

## **Traditional Hodensosaunee Thanksgiving Address and Welcome**

**Taylor Leal Gibson**

**Wahadaidi Ne gyahsoh (He's on a new road is my name)**

**Ganyadèh niwagehsyaodèh (Turtle Clan)**

**Gayogohonó' niwagohwejo:'dèh (Cayuga Nation)**

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### **Abstract**

Taylor Gibson gave the opening keynote thanksgiving address for the 2016 White Privilege Symposium Canada - entitled Academics and Activists: Advocating for Equity, Justice, and Action. He shared his life story as it relates to the experiences of indigenous people, and the issue of perception in the teaching of Native and European history. Addressing the cultural clash between reserve and non-reserve educational programs and schools, his empowering story shines light on the importance of speaking out against stigma in learning environments, especially among non-native audiences. It was his upbringing on the reserve, involvement in protests, and exposure to these different educational systems that led to the cultivation of his life-long interest in learning the Cayuga language, history, and culture. What equips him to provide educational services related to these areas is a sense of responsibility, opportunity, recognition of his family's tragedies, and an obligation to his daughter.

*Keywords:* Indigenous; Indigenous history; Canadian history; Stigma; Historical perception

Taylor Gibson is from Six Nations Canada (Hodihnosyonih Territory), having lived most of his life on the reserve, learning from his grandparents. During his time as a student, he participated in the Cayuga Immersion program and later earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in History. Taylor is currently an assistant researcher at Deyohaha:ge Indigenous Knowledge Centre at Six Nations Polytechnic and is passionate about Indigenous culture and history, Hodihnosyonih culture and history, and the Cayuga language.

### **Traditional Hodensosaunee Thanksgiving Address and Welcome**

My English name is Taylor Leal Gibson and I am from Six Nations.

My experience in coming into environments where the Indigenous voice has never been heard can prove to be challenging. As a student in the university or in public locations, I have experienced a level of ignorance about Indigenous people that can be daunting on so many levels. I will peel back some of the layers that cause this ignorance. In so doing I hope to contribute toward an understanding of why Indigenous people see it as a burden to inform non-native people of their history and culture. I feel it is up to the government to be educating Canadians about Indigenous history and culture, including prior to colonial contact. However, the government has completely failed in this task. Additionally, there is a stigma imposed on Indigenous students because of the accepted narrative that Indigenous people were defeated and their lands conquered long ago by early Europeans. This has been the accepted narrative in U.S and Canadian history, as well as the formation of the two nation-building stories. The problem with this meta-narrative is that it often leaves out the Indigenous perspective. Because of this silencing, another layer is that Indigenous students may sometimes not know enough of their own history to give an informed opinion on it or they may not be comfortable with sharing it.

Due to these layers of misunderstanding, I feel responsible for teaching about Indigenous language. I was fortunate to grow up with excellent teachers who knew their culture and language. These

teachers always made me and the students in my class feel good to be Onkwehonwe. I went to I. L. Thomas Elementary School on the reserve where I am from (Six Nations of the Grande) and had the good fortune to remember what some of my teachers told me. Every morning in the school, the staff and students would gather in the gymnasium for the Ganyohonyohk (Thanksgiving Address). At that time, I was still really shy and so I could never recite this in front of all the people from the school. But I listened and admired my peers who could. I still remember their names. I also listened during the ceremonies held at the Onondaga Longhouse where my family would go, though my grandmother usually would be the one who took me, my siblings, and my cousins, because my parents had to work. This was a very important part of my learning.

Also, I cannot express how important my time with my grandparents was. They taught me many things and especially how to be a good worker and connect to the land through working it in the spring and summer, hunting in the Fall, tapping trees in the spring, and picking strawberries in the summer again. They always had guests coming over and so they would send the kids outside. But most importantly, they taught me to never give up. No matter how bad things got, I had to keep pushing through and complete the task at hand. There probably isn't a day I don't think of them in some way, as I wonder if what I do is right. I was an extremely shy kid while growing up, I didn't realize at the time how difficult it was for the Indigenous experience in Canada. I just thought my mom was always arguing with people and grew to dislike arguing a lot. It wasn't until I got older and learned that it was just how badly

people were getting treated and that one had to argue for justice.

I went to high school on the reserve for two years and for two years at a non-Indigenous off-reserve high school of my choice. When I went to the off-reserve high school, I expected a high level of racism there. I was pleasantly surprised, as the racism wasn't as bad as I had thought it would be, though it was still bad. The teachers weren't always the best trained to deal with Indigenous people or issues and made inappropriate comments. Again, this was how the Canadian educational system was failing Indigenous students as well as Canadians about the history of this country. I actually had an "encouraging" student councillor tell me to my face that I wasn't smart enough to go to the university. This was my first real exposure to non-natives and what they were really like.

I understood right away that there were two types of thinking; Indigenous and Western, but only one was presented in the school curriculum. Those experiences helped prepare me for what was to come. When I had graduated from high school, I went to school at Six Nations Polytechnic in the Native University Access Program, now called the University Program at Six Nations Polytechnic. At this time, the 2006 protest was beginning in Kanohsataton (the protected place) in Caledonia. When I first started going to the protests, it's like something woke up in me. For most of my life until then I simply lived and learned and went to ceremonies—nothing having an activist effect. Whatever activist things happened, I was too young to remember. But going to the protests helped reconnect me to something deeper and I feel a lot of people from Six Nations felt that connection as well. My whole family was there protesting and staying up all night to watch

the site in our locations and maintaining the fire for the night a few times. This also reconnected my extended family and made them stronger.

In the fall of that year, I was able to attend the Wadewayesdanih intensive Cayuga language program for a year with Marge Henry gehéh (passed). I found this year to speed up my learning in the Cayuga language as well as to meet more people who were learning. They were extremely helpful and patient with me and helped me develop a life-long interest in learning the language. I spent time learning and talking to people about different subjects relating to Hodihnosyonih culture. So, I applied to some schools and got accepted by McMaster University for the history program and I took philosophy as a minor. This resulted in a greater culture clash, as I would sometimes feel as though I was the only Native on campus and in my program, as there weren't many of us. Again, the same narrative of Native people was presented in the history classes. In the small seminars I would get this overwhelming anxious feeling of wanting to say something, but my shyness blocked me. I was fortunate in my short life to meet strong and knowledgeable people. I recall being in the university environment wishing these people were there and thinking they would know what to say if they were in the university with me. Then I realized that I cannot count on other people to always be in the places where I am, and that I would have to be that person. So, I learned to pick different things up along the way to help me.

Responsibility is one of the main reasons that I am willing to do this kind of education about Indigenous culture, languages, and history. I feel responsible for learning it and I have a need to pass it on. Also, I feel I have an opportunity to speak to

a larger audience and that if people began seeing and hearing how we understand the world maybe that will help the larger non-native audience try to understand a little more about Onkwehonwe people. Perhaps it will even inspire them to look at the history for themselves and realize we still have a very real relationship that has been one-sided for a long time. Maybe this will help them understand where Onkwehonwe people are coming from and help open their hearts and minds to Indigenous issues regarding land claims and the environment.

Lastly, I think of my uncle who went to Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario. He was a young student, away from his family and struggling. It is not really clear what happened, but while on his way home he had a nervous breakdown. The bus driver just thought he was a “drunken Indian” and kicked him out in the middle of nowhere during the winter time. Only his remains were found. He died from what they could only suspect was hypothermia. Perhaps that is my reason for providing educational services. Having a young daughter adds to my recognition that education can play an important role in improving relations between European and Indigenous people. I have this hope because I would not want people to make decisions based on their ignorance that could negatively affect my daughter because of her race. Furthermore, I hope that by informing the general population about Hodihnosyonih culture they may have the ability to make the right choices in the future; to not make heartless actions and cause individuals and families a lot of grief and heartache.