

Pontiac's Speech to an Ottawa, Potawatomi, and Huron Audience, 1763¹

Despite extensive Indian involvement in the Seven Years' War, no Indians were invited to participate in the Treaty of Paris of 1763. Sources of trade dwindled, and British colonists poured into the Ohio Valley. In 1763, Pontiac, an Ottawa war leader, began spreading the message of the Delaware (Loup) prophet, Neolin, who advocated a new interpretation of Indian-European relations. We receive this account through multiple interpreters: Neolin (presumably in his native Delaware language), the language Pontiac used that day (probably Ottawa), French (probably written down by the French Canadian soldier and notary Robert Navarre), and now in English.

An Indian [Neolin] of the Loup² Nation wanted to meet the Master of Life, which is the name all the Indians call God. He decided, without telling anyone in his nation or village, to go on a journey to Paradise, where he knew the Great Master lived. But since he didn't know the way to get there and knew no one who had been there and could show him the road, he tried magic, hoping to pull forth good omens from his dreams.

All Indians, as a general rule, put great faith in their dreams, and it is very hard to free them from this superstition, as this story proves. In his dream, the Loup Indian imagined that all he had to do was start out, and after many, many steps, he would arrive at the heavenly dwelling place, so very early the next day he did start. He dressed and equipped himself for hunting, not forgetting to take his weapons and a large cooking pot.

And thus he set out on his journey to Heaven to see the Master of Life.

The first seven days went well according to his plans. He walked with good courage, always firm in the confidence that he could reach his goal. Eight days went by without anyone appearing to block his way. On the evening of the eighth day, as the sun was setting where it always sets, he stopped at an opening into a little meadow where he saw a good place to spend the night along the bank of a creek. As he was setting up camp, he noticed at the other end of the meadow three paths, all very wide and well trodden down, and this seemed strange to him. Nevertheless, he kept working, setting up shelter and starting a fire. As he cooked his supper, he realized that the farther the sun went down and the darker the day grew, the lighter the three paths became. This surprised him, and frightened him, too.

He hesitated, considering what to do—stay where he was or get away from there and camp somewhere else. But as he reflected, he remembered his magic, or rather, his dream, and that the only reason he had started out on this journey was to see the Master of Life, and this thought led him to feel and believe that one of the three paths was the one he had to take to get where he wanted to go.

[Neolin tries two of the paths but comes upon huge fires on both.]

So he had to go back and take the third path. He walked on it for a whole day without seeing a thing to hold him back, when all of a sudden there appeared before him an astonishingly white mountain, which amazed him and brought him to a halt. Nevertheless, he firmed his resolve and kept going, determined to see what this mountain could be.

When he reached the foot of the mountain, the path gave out, and it grieved him not to be able to keep going. As he stood there, he looked around and saw a woman of the mountain. She was dazzlingly beautiful, and her clothes were so white the whiteness of the snow seemed dull next to them.

She was sitting down, and she spoke to him in his own language: “You seem surprised not to find the path to where you want to go. I know that for a long time you have wanted to see and speak with the Master of Life. That is why you set out on this journey: to see him. The path to his home is on this mountain, and to climb the mountain, you must abandon everything you have, take off all your clothes, and leave everything at the foot of the mountain. No one will stop you. Go wash in the river over there, and afterwards you will climb.

Step by step, the Loup Indian obeyed the words of the woman. . . . When he got to the top he was surprised not to see anybody anymore. The woman had disappeared. He found himself without a guide, facing three villages that stood in front of him. He did not recognize them, and they seemed differently constructed from his own, more beautiful and better ordered.

After meditating for a while on what he ought to do next, he started out toward the village that seemed most promising to him. . . .

He had no more difficulty and walked all the way to what he thought must be the village gate. He stopped and waited for it to open so that he could enter. As he was gazing at the lovely outside of the village, the door opened. He saw a handsome man all dressed in white coming toward him. The man took him by the hand and said that he was going to grant his wish to speak to the Master of Life. The Loup allowed himself to be led, and they came together to a place of unequalled beauty, which the Indian could not cease to wonder at. There he saw the Master of Life, who took him by the hand, gave him a hat embroidered all over with gold, and bade him sit down on it. The Loup hesitated for fear of spoiling the hat, but he was ordered to sit, and he obeyed without a word.

When the Loup was seated, God said to him, “I am the Master of Life, and I know what you want to learn and whom you wish to speak with. Listen well to what I am about to say to you, for your own sake and for all the Indians. I am the one who made Heaven and Earth, the trees, the lakes, the rivers, and all people and everything you see and everything you have seen on Earth. Because I made all this and because I love you all, you must do what I say and what I love and not do what I hate. I do not at all love for you to drink until you lose your senses the way you do. When you fight among yourselves, you do not do right, and I hate it. You take two wives or chase after the wives of other men, and that is not right. I hate it. You should have only one wife and keep her until death. When you want to go to war you juggle and sing magical incantations, thinking you speak to me. You don’t. You speak to Manietout,³ an evil spirit who breathes nothing but evil into you and whom you listen to because you don’t know me well.

“The land where you live—I made it for you and not for other people. Why do you put up with the Whites⁴ on your lands? Is it because you can’t get along without them? I know that the people you call the Children of your Great Father⁵ supply your needs, but if you were not evil, as you are, you would do without them and you could live just as you lived before you met them. Before the people you call your Brothers came to your lands, didn’t you live by the bow and arrow? You didn’t need guns or powder or those other things. Nevertheless, you caught animals to eat and dressed in their skins, but when I saw you giving yourselves to evil, I withdrew the animals into the depths of the forests so that you would need your Brothers to supply your needs and clothe yourselves. All you have to do is become good and do what I want and I will send the animals back for you to live on.

“I do not forbid you to allow the Children of your Father⁶ among you. I love them. They know me and pray to me, and I give them their needs and everything they bring with them. But as for those who have come to trouble your lands: drive them out, make war on them. I do not

love them. They do not know me and are my enemies and the enemies of your Brothers. Send them back to the lands I made for them, and let them stay there.

“Here is a prayer which I give to you in writing to learn by heart and teach to the Indians and to the children.” The Loup answered that he did not know how to read. The Master of Life answered that when he went back to the Earth all he had to do was give the writing to the village chief, who would read it and teach it by heart to him and all the Indians and that they must recite it evening and morning without fail. “You must tell all the Indians, drink no more than a cup of wine a day or at most two cups. Have no more than one wife. Do not chase after other men’s wives or after the unmarried women. Do not fight among yourselves. Do not practice magic, but prayer, because when you practiced magic you conversed with the Evil Spirit. Drive from your lands those redcoat dogs⁷ who will do you nothing but harm. When you need something, address your prayers to me, and I will give to you as I give to your Brothers. Do not sell to your Brothers what I have placed on Earth for food. In short, be good, and you will receive free all that you need. When you meet one another, give greetings, and give your left hand, because it is the heart’s hand. Above all things, Loup Indian, I command you to pray every day, morning and night, the prayer that I give you.”

The Loup promised to do what the Master of Life told him and to speak for him to the other Indians, and that in the future the Master of Life would be happy with them.

Then the same man who had brought him by the hand came to take him again and guide him back to the foot of the mountain, where he told him to take up his belongings again and go back to his village. This the Loup Indian did, and when he arrived, he astonished the people of his nation and his village, because they had not known what had become of him, and they asked him where he had been. Since he had been ordered not to speak to anyone until he spoke to the village Chief, he simply made signs to them with his hands that he had been on high. As soon as he entered the village, he went straight to the chief’s house and gave him the prayer and the law that the Master of Life had given him.

This adventure was soon known throughout the village, and people came to hear the words of the Master of Life and carried it to the next village, and those people came to see the famous traveler and spread the news from village to village until it reached Pontiac, who believed it just as we believe an article of faith; and he instilled it into the minds of his Counsel, who listened to it as to an oracle and told him that he only had to say the word, and all of them were ready to do what he demanded.

1 Translated by John DuVal from [Robert Navarre?], “Journal ou dictation d’une conspiration, faite par les sauvages contre les Anglais, et du siège du fort de Detroux par quatre nations différentes le 7 mai, 1763,” in *Journal of Pontiac’s Conspiracy*, ed. M. Agnes Burton (Detroit, 1912), 23-33. In *Interpreting a Continent: Voices from Colonial America*, ed. Kathleen DuVal and John DuVal (Lanham, Md., 2009), 79-83.

2 The Loup or Wolf Indians were the Delawares or Lenni Lenape.

3 Manitou was the name for spirits in Algonquian cultures.

4 The French term is *les Blancs*. Early Spanish and French documents rarely used terms of color to differentiate between Europeans and Native Americans. Native Americans did sometimes use Red for themselves and White for the English or for all Europeans.

5 The Children of their Great Father were their “brothers” the French.

6 The French. It is unclear whether Neolin himself advocated exempting the French, but Pontiac knew they would be important for supplying a war against the British.

7 British regular army soldiers, who wore red coats.