

***Abenaki Chief Don Stevens:
Tribal Recognition and Resilience in Vermont***
“Indigenous Perspectives” - Monthly Broadcast on HealthyLife.Net
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Bozho, dear listeners. I greet you in Potawatomi, the language of my tribe. I am Randy Kritkausky, an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. I am the host of this show, Indigenous Perspectives.

This episode of Indigenous Perspectives originates, not from my tribal homelands, but from N’dakinna, the un-ceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people who for thousands of years were, and still continue to be, stewards of these lands in the State of Vermont in the northeastern United States and across the Canadian border in Quebec, Canada.

In this show, I begin with a territorial acknowledgement because it is important to understand where we come from, both culturally and geographically, and also because this program focuses on understanding our roots in Mother Earth and connections with our ancestors.

Our guest today is Chief Don Stevens of the Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation of Vermont. We are going to explore the history of the Abenaki, and among other topics look at how Native Americans have responded to their encounters with European culture, and in particular the Christian religion. We will be looking at some of the different ways that Native Americans celebrate Christmas.

But before we wade into those waters, let’s back up and ask Chief Don Stevens why the land acknowledgement I opened with is so important.

Chief Stevens, I open the program, Indigenous Perspectives, and all of these broadcasts, with a territorial acknowledgement. Can you help listeners to understand why such recognition is important?

Chief Stevens: Yes, thank you Randy. The recognition is important per se to remind Europeans that the Abenaki and the native peoples were the original stewards of the land. We say stewards because we did not look at ownership

like Europeans do, or dominion over. We were given the responsibility of being stewards for the land that the Creator and Gluskabe really created; Gluskabe was the person who created the lands and the animals and those things in our culture, to provide for us and if we took care of the land and provided for the land, the land would take provide for us. So we look at more stewardship rather than dominion over or ownership like Europeans do. So that's why, when we do these acknowledgments, and you had said the "un-ceded land" which kind of refers a little bit to ownership -it's a concept that the Europeans understand about being the original inhabitants of a particular place.



Poster Credit: Nulhegan Abenaki Tribe

And native people like the Abenaki are place based people. So, Nulhegan means place of the wooden traps, Coosuk means pine, and Abenaki means people of the dawn or the first light. So native people would know me as one of the “people of the wooden fish traps who live in the pines who see the first light of day.”

So those acknowledgments to place, that is who we are as a people, which may be different than other ethnic groups.

Randy: Don, along those lines, many of our listeners will have images of Indians on horses hunting buffalo in their minds as we speak . Can you reflect on how that image corresponds to the realities of the Abenaki and other eastern tribes?

Chief Stevens: I think it’s all about context, because the things you have described would be a stereotypical image of people on the east coast, but if you were speaking about people maybe in the west, people where the buffalo roamed and they hunted buffalo - historically, that might be an accurate depiction. But over here in the East we did not have buffalo this far over, maybe in Neanderthal days or something like that, but the buffalo didn’t come as far as the Atlantic over here on the east coast.

So for me the Westerns and the TV shows and how native people are depicted, they’re trying to lump 500 nations into one image. So that’s when there are discussions of mascots or other type of things, it’s really dehumanizing when people have an image of what native people are supposed to look like based on their exposure, and kind of condense everybody into one image. We’re a wide range of different people, like we [Abenaki] mixed with French, we were Christianized by the Jesuits so we have more of a white appearance than the western type image of say a Lakota person or a Navajo or similar.

Randy: So along that very line of reasoning, I’m continually asked, and I’m sure you are, how should we be referred to? Very often we’re referred to collectively as Indians, some people refer to us as Native Americans, some as Indigenous Peoples, in Canada it’s “First Nations.” What is your guidance and preference on this matter?

Chief Stevens: Well again, I think if we're referred to in a good heart it really doesn't matter in my mind. For instance, we were known in our language as alnombak, which means human beings, we were human beings. So on the greater web of life, there was the animal people, the tree and plant people, and the human people. Because we could destroy things, we had a greater responsibility to not do that, but we work in harmony with the greater universe and the different strands on the web of life, right? So we were known as human beings, alnombak.

Now, a European label that tries to label us, in law, in statute - we are known as Indians. So in federal law and state law, we are known as Indians. We have to carry an Indian status card. And there's the Indian Arts and Crafts Act. So from a legal standpoint we are Indians, we're the only people who can not self-declare, that have to prove who we are, be a part of the European status.

So in that aspect, we're Indians. If you're saying we're indigenous to North America some people call us Native Americans to the North Americas, or Indigenous. So that fits too. Most of the time First Nations are referred to as people in Canada and, even though we were first nations here and in the US, most people when they talk about First Nations, it's more of a Canadian term, and of course Aboriginal is more Australian.

For me, as long as it's said in a good heart and there's no disrespect meant, you can call me Indian, Native American, Indigenous, anything that your heart desires, because these are European words, they're not our words.

We are referred to as Nulhegan, place of the wooden fish traps, or we are referred to as Abenaki, people of the first light, or by name.. ..so that's how I would respond.

Randy:- I really appreciate your clarifying that because an awful lot of people feel really uncomfortable trying to understand how they should honor us and speak to us. It's a delicate matter for some. But along that very line I may have slightly mislead our listeners when I do the acknowledgement. I may have given the impression that the Abenaki have been here from time immemorial, as opposed to many many centuries.

Like many Native Americans, your people have been very mobile and have had to adapt to different circumstances. Can you back up and give us a little bit of history on your creation story and maybe explain how your people are linked in some ways to my people, the Aninishinaabe, whose settled far west.

Chief Stevens: Well, I think that first off if you're doing a look from a historical perspective, archeological perspective, there's been items and graves and goods found from 11,000 years ago, so we've been at least historically documented here in Vermont for at least 11,000 or 12,000 years.

So, and as you say, alnombak, or I say, human beings, we are the direct descendants from those original peoples, what they were called at this time who knows how they referred to themselves. I mean, Nulhegan have lived on the Nulhegan River and the Clyde River and the waterways. That's how we were referred to or how we were known by either Jesuits or other Europeans when they first came, because we lived on those places and that's how we referred to ourselves.

So when you say we've been here for not time immemorial, but I'd say at least 12,000 years, and Nulhegan specifically for hundreds of years, because that's how we refer to ourselves. Yes, we were nomadic; we lived along the waterways during the summer so we could plant our corn and we could eat fish and waterfowl and grow our crops, and since the waterways were our highways we would use them for trade and for any other travel. But of course in the wintertime we would move to our winter grounds, the pines, because that's where the big game were. So we were nomadic in the sense of allowing those resources to replenish. So we'd either be near water in the summer through fall, or be in the woods during the winter, and things could replenish.

Now going back to how we're related, your people and ours are closely related because at one point, I believe your people, as far as I know, were over on the east coast and when Europeans first came, I think they moved west to preserve parts of our culture. We have wild rice here, you have wild rice there, and we have the shared beliefs, but different.

For our creation stories – it would take a long time to do the creation story - but in a nutshell, the Creator was walking across the universe with the eagle and the turtle and they stopped to find a way to get a drink. They came upon the Earth, and as he allowed Tolba, the turtle, into the water to swim, he was trying to find a place to sit, and he tried to create a place from under the earth. And all this dirt fell from his hands onto the turtle's back, including one of our spiritual people Gluskabe, who fell from the sky, from the falling dirt from the creator, and formed himself.

Gluskabe means one who formed himself from something, which landed on the earth and then populated the earth with trees and humans and other things. Like Adam who was created by the dirt that Jesus compiled, and made Adam, Gluskabe was made from the dirt falling from the hands of the Creator. So there's a lot of similarities between Christianity and our culture, but it is different. Like, we didn't have such a thing called the devil. We had something called the trickster, but there was no thing called the devil.

Randy: Thanks. Many of the listeners on this radio network, Healthy Life dot net, focus on wellness, and a wide range of topics on spirituality, and on healing. How might those in the mainstream who are interested in such topics learn from indigenous people, without appropriating what we do, if you want to tackle that subject of appropriation?

Chief Stevens: I think that without getting into specific ceremonies or particular practices, I think the way native people look at things, is being connected to the source so that you're never alone. That's where a lot of problems have happened today, because more and more people turn away from the source and more towards being in a virtual world; they're not connected. And when I mean source, like, I am never alone because I am part of creation I am part of that web of life and I stand on the shoulders of my ancestors. And they stood on their ancestors before that, so we're connected to those generations previously, and we will be connected to those generations ahead of us.

Like in our belief the seven generations which most people talk about, is that if you think about yourself as the center, you may know your mother, your

grandmother and maybe your great-grandmother. So those are the generations behind. And the three generations ahead are being your children, your grandchildren and maybe your great-grandchildren. That's your world, that's your influence.

And those are the people you are involved with.

Many people look at seven generations as seven generations ahead - which if you think about that, I don't know if I could affect somebody in 500 years from now. So it's always three behind, three ahead, and one in the middle.

On top of that, I would say being connected to your spiritual source whatever that is, whether it be God, whether it be a higher power or whether it be Nature or whatever that source is, you need to be connected to that, that makes you feel well and not alone. Bear is medicine to us, so we're very connected to the Bear, we're very connected to the Creator, we're very connected to our eagle feathers, which is like holding the hand of our Creator. Those are the things we're connected to.

We're also connected to our food sources which are the environment, the earth, the plants, the animals who provide us with food and medicine. So there's different connections to the source.

Our computer is not a source, it's not a connection, it may help keep community during these Covid times but it's not THE thing, it's a tool. So I'm talking about connecting to the outside, the environment, your food sources, your spiritual source.

Does that make sense?

Randy: Perfect. So, many people that I talk to and students very often, colleagues, friends, even family members will read an inspirational book written by or about native Americans and they basically come to the conclusion, oh ,gee, I want to be like a native American. Or maybe want to really quietly secretly BE a native American.

The question is how do we avoid this problem that they have in Europe, where on a weekend 10,000 people go into a forest and dress up are Indians

and have a pow-wow and feel that they are Indians? Is that respectful? Is that problematic?

Chief Stevens: It is not respectful when you mis-appropriate a culture that's not your own. So that's why when we go back to people following the Native path, it's OK to follow the philosophy and the way we view the world and the way we view our place in this world and where we live. There's nothing wrong with that, I mean people do that all the time.

If you come across the farm that your grandfather owned, you don't refer to that as whoever lives there now, you always refer to it as your grandfather's farm, or your great aunt's farm. And this is where they worked and where they had a swing and you might have played there. You never look at it as who's there now, it's always your view and your recollection of that place.

So when we say you should follow the path of being connected with the other strands of the web of life, that's a philosophy of ours, but I'm saying that if you follow that, that's not mis-appropriation. That's just a way of viewing things as they are.

But if you decided to do a pipe ceremony that you're not authorized to do or if you have no involvement in that, to do that specific ceremony, that's mis-appropriation.

So I think as long as you're not doing the cultural practices that are done by a native person, or using something that's not belong to you, then it's OK to follow a certain path. Just don't mis-appropriate something that's not yours. So dressing up in regalia, if it's Native regalia then that's not appropriate. But if it's regalia that you've designed that has meaning to you in your culture, then by all mean, do that.

Randy: You always do such a great job of explaining these issues which for many in the Native American community are raw nerves, and I love the way you do this with equanimity.

Let me close up this session by saying that we've been discussing Abenaki history and culture with Chief Don Stevens. After a brief break, we will return

and focus on one aspect of the encounter of indigenous cultures and colonizers. We're going to examine how indigenous people encountered, were shaped by, and also re-shaped Christian religion that was part of colonization. Since this show is broadcast on Christmas eve, we will use the holiday of Christmas as our window into contemporary indigenous life.

Segment 2

Welcome back. In this segment of the show, I want to develop a hugely important theme that is applicable to all of us, indigenous or non-indigenous, particularly as we struggle to understand the mind-boggling changes that face us today, and as we seek to find solutions to the formidable social, cultural and environmental challenges that we confront. How can we heal ourselves and the planet, how do we reinvent ourselves without cutting too many of the delicate threads that constitute the web of tradition enveloping and enriching our lives, is the question. How do we hold onto the best of traditional belief and wisdom, knowledge and insights from both indigenous and mainstream cultures, and combine this wisdom with insights offered by entirely new perspectives informed by new realities? That's a formidable question.

Chief Don Stevens, let's get specific. Rather than addressing my questions in the abstract, let's be concrete. Do the Abenaki celebrate Christmas? If so, how do you connect your millennial- old traditional culture with the reality of this new arrival of Christianity?

Chief Stevens: I think the great thing about our people and our ancestry is that we are resilient people. We would take the best of things that were presented to us and make them our own. For instance, when French Jesuits came, they would notice us celebrating our type of Christmas. When I say our type of Christmas - we had a winter harvest festival. After the harvest, we'd have a celebration, in winter just before we went into really lockdown, because in winter you're pretty much cooped up in longhouses with a multitude of families and that's when you fix your baskets, create tools, make things, because it's a long winter.

And that's when we would tell our stories. So right before everybody went in for the winter, there would be a feast and a celebration of getting through the harvest. And we would know what people might be lacking.

The community is very close-knit, so we would put out a blanket, a red blanket on the ground and we would call a certain time that we would share this gift-giving or feast, and, like, if we knew one person needed an axe because he broke his over the summer, and if we had an extra one we might put an axe on this blanket, and if someone was short of corn flour or meat or some type of whatever they may be short of, we would put that on the blanket and because everyone knew each other and what their needs were, we wouldn't take that off the blanket. We would allow the person who was short on those things to take it.

Because in our culture in order to get something you have to give something, this is the one time of year you could pick something off this blanket, and you weren't obligated or indebted to that person who gave it to you, because everybody who participated put something on the blanket. So it was just a gift, where you reach in and pick something you need.

And there's no obligation to anybody else; it was a real blessing. Which is sort of what we do with Christmas time, where people have a gift and they give it with no strings attached. And of course, Coosuk, we're people of the pines, so the pine tree related to us.

At what point - there's 400 years of Christianization of native people - at what point does it become part of your culture, or part of your lineage? Because we also walk in two worlds, we married into the French, French married into us and we celebrated both Christmas and our traditional way of looking at gift-giving for the winter. And because of our belief systems about being Christianized, they weren't the same but we could relate enough to the Christian teachings so that way it was an easy melding of cultures, and of celebrations.

Randy: Fantastic example.

I'm going to ask Carolyn, our other guest, to join us now and talk a little bit about her awakening to Native American spirituality at Christmas time, from a more mainstream perspective. Carolyn?

Carolyn: Well, in my childhood, we celebrated Christmas in the typical American way, with a tree and presents. Starting December 1st each year we also had an Advent Calendar, made of cardboard with little numbered doors counting up to Christmas. We opened one each day. Behind each door was some image related to the Biblical Christmas story.

While the Advent Calendar was always fun, what meant the most to me was always the family Nativity scene, or crèche, figures out of the story of the birth of Jesus (sort of like a dollhouse, but much more serious!). When I was really little, we just had a baby Jesus, a little wooden trough with some straw in it for his bed, Mary his mother, an ox and a donkey. Year by year we added more figures- Joseph - Mary's husband, shepherds and sheep, a camel and some Wise Men. I loved the crèche and got to set it up each year. Making the story real with "pretend" figures was part of the way it came alive for me.

Fast forward quite a few decades; I'm now living in Vermont with Randy. Our old cardboard advent calendar disintegrated. Randy made one, a large, 6 foot (2 meter) three-dimensional display combining an Advent Calendar and crèche scene. Behind each door there was a figure, about 5-inches tall. These included not only the traditional Jesus-Mary-Joseph-shepherds-kings-angels, but also figures illustrating real-life people with different occupations, living in Roman-occupied Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth.

Then, around the time of the "awakenings" that he discusses in his book, Randy realized that indigenous people were missing from his beloved Advent Calendar scene. None of our crèche figures had any connection with Native life. Were the indigenous people being ignored in our own household? Oh, no!

So, he found some figures of Indians, some carrying signs of their crafts like pottery bowls, baskets or beaded head coverings. And a wolf, on a larger scale than any of the others, howling at the moon with lifted head.

Randy: So for three years these Native American figures were “off on the side” of our crèche scene. They were basically uninvited outsiders to anyone looking at it. Then it struck me. We are celebrating Christmas on the un-ceded Native American lands, and indigenous people who had 15 thousand or more years old culture and spiritual traditions were marginalized by much newer 15 hundred year old transplanted Christian culture. And I asked myself - does this accurately represent what really happened? And the answer was, no.

So what we did, and what we’ll discuss on future programs, is we tried to visually reshape this narrative that we had created in our own house. And now our indigenous visitors are going to be moved to the center of our crèche scene. And they will be bearing gifts like the Magi kings. But they won’t be material gifts, they’ll be gifts of spiritual insight and wisdom about how to share connections with Mother Earth.

So, after a brief break, we’re going to look at another innovation and talk about the Biblical Christmas story and our family advent calendar and nativity scene. And we’re going to bring Don back into the discussion because I’m really curious to know how he’s reacting to what he’s hearing from another tribal member. Stay tuned.

Segment 3

Randy: I’ve been talking with one of our guests today, Carolyn Schmidt, about how our traditional family Christian nativity scene morphed into a visual representation recognizing and including Native American presence, and acknowledging what Native Americans did to shape a religion that is often portrayed in history with a one-sided story about overwhelming influence on Indians. Listeners might be wondering about the liberties our household is taking by reformulating the traditional Biblical Christmas story and turning it into a modern parable. In this segment we’re going to look at how a mainstream author in the New World also reshaped the traditional Christmas story.

Carolyn, can you talk a bit about this?

Carolyn: Well, this goes even further than including Indians in our crèche scene. We've also included the Fourth Wise Man. This is an interesting new figure; he is never mentioned in the Christian Bible, he completely missed the "photo-op", he never got to the place Jesus was born in time. He doesn't appear on any Christmas cards, but -

Randy: Be clear for me, I thought there were only supposed to be three. You have to explain to us why this fourth guy pops up.

Carolyn: Well, that's by tradition over the centuries. The Christians' "New Testament" just gives a bare outline - wise men coming from the east, following a star, finding the infant son of God in a makeshift crib in an animal bar. They kneel to him and give him their gifts. This traditional story has been embellished and dramatized, establishing the "Three Wise Men" or "Three Kings" as recognizable images of gift-giving worshippers.

But a story called "The Other Wise Man", written in 1895 by an American, Henry Van Dyke, imagines a different possibility. There's a fourth wise man who wanted to join in the search for the new savior, but never found him. He took a different route, he was lost to history, and to popular tradition.

Here's a summary:

Artaban is a wealthy Persian who follows the Zoroastrian religion of his culture - that is, the belief in a constant struggle between the forces of goodness and evil, and constant striving by people to seek for the good, often portrayed as a source of light. Like many Zoroastrians, he was knowledgeable of the sciences of his time, especially astronomy. He decides to join three other fellow seekers on a trip to the place where they have calculated the special event - the birth of the son of God - would happen.

So Artaban sells all his property, turning his wealth into three jewels which he can carry with him. They're going to be his gifts to the newborn son of God. He's supposed to travel to meet his friends, BUT - he stops to help a man who is dying for lack of food and water, he misses the planned departure with his friends and their well-laden camel caravan of provisions. So he keeps on by himself, he finally gets to Bethlehem, he finds a sort of deserted town, he finds

one woman there saying that the family he is looking for left the village suddenly, heading for Egypt. He realizes that he's going to have to extend his journey. But what happens is this woman with a small baby, is very kind, she gives him a meal, but suddenly there's an intrusion, there's all kinds of confusion and uproar and soldiers are coming into the town, there are swords and screaming, the soldiers are killing all the infant children on the order of the ruler of Palestine who is trying to kill any child that might be the new king.

So I'll read just a little bit from the story itself. The soldiers are coming down the street, the young woman with the little baby is hiding in the back of her cottage, and Artaban confronts the captain, and it says:

Artaban's face was as calm as though he were watching the stars, and in his eyes there burned that steady radiance before which even the half-tamed lunging leopard shrinks. He said in a low voice, 'I am all alone in this place, and I am waiting to give this jewel to the prudent captain who will leave me in peace.'

He showed the captain the ruby. The captain was amazed at the splendor of the gem. The pupils of his eyes expanded with desire, and the lines of greed wrinkled around his lips. He stretched out his hand and took the ruby.

'March on!' he cried to his men, 'there is no child here.'

The clamor and the clang of arms passed down the street. Artaban re-entered the cottage. He turned his face to the east and prayed:

'God of truth, forgive my sin! I have said something that is not, to save the life of a child. And my ruby is gone. I have spent for man that which was meant for God. Shall I ever be worthy to see the face of the King?'

That's the end of the quotation.

So Artaban spends 33 years searching for the "son of God", and he keeps running into situations where he steps into help. As he is dying, he feels he has failed, but he has a vision of the son of God, telling him that his deeds – his actions in caring for others – were the greatest gifts that anyone could have given. So, Artaban dies with validation for the decisions he made along the

way – to place good deeds in the here and now over his own personal spiritual quest. The deeds he did actually fulfilled his goal.

The story is available in book form, and also on the internet – just do an internet search for “the other wise man”, Project Gutenberg.

Randy: So when we first heard the story I have to say it knocked it us over, and now we’re beginning to incorporate it into our Christmas celebration with the Indians.

And I’m beginning to recognize that the message Artaban embodies is in many ways so much like the blanket ceremony that Chief Stevens described, where we share what we have with those in need.

Don, can you comment on this? This is probably a new story for you. Have you heard this variation on the Christian Christmas story?

Chief Stevens: No, I have not heard this. Just to explain, because we were Christianized by Jesuits, certain things were able to be easily translated. In other words, we believe in a Creator, so does Christianity; we believe in Gluskabe, who was made of dirt from the falling hands of the Creator, like Adam was. We believe in the spirit of the woods, we call him Yeti, big foot, big hairy man, Christians may call him St. Francis, I believe he was in charge of the animals and plants in the Christian culture.

So there are a lot of cross-overs so we could understand what those things were. We really didn’t get into the nativity section from a Native perspective, at least the Abenaki didn’t.

However by intermarrying with the French and being Christianized, if you have French European lineage as well as Abenaki and native culture, you have to celebrate both in order to be a whole person. So you don’t just celebrate Native culture and you don’t just celebrate French culture. You kind of meld the two in a way that is acceptable within in your own cultural-traditional family. So for instance we celebrated Christmas and had presents and decorated the tree as well. But we also had the blanket that we put the gifts on and that we would have people that would take off from those.

So it was the melding of two to celebrate the whole persons. But we didn't perse get into the wise men and the nativity scene. It was part of the Christmas story, but we looked at it in a broader sense.

Randy: Thanks for explaining that. And again, the point we have in introducing this story is really a broad one. Not to advocate that other people should adopt it, but to point out that we can re-invent ourselves by building on the best threads of tradition and re-weaving them together where they're frayed, and we can make those stories work for ourselves.

So after the next break I think we're going to come back and talk about some other ways that Native Americans have been creative and inventive, and most importantly contributed to adding value to what Christianity and other spiritual traditions have to offer in the modern world.

Stay tuned.

Segment 4

Welcome back to the final segment of Indigenous Perspectives. Perhaps, like the fourth Magi king Artaban, you are feeling that our program has left you stranded in the desert far from home. You might be asking why a program about indigenous perspectives has involved a story so geographically and culturally remote.

This is undoubtedly how many indigenous people in the New World must have felt when colonists and missionaries started telling them stories about their Creator and a person called Jesus. Native Americans, attempting to build bridges of understanding, responded by telling the colonists and missionaries their own creation stories of Turtle Island and explaining about indigenous spiritual traditions. For the last 500 years both sides in this cultural encounter have been struggling to find common ground, to reconcile sometimes conflicting viewpoints, and to share wisdom.

In our small household here in the snowy forests of Vermont, on the lands of N'Dakinna, as we have shown you, we are still creating and recreating our

own Christmas narrative. This exploration, like so much that has occurred under our roof in recent years, is a journey homeward, a re-discovery of our ancestral roots, and ultimately an act of reconnecting with our ancestors. It's my Potawatomi grandfather and his grandfather, caught up in the spiritual and political turmoil of their times, who have repeatedly guided me homeward.

This fact was made evident when we came across my grandfather's letters from France where he was a soldier in World War I. And in particular, his letters of 1918. With hindsight of historical knowledge, we know that this was a time that was the beginning of peace making. But for my grandfather and others in France, it was by no means certain that the cease fire would hold. He writes with real anxiety about the possibility that fighting could break out again at any moment.

In the midst of this, my grandfather did something extraordinary. He organized a Christmas dinner for his regiment of ambulance drivers and truck drivers. Somehow, in the French countryside, he managed to find a turkey, and have a feast, and he typed up a menu, a menu that he placed at each place setting at the table in their army barracks. We managed to get a copy of that menu; he included it in his letter.

So a few years ago, for the final Christmas dinner we shared with my 90+ year old mother, we put this menu at each place setting. And then we did something quintessentially Native American: we put out an ancestor plate. It's always served first. An ancestor plate is an acknowledgement of gratitude for the gifts and sacrifices of our ancestors.

Tomorrow, on Christmas Day, we will do the same thing once again. We will put out an ancestor plate, and we will feed our ancestors first. Don, do you have this kind of tradition among the Abenaki? How do you connect with your ancestors, or do you connect with them, at holidays?

Chief Stevens: Yes, Randy, we do it at holidays, but we actually connect with them all year round. When we gather as a group and any time we feast, we do a feast song to ask the ancestors to come and join us, and then we will have a

child go around and put something of the food on the plate, which connects our young to our old, and we will have them place it on the table.

Because our ancestors eat with us, they don't eat anywhere else, we're inviting them to our feast and to be at our table.

And we're honoring the choices they made to allow us to be able to survive. So we do that all of the time, not just on holidays, so it's a cultural practice that we do.

Randy: It's really a beautiful story, Don. Thanks for sharing, because this year in particular, with Covid and social isolation when families aren't getting together, many of us, as in our household, will be eating alone and others won't be at the table. But for us, this year, I think we're going to feel more connected than ever, in some strange ways. We'll look out the window in the snowy forest and feel connected to Coy Wolf, and Koo-koo-o-koo the owl, the winged ones at the bird feeder, and as you said, it's a community and it's a community not just of those currently with us but those who've walked on.

And I love the way you so gently describe the fact that we are embraced by an animate world and by the spirits of our ancestors. This I think for listeners is the great gift that Native Americans bring to this culture.

Chief Stevens: Yes, and I think personally with us, at least I'm always speaking on behalf of our culture and what we do, is that death to us is a transition; there is a physical loss of the body but the spirit is always with you and they walk among you at all times. You may not be able to see them, but they're the things that guide you if you pay attention and you open your ears, your heart and your mind and you ask for that help, it's what you feel as intuition. So if you ask for guidance to do this, if it feels right they're trying to guide you. If it feels wrong, they're trying to tell you "don't go that way". To us, the ancestors are guiding you through that intuition, and trying to help you move forward. So they're always around, so we're always never alone, so from a spiritual sense we are always with our community, our people, our ancestors. Now from a physical standpoint, for people who are living still, that's where the community gatherings are good and that's how we stay in touch. Either now,

with Covid, I phone, with social distancing, trying to get together or through the virtual world where we can still see them, but we are still with our community and that is what keeps us moving forward.

And why we embrace Christianity so well is because our mind is more set that the community is more important than one person, so a lot of us go into the military, as you spoke of, because we understand that the greater good is better than the individual, so we work as a communal people.

We open our hearts like we did with the first people that came to this new world, when they were starving we taught them how to grow food, the Europeans, so they would survive. Obviously we know other things that happened after that, but we were generous and kind by trying to keep them alive before they started taking things from us. So we are all about trying to be the best of ourselves, because we've always been community oriented, whether spiritually or physically.

Randy: Don, thank you so much for doing such an eloquent job and helping our listeners understand what it's like to be a Native American.

I want to say to our listeners, migwetch [*thank you*] for your listening. I hope that this broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots in Mother Earth and with your ancestral roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, I encourage you to take a few minutes to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna, and perhaps even that of ancestors. Allow yourself to touch their presence. Capture that moment and hold onto it. And if you might, write to me and let me know about your experience. I can be reached at randykritkausky@hushmail.com or through my website at randykritkausky.com.

Don, migwetch, thank you so much for your input.

Chief Stevens: Adio wli nanawalmezi, [*good-bye, take good care of yourself*]
Randy. Until we see each other again.

For audio: (56 minutes):

<http://www.ecologia.org/news/2.AbenakiDec2020.mp3>

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