[*JSRNC* 10.2 (2016) 137-140]
doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v10i2.27279

JSRNC (print) ISSN 1749-4907
JSRNC (online) ISSN 1749-4915

Introducing John Mohawk

Robin M. Wright

Department of Religion, 107 Anderson Hall,
P.O. Box 117410, University of Florida,
Gainesville, FL 32611, USA
Baniwa05@ufl.edu

I begin this special issue with a short essay by the late Seneca (Haudenosaunee) historian, philosopher, and activist John Mohawk. There is no better way to introduce Mohawk than with the words of Jose Barreiro—a close associate and friend, as well as executor of his literary work and editor of the collection of his essays *Thinking in Indian*, in which the subsequent essay appeared:

> [John Mohawk was] intensely steeped in the spiritual ceremonial traditions of the Haudenosaunee people through his foundational longhouse culture at the Cattaraugus Reservation in western New York. Mohawk was one of those rare American Indian individuals who comfortably stepped out into the Western academic and journalistic arenas. He was an enthusiastic participant in his own traditional ways, a legendary singer and knowledgeable elder of the most profound ceremonial cycles of the Haudenosaunee. As a scholar, he represented the Native traditional school of thought in a way that was as authentic as it was brilliantly modern and universal.
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> He had emerged to prominence, naturally and with certainty, as a thinker, philosopher, and strategist who dutifully helped out the longhouse clan mothers and chiefs in land rights and other treaty rights and nation issues. John spoke often at traditionalist gatherings and was a traveler-lecturer-writer on the Iroquois communications group White Roots of Peace, based at the Mohawk Nation with the Native advocacy journal [which he founded] *Akwesasne Notes*.
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> From 1976 to 1983, he was the executive editor of the international Native journal *Akwesasne Notes*. Later, he was professor of American studies and director of the Center for the Americas at UB. He authored, edited, and coedited several important books, including: *Basic Call to Consciousness, Exiled in the Land of the Free, Utopian Legacies: A History of*

Conquest and Oppression in the Western World, and *The Iroquois Creation Story*. He published over one hundred articles, most blending the line between scholarship and journalism. Mohawk was also founding editor of *Daybreak*, another national Native magazine, which from 1987 to 1995 led much of the coverage on Native American and indigenous topics. He was a roaming editor for Cornell University's *Native Americas* Journal (also for ten years, 1995–2005), always on the leading edge of Native themes in the thinking media. From 2002 until his death, in 2006, he contributed numerous opinion columns to *Indian Country Today*. John framed a good piece of the discussion by Native leadership on the crisis of environmental assault and degradation. He spoke out early and often on the dangers of the globalization juggernaut and warned against homogenization of indigenous cultures, postulating that Native 'political sovereignty is predicated on cultural distinctiveness'.

The Sacred in Nature—Mythology Can Change Our Minds:[1] *John Mohawk (1945–2006)*[2]

Some scientists are among the most awestruck witnesses to the glories of the unfolding universe and among its most eloquent guides. They are aware of the immense distances, the enormous powers of gravity, and the depths of the unknown. Scientists can testify that the miracle of life on earth can and should inspire awe and have expressed their own humility in countless ways. They are also engaged in a discussion about the possible and probable limits of what can be known in pure science: 'One of the questions the science of science is considering is whether humanity, in its quest to build consistent logical explanations of the universe, is stuck on the Godelian treadmill, confronting a universe inevitably more complex than our brains'.[3]

The issue is not, however, whether the universe is more complex than our brains. The universe, in a metaphorical sense, is our brain, and vice versa. The human species is not apart from it; it is a part of it. As the universe expands into ever-evolving complexities, we are witnesses to its grandeurs, and therefore, the universe is witness to itself at the same time. Our consciousness is not separate from, but a product of, the

1. Reprinted with the generous permission of Jose Barreiro, *Thinking in Indian: A John Mohawk Reader*, 2010 (Kindle Locations 503-507). Kindle Edition.

2. Formerly, Professor of American Studies, Director of the Center for the Americas, University of Buffalo, Buffalo, NY.

3. 'In 1931, the Austrian mathematician Kurt Godel captured this dilemma in one of his famous incompleteness theorems. Once a logical system becomes as complete as arithmetic, he showed, it cannot prove its own consistency. Doing so requires a more complex system. But then to prove the consistency of that system one needs a yet more powerful system, and so on ad infinitum' (Johnson 1994).

universe. We are not superior to nature, but rather its fellow traveler, its coconspirator, its self-conscious manifestation of itself. Our most powerful contradiction as a species is our ability to imagine that human society is a god, superior to the universe that has created our bodies, our air, our food, our history, our future. Conversely, we also possess the ability to conceive ourselves as harmonious members of a natural world community, and in this the philosopher-scientists can be powerful allies to the expression of Indian thinking. However, even when we know all about the majesties of the universe in the giant trees of the forests, the myriad forms of life under the microscope, the comets and the life cycles of the salamanders, we know less than we think we do.

Vaclav Havel (1994) has observed that modern science appears to 'have exhausted its potential', that it no longer fulfills a need to find meaning in the world: 'We may know immeasurably more about the universe than our ancestors did, and yet it increasingly seems they knew something more essential about it than we do, something that escapes us'. This view reflects an emergence from a former time, when the world was viewed as a mechanism. For the mechanistic view to hold, however, it would be logical, as modern nihilists have argued, that life is meaningless. Human beings are generally unwilling to accept this conclusion.

In a former age there existed an assumption that the universe was rational in all its details, but contemporary science has backed away from this as well. A former age thought that human beings possessed the potential to think and act absolutely rationally, but contemporary psychology suggests that not only is there little evidence for this potential, it may not even be desirable. Ancient peoples may not have known the speed of light or even the configuration of the solar system, but they were aware that the universe was much greater than what they could see or feel. They accepted the concept that there were things that were unknowable about the universe and the acknowledgment of this limitation rendered invisible beings sacred. Because the universe is such a mysterious entity, it is difficult to talk about it in a meaningful way. How does one describe the human relationship to a mystery? The answer is that cultures throughout the ages have devised mythic narratives that describe in metaphorical terms a memory of how the universe appears to work. These mythic narratives often contain elements that invoke a visual image and are proposed to have power over affairs important to humans. Humans have historically invested these ideas, images, and narratives with both attention and power. Are mythic narratives real? They are as real as the power the people have invested in them. People who come together around cultural themes and who act them out exercise a kind of collective power.

The issue of humanity's relationship to external others—the environment, the animal world, the plant kingdom, other cultures, and nature in general—is emerging as an important issue for the first time in more than three millennia. For most of history, the threats to civilization came from drought or barbarians, pestilence or invaders from afar. Today, modern civilizations may be creating conditions that could destroy the interlocking web of life upon which they are founded. Finding ways to bring cultural thinking toward profound respect for the works of nature is becoming a priority. It is easy to see that one way of accomplishing that objective is by learning about cultures that locate the sacred in the manifestations of nature and that have also developed traditions of celebrating that sacredness.

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