

**By Dr. Greg Lendvay**

Note: Terms in **red** are concepts that you can study further with your students. They are also topics/concepts that students can act out/embody during the narration of the story.

**The Haudenosaunee, People Of The Longhouse:  
Tribes That Decided To **Cooperate** And Work Together**



Many books speak about the Iroquois League of Nations, tribes that joined together to follow a **common law**. The people known as the Iroquois call themselves the **Haudenosaunee**, the People of the Longhouse. The Haudenosaunee lived in the areas east of what we call **Lake Ontario** and the **Saint Lawrence River**. The Haudenosaunee adapted to the climate (weather) and **physical environment**. The ways that people **learn to live with the physical environment** are **adaptations**.

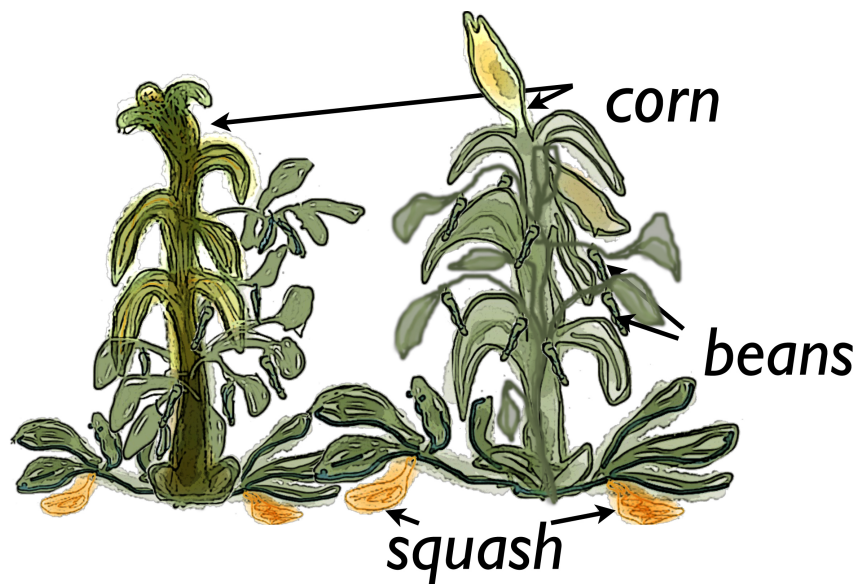
The **climate** was warm in the summer and winters were cold with lots of snow. Rainfall was more than enough to support vegetation. Many **natural resources** were there. Different kinds of trees grew on the hillsides and along rivers. The trees formed thick forests. Lakes and rivers provided water and many fish. Large animals like deer and elk and small animals like rabbits, squirrels, and beavers were all over.

The people learned to **adapt** to the climate and surroundings. They wove blankets from fibers of plants and used the fur of animals to keep warm during the winters. In addition to adaptations to keep warm, they learned to hunt and fish to get food. They also gathered fruits, nuts, and grapes in the forests. The **people adapted** to living in the forests by using the natural resources, plants and animals.

They Haudenosaunee also **modified** their environment in many ways. They used wood from trees to make their houses. In that way they **modified** or changed their environment. The forest

areas now had **human features**--trees were cut down and houses were built on the fields cleared of trees. Their homes were called **Longhouses**. Each longhouse had sections along the walls so that families could have their own spaces. Sometimes the houses were **built in circles** for protection. The ends of long **wooden poles** were buried in the dirt next to each other to make a **fence** around a group of houses.

The Haudenosaunee learned to become great farmers. They planted corn, squash, and beans so that they would grow together. To do this, they **planted beans and squash next to the corn**. As the corn stalks grew, the squash grew around the corn on the ground, blocking out weeds and keeping soil more moist. The beans wrapped themselves around the corn stalks and grew into long vines supported by the corn stalks. The people named **corn, beans, and squash**, the "**three sisters**". They also planted fruit trees in rows to grow their own fruits. They gathered berries and nuts from the forests.



Some of the Haudenosaunee villages had hundreds of people. **Cutting trees, clearing fields, and building houses** were ways that the people **modified** the environment. **Farming and growing fruit trees** were other examples of modifications.

The Haudenosaunee had a **culture** that was similar and a **confederation** to help them solve problems. The **confederacy** started with five groups or **tribes**. The **Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga** tribes lived just south of Lake Ontario. The **Finger Lakes** were in their territory. The **Oneida and Mohawk** lived east of the other tribes. Later, they were joined by the **Tuscarora** tribe.

Their **cultures** were the same--they shared a **common language, similar beliefs, and common customs**. Every family shared the **same fire** from the **keepers of the coals**. Every longhouse had a **fire inside, in the middle of the house**. The families gathered around the fire to educate children, tell stories, and celebrate. The **keepers of the coals** had a special purpose. Every tribe and family got its fire from the same coals. Around the fire, the families told stories about their culture and beliefs. They remembered family members and good things from long ago.

When the women and men gathered to discuss their families and tribe, they **met around the council fire**. Everyone had a say and the right to tell their thoughts. The people did not follow the

idea of a majority rule. The women and men would discuss until their **hearts were one** about the issue. Their agreement was a **consensus**, a final agreement accepted by all.

The **women** of the tribes **owned the property**. The women took care of the longhouses and fields. The **women** were the **farmers**. The men did the hunting. Sometimes they had to travel to hunt and fish. The **men** also **traveled** to meet the **representatives** from the other tribes.

The Haudenosaunee had a form of **representative** government that went back many, many **generations**. Since the women took care of the villages, they became **the judges for the community**. Women solved the fights or disagreements. Women would appoint men of the tribe to be the **representatives** (people chosen to serve the people in government). The men representatives of one tribe would meet with the **representatives of the other tribes** to make decisions and **make the laws**. Chiefs, leaders chosen from the representatives, made sure that the **laws would be carried out**.

Government of the Iroquois centered on the belief that governments should exist by the **consent (agreement)** of the **people** (*the consent of the governed*). The same **beliefs (principles)** about the **rule of the people** were accepted by all the levels of government--the local families, the tribe, and the **league of nations** (the **confederation**). The Haudenosaunee government, therefore, had **three branches of government**. **Representatives** that **made the laws** were the **Legislative Branch**. Leaders that **carried out the laws** were the **Executive Branch**. The women **judges that solved conflicts for the community** were the **Judicial Branch**.

The **Great Law of Peace** formed the government of the Haudenosaunee many years ago. This is how it happened. The tribes were constantly fighting with each other. Everyone was suffering because of this. A great leader, the **Peacekeeper**, chose a chief named **Hiawatha** to put a stop to **disagreements** (fights) and wars that took place among the people.

**Hiawatha** was a great speaker and he agreed to help out. One day the **Peacekeeper** and **Hiawatha** called the people together. The people had been arguing and not listening to each other. Suddenly, the **Peacekeeper** held up **one arrow** with both hands. **Hiawatha** yelled out, "Look, everyone of you, see this one arrow!" The **Peacekeeper** bent the wood until it cracked and snapped. He tore the arrow apart completely. **Hiawatha** explained, "This one arrow, all by itself, is weak. It can be broken easily." The **Peacekeeper** then gathered **five arrows** and bound them together. With both hands, he held them up high above his head. **Hiawatha** pointed to the five arrows and said in a deep, most serious voice, "See these five arrows? Look at them!" The **Peacekeeper** waited until the eyes of all women and men were looking at the five arrows. The **Peacekeeper** then strained his hands and tried to bend and break the arrows. His hands trembled and shook. "Look," **Hiawatha** spoke, "these five arrows are bound together. They cannot be broken! This is what you must become—five arrows bound together and not arrows that are separate and alone!"

The tribes made a **treaty**, a plan, to work together. In the territory of the Onondaga's, the Haudenosaunee people dug up a tall white pine tree, buried their weapons underneath the tree, and planted the tree again. They named this the tree of peace. This agreement created the confederacy. The treaty became the most important law for Iroquois, **The Great Law of Peace**. This was a **constitution**, a law that organized the people and set up their **representative government**. The **Great Law of Peace** still organizes the Haudenosaunee Confederation of Nations. The people **invite anyone** who wants to join the way of peace, to **sit under the tree** with them.