foster, one of the celebrated authors and theologians of the Native American tribe Ojibwa writes, "We find virtue in the purity of our intentions" (Foster 158). Be it virtues or vices, they reflect our deep rooted intentions. Human decision-making is fundamentally steered by individual ethical perspectives, shaping what one deems right or wrong. Cultural values form the bedrock intertwined with our choices, defining our core character. From these principles, individuals often rationalize their thoughts. In matters of environmental ethics, culture plays a pivotal role in shaping and defining the relationship with the natural world/ non-human world.

Whether following the Utilitarian principles advocated by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, adhering to Kantian notions of duty, embracing Aristotelian teleological virtue, or subscribing to the

Natural Law Theory proposed by Thomas Aquinas, each presents a distinctive ethical positioning/perspective. Certain cultures prioritize utilitarian principles over individual duty, while in others, duty is derived from natural or divine law. Cultural beliefs often dictate which ethical framework should be adopted, emphasizing the intricate connection between culture and ethical decision-making.

Exploring Iroquois Culture in Joseph Bruchac's Peacemaker: A Framework for Ethical Decision-Making Rooted in Core Character Value

Joseph Bruchac, in his novel *Peacemaker*, revisits the historical genesis of the Iroquois confederacy (People of the Longhouse) of the Five Nations namely Mohawks (People of the Flint), Oneidas (People of the Standing Stone), Onondagas (People of the Hills), Cayugas (People of the Great Swamp) and Senecas (People of the Great Hills).

Okwaho, the twelve year old narrator and protagonist of the novel seeks revenge for the abduction of his best friend Tawis, by the neighbouring tribal nation. The burning desire of revenge kept Okawaho awake and he could never sleep in peace. He wished that he was a grown man and could have helped his friend escape. The arrival of a messenger of peace -The Peacemaker, who, through his stories and tales promises a freedom from wars and succeeds in convincing the leaders of the five nations to give up their weapons and live in unison and peace, thus forming the great Iroquois confederacy.

Bruchac, through various legends, brings to life the culture and tradition of the people of the Longhouse. The lives of the people of the Longhouse are intricately weaved with the natural world. To them, the natural world is everything. Their identity is the amalgamation of the human world and the non-human world. Just to name a few, the people were named as 'At the Edge of the Sky', 'Clouds Forming', 'Sky Woman', 'Tall Bird', 'Wolf Woman', and 'Bird Flying'. In fact, Okawaho means 'The Wolf' in the language of the Mohawks. The language system and the usage of metaphors, which is an integral part of one's identity, were based on the flora and fauna. "The three of them were like kernels from the same ear of corn" (Bruchac 30), "I had to look at my arms to make sure I was not covered with the brown feathers like turkey buzzards" (Bruchac 31). This shows their close association with the natural world.

The people of the Longhouse followed a clan system which was named after the animal world symbolising the characteristics of the animal. "Our people were also given the clan system. Turtle, Bear, Wolf, for all of our Five Nations, as well as Snipe, Deer, Eel, Heron, Beaver, and Hawk for our Onondaga people" (Bruchac 46). This event exemplifies the profound harmony that the Longhouse community maintained with the natural world. Decision-making authority rested with the women, and tribal leaders consistently sought the counsel of clan mothers before making any decisions. Similar to the dynamics observed in the animal kingdom, women held significant power and authority within this culture. For, "people were reminded that the women are the ones from whom all life and all power comes" (Bruchac 46).

The ethical choices made by both the clan mothers and tribal chiefs centered on fundamental character values like trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, and compassion. These decisions were guided by the teachings passed down from their ancestors, who held a belief that the gods imparted the principles of life. Their moral guidance stemmed from the teachings and principles of the divine. Thomas Aquinas, the great philosopher and the propounder of the Natural Law Theory in his *Summa Theologica* urges that the commandments of God help humankind to see what is right and wrong. He delineates four categories of laws, beginning with the Eternal Law, described as God's comprehensive design-essentially the rational purpose existing within God's mind. When creation aligns with this design through reason, individuals become active participants in what

Aquinas terms the Natural Law. In cases where human beings struggled to adhere to the strictures of the Natural Law, they created more adaptable laws, termed by Aquinas as the Human Laws. Additionally, Aquinas introduces the Divine Law, which he defines as God's laws revealed to humanity through various revelations/manifestations of His unending grace. This unending grace is intended to aid humans in fulfilling divine purposes and plans.

The Eternal Law propounded by the people of Longhouse instructed them to respect the non-human world. As the people's entire sustenance relied on the natural world, it became their duty to safeguard and nurture it. The relationship between the human and non-human realms was characterized by mutual respect and trust. From a tender age, children were instilled with a sense of gratitude. They were taught to express thanks to the crops and animals for providing sustenance to humanity. "I thank this corn for giving its gift of life to us all" (Bruchac 78). When Okwaho goes fishing, he is gentle in handling the fish and the fish obliges. "It didn't struggle, as if it was showing its agreement to be their food, knowing that they would respect it" (Bruchac 7). Okwaho honours the catch by showing his gratitude to the fish when he says the ancient words "May your spirit continue to swim. Thank you for giving yourself to me" (Bruchac 7).

The natural world was always in communion with the human world. The flora and fauna often interacted with the human being. "His mother often told him to listen closely to everything around him. Sometimes a bird call or the sound of the wind in the trees might be telling you something" (Bruchac 102). To the people of Longhouse, the natural world would speak to the ones who cared to listen. When Okwaho goes into the forest to compose a song, he remembers what his mother had told him, "If you listen long enough and well enough, you can sometimes understand what the natural world around you is trying to say. It might be advice or perhaps a warning. You may even become one of those people, a real listener, one who understands almost everything the forest is saying (Bruchac 103).

The significance of birds to the people of Longhouse is paramount. To them, birds were messengers from the Divine and served as an inspiration for songs-which holds a special place in their traditions. When Okwaho is on the run from the captors and is in hiding, the Chickadee bird sings to him that the danger has passed. "'A-dee-dee-dee,' Okwaho sang back to the bird, whose song was a message that the danger was past. 'A-dee-dee-dee.' Chickadees were known to be friends of human beings, more so than any other bird" (Bruchac 15). Upon noticing a blue jay tattoo on Carries' face, Okwaho's curiosity piqued regarding its significance. His intrigue was satisfied when Carrie disclosed that he once bore a different name. Upon choosing to become the messenger of the Peacemaker, he adopted the name Carries, which suddenly made sense to Okwaho because, "Of all birds, it is always blue jay who first calls out to alert all to danger approaching" (Bruchac 86).

The people of the Longhouse respected the non-human world and treated them with diligence and respect. They believed that the non-human world was their kith and kin and they grew along with the human world. To them, the sun was their 'elder brother' and moon, their 'grandmother'. Thus, it was their duty to take care of the animals and vegetation- "to care for the Three Sisters-the Corn, the Beans and the Squash" (Bruchac 29).

The Almighty's gracious revelations and the sending of messengers gave the people of Longhouse traditions and ceremonies. In obedience to the Divine Law and as a sign of trustworthiness and gratitude, the people of Longhouse greeted all parts of the creation acknowledging the animals, birds, vegetation, the sun, the moon and stars by speaking the thanksgiving words

We greet and thank our Mother, the Earth, the one who gave birth to us and who cares for all life. We greet and thank the waters, the rivers and streams, the lakes, and the water that flows through our own bodies. We greet and thank the trees, especially the maple, who is the leader of all the trees and is the first to give us a harvest in the form of its sweet sap.

We greet and thank all of the plants that teach us and allow us to use their roots and stems, their leaves and flowers, as medicine.

We greet and thank the Three Sisters, those who sustain us by providing us with food, the Corn, the Beans, the Squash... (Bruchac 44)

Human deviation from the Natural Law results in harm to the non-human world, severing the once harmonious and communal bond shared with it. Decisions guided by Human Laws, driven by individual conscience rather than synderesis, contribute to this disruption in the relationship between humans and the non-human world. In his epistle to the Romans, Apostle Paul writes, "They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them ("Romans 2:15 (NIV)"). Referring to this, Thomas Aquinas notes that the human conscience is morally neutral thus it could be fallible. For the role of conscience, to him, is the application of knowledge. Thus, Aquinas introduces a new term, Synderesis. Aquinas states, "Synderesis is not the same as conscience but is the innate ability of the mind - a habit of the mind - to apprehend the eternal/divine laws. The role of conscience is to apply the primary precepts discovered as the content of synderesis" ((Dimmock and Fisher 173).

Synderesis, being the innate ability of the mind to adhere to the ethics and morals, obeys to the Divine Law whereas Conscience can be triggered to adhere to Human Law just like Atatarho, one of the tribal chiefs of the Longhouse. "The minds of our leaders have become twisted. They no longer think first of giving thanks, first of peace. They no longer turn to the clan mothers for guidance. Instead, they think only of power, of making war and striking back at those who strike us. And the Entangled One, Atatarho, is the worst of all" (Bruchac 46).

Decision making is an integral part of one's daily life and based on the circumstances, the ethical standpoint varies. But when it comes to environmental ethics, it is crucial that one sticks on to one ethical standpoint. Culture and tradition played a major role in the people of the Longhouse treating the non-human world with utmost respect and always having a heart of gratitude. They took responsibility to uphold the rights of the non-human world which was a result of mutual trust. This resulted in a glorious and sublime environment built on cordial relationships between the human and non-human world. Thereby acting as a framework for ethical decision-making rooted in core character value.

Conclusion

"Stories are so strong because they are alive. A story is like someone you trust to take your hand, lead you on a journey, and then bring you back home again" (Bruchac 32). Stories are full of life. They instruct, educate and guide. Stories became the tool of education for the people of Longhouse. When people struggled in their day to day lives, the Divine graciously sent messengers with stories that became a solution for their problems. Whether recounting the creation of the first man and woman, the tale of Sky Woman delivering seeds, or the narrative of the messenger conveying ceremonial stories, all these accounts embody core character values such as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, care, and good citizenship.

Whenever something goes against the order of nature, there has been chaos. The stories of the people of Longhouse bear ample examples of this. The avarice of human beings provokes the conscience to distort the Natural Law and follow the Human law which has little respect for the non-human world. The Human Laws rarely focus on core character values thereby forgetting to adhere to the gentle and meek voice of synderesis. In order to protect the fast depleting natural and non-human world, one's environmental ethics needs to be centred on the Eternal Law that embodies the core character values of respect, care, trustworthiness, responsibility and good citizenship. In

fact, the regular practice of core character values would make one a good citizen. The culture and lifestyle of the people of the Longhouse provides a practical solution to the environmental concerns. Their beliefs and practices provide a framework for ethical decision making rooted in core character values. As their ethical standpoint was centred on natural laws, they respected the non-human world. They cared for their “relatives”. A sense of mutual trust thrived between the kin of the human and non-human realms, embracing their shared responsibility to nurture the non-human world. They didn’t view it as a resource to be exploited, but rather as a source of life. To them, the non-human world wasn’t separate; it was an integral part of their existence. They regarded it as a guide, a source of inspiration and teachings to lead a rightful life, recognizing that human beings often forget and stray from the Natural Law. “We humans are weak and forgetful. We are not like our wiser relatives, the animal people who always remember their place in Creation and their proper role” (Bruchac 45).

Stories and legends serve as compelling sources of inspiration, imparting invaluable life lessons. The narratives and legends of the Longhouse people offer practical guidance on the importance of respecting and nurturing the non-human world. Their environmental ethics fostered a harmonious relationship between the human and non-human realms. Although current times may seem uncertain and the future foreboding, redirecting our focus from exploiting the non-human world to cherishing and respecting it could sustain our resources. The path ahead might appear challenging, yet there’s hope for improvement if the human world aligns its decisions with core character values of respect, care, trustworthiness, responsibility, and good citizenship. Just as Okwaho believed, we too can strive for a more harmonious coexistence. “Things had been bad before and then good had come to the people. Perhaps, just perhaps, it was time for that to happen again” (Bruchac 47).

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