

THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER

CHAPTER 8

After learning about turtles from around the world, Tota Ma was excited to learn more about turtles and their habitats close to home. All winter, she hoped *A'nó:wara* would visit her in a dream. It was in the early months of spring, when Tota Ma finally heard from her friend *A'nó:wara*.

"Tota, the Spirit of the water has spoken to me" said the turtle. "It is telling me that Elder Josephine Mandamin is coming. Go and meet her. She has a message for you. Josephine has thought about the seven generations that came before us and she is thinking about the seven generations to come. Josephine is honouring the water and the Spirit of water. She will arrive soon with her group of Water Walkers. Listen to what they have to share and take their message home to your community. When you walk for the water, you will be walking for me and for all that live in the water. Listen to Josephine's message and then you will understand my eighth challenge: Walk for water, walk for the turtle, walk for yourself, and your future."

A'nó:wara's words blazed in Tota Ma's heart. She called the Friendship Centre to find out if they heard about Josephine's travels. Those at the Friendship Centre said Josephine and the Water Walkers were coming soon and Josephine would stop at the Friendship Centre. She began her very special journey in 2003. At that time, she spoke to the women on her territory and encouraged them to join her Great Lakes Water

Walk. On this walk, they would pray for the water and teach others about the importance of the water. Josephine would speak about her walk around the Great Lakes to bring attention to the health of the water. She would show care for the water by praying for it.

Tota Ma went to bed early that night. She was looking forward to meeting this wonderful grandmother from Manitoulin Island!

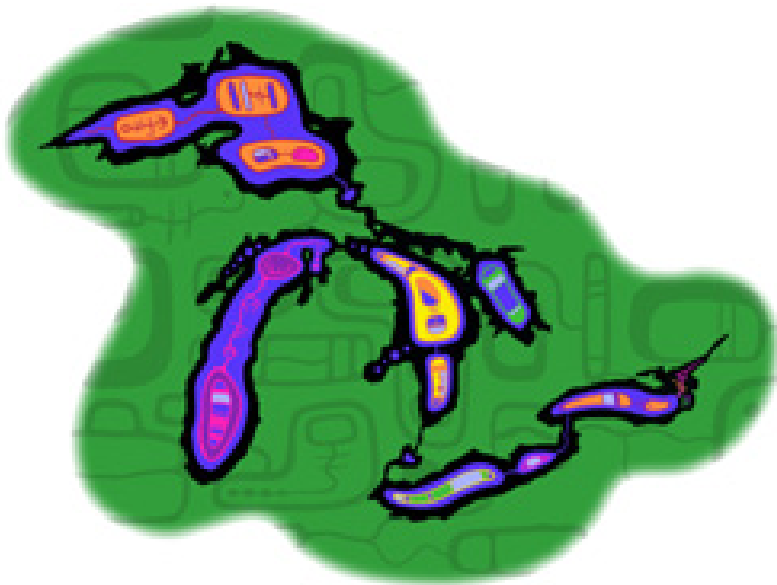
When Tota Ma got to the Friendship Centre, there were many people gathered to welcome Josephine and her Water Walkers. It was inspiring to hear her message about the importance of water. Josephine asked everyone to remember to pray for the water and her gentle, motivating words touched all!

For days after the visit, Tota Ma felt honoured to meet Josephine Mandamin, the Elder who journeyed around all of the Great Lakes. Josephine's message was to continually remind everyone how important fresh water is to all people, not just First Nations.



After this visit, Tota Ma realized that Josephine took her responsibilities as an Elder very seriously. Josephine reminded the community of the responsibilities that women have as water keepers. She shared with Tota Ma the understanding that water is precious and sacred. It is one of the basic elements needed for all life to exist. She also explained that people everywhere need to be concerned about local water use. This would build awareness about how much water is being used or wasted.

Tota Ma remembered some of the facts Josephine talked about. She was surprised to learn that over forty million people live within the beautiful Great Lakes watershed. This helped her realize why Josephine was worried about water. People surrounding the Great Lakes have clean and fresh water available to them but some have taken it for granted. Groundwater has become sick with the pollution of industry and population growth. Many people do not understand that they have an effect on those living downstream. They must make sure that water they send downstream is clean and healthy.



Thinking about how water is essential to survival and health, Tota Ma realized that everything is related to water! First Nations people living in Ontario are aware of water pollution in the Great Lakes. Since the beginning of time, the First Nations people living along the shores and rivers of the Great Lakes watershed have carried a responsibility for the water. The need to keep the water clean and healthy was understood. It is the water that cleanses and heals body, mind, and spirit, and everything depends on water for continued life. There is a connection between water and all life forms, gifted to humans by the Creator.

Tota Ma remembered Elders speaking about the need to keep water clean and pure for the next seven generations to come. Ceremonies include water for its healing and nourishing power. The First Nations people of Turtle Island believe that water is sacred and it is the life-blood of our First Mother, *Yethinihstenha Ohwentsya*. There is a need to come together with all people living in the watershed and share awareness of the declining condition of the Earth's fresh water.

Josephine's words were still rippling through Tota's thoughts as she went to bed. Before she knew it, she was dreaming about sitting by the marsh in the early morning, listening to the Red-winged Blackbirds. *A'nó:wara* peeked out from under some floating duckweed.

"*A'nó:wara, She:kon*. It is so good to see you. *Senhniseriyohsten!* I met Josephine Mandamin. She was the wonderful Elder you told me about. Josephine and the Water Walkers have been



family cannot live in a wetland if water is not plentiful and healthy."

The old woman knew that her use of water changed over time, but she was determined to make positive changes for the future. There was a lot for Tota Ma to think about and act upon.

walking around the Great Lakes watershed, carrying a bucket of water to remind everyone about the importance of water. I spoke to her about you and the challenges. Josephine reminded me that turtles need clean and healthy water, just as we do. She thought that if the women and children got together, they could walk around the wetlands and the waters in their communities. By carrying a bucket of water to symbolize its sacred nature, the walk would let everyone know that there is a serious concern for water. Josephine hoped that any litter or garbage found would be picked up, so when the turtles awoke from their winter sleep, they would find a cleaner and healthier place to live. She reminded everyone that women have a responsibility to care for water, just as the turtles do. *A'nó:wara*, I am so inspired. What is my next challenge?" The old turtle blinked in the bright sunlight.

"Tota Ma, your *ninth challenge* is to look at how much water you use. Honour the water Spirit for its gifts by protecting it. Water for drinking, washing, cooking, and bathing is becoming scarce. My turtle

