



Water Walker
Autumn Peltier
Anishinabek Nation • Canada

Autumn Peltier remembers her first-ever Water Walk. It was the spring of 2017 and she was just 12 years old. The weather that day was pretty stormy. As she and a group of indigenous activists crossed a treacherous bridge, the wind blew so hard that Autumn could barely move forward. The rain swirled down around her. Nevertheless, she pushed on.

Autumn's great aunt Josephine Mandamin was leading the small group, which was walking all the way from Duluth, Minnesota to Matane, Quebec – more than 3,000 miles. It was Autumn's first Water Walk, and for Josephine, at 75 years old, it was her last: an important moment in both of their lives.

This walk was their shared legacy, passed down from their ancestors, for future generations of water warriors. “When you think about how strong indigenous women are, you're never supposed to let anything stop you,” Autumn says.

Activism runs through Autumn's blood. Her great aunt Josephine started the Water Walk movement in 2003, before Autumn was even born. A respected Anishinaabe elder, Josephine wanted to bring attention to a problem that affects First Nations peoples across Canada: a lack of access to safe drinking water. She decided she would walk around the Great Lakes and pray for them, and then she would keep on walking.

Josephine's first walk was around the entire perimeter of Lake Superior, a 2,500-mile journey. She then walked around the rest of the Great Lakes: Michigan, Huron, Erie, and Ontario. And she kept walking, even as she grew older and older. Eventually she had completed 13 journeys, and walked tens of thousands of miles.

Why fight to save the water? For the people of the Wiikwemkoong First Nation, water is the most sacred of the elements, but for indigenous people across Canada and around the world it is also one of the scarcest. And with climate change this precious resource is becoming even harder to find, as temperatures rise and desertification accelerates.

“It's really important to us because when we're in the womb, we live in water for nine months,” Autumn says. “We learn how to love our mothers and how to love the water.”

Josephine always reminded Autumn of how important this element was in sustaining life, and also in their indigenous culture. When Josephine passed away in February of 2019, at 77 years old, Autumn knew it was her turn to be a leader and to make sure that her people's water was protected.

“I had to think to myself, ‘Who is going to carry on her work?’ she says. “And if I don't do it, then who is going to protect the waters?”

Autumn didn't just walk the walk; she also talked the talk. Over the last few years, she has become a global voice for water rights – speaking at major international conferences, starting trends on social media, and calling for action from world leaders, including her own—Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

“I am very unhappy with the choices you made,” Autumn told the prime minister at a First Nations water conference in 2016. Her simple honesty caught the attention of many worldwide. During his election campaign, Trudeau had painted

himself as a champion of indigenous rights, saying that he wanted all water advisories for First Nations peoples in Canada to be eliminated by 2021. This would mean that instead of having to boil their drinking water to avoid infections and illness, they could just turn on the tap like all other Canadians.

While Trudeau has made progress in reducing the number of water advisories—from 105 when he took office, to 56 in September of 2019 — it just hasn't been enough. "You see people talking about what they have done and what they're saying they're gonna do," Autumn says. "You never really see people talking about the other side of that: what they're not doing."

Autumn has also called on Trudeau to stop the construction of oil pipelines that cut through First Nations lands and seep into their water resources.

Autumn has never been afraid to raise her voice and speak up. She began to learn public speaking at an early age, just eight years old. It has become a way for her to honor her indigenous heritage, and to share her own voice as an activist.

Still, she says, sometimes she gets nervous. She gave her first big speech when she was 10, to a conference of First Nations people. Staring out at the more than 500 leaders gathered there, she worried that she couldn't do it. But then she reminded herself of why she was there and what she wanted to accomplish.

"Everybody here just wants to listen to me. They're not gonna judge me. They just want to listen," she thought.

As she has grown up, Autumn has continued to speak up for her people, traveling from Canada to the U.S. and Europe. She spoke at the Children's Climate Conference in Sweden; the United Nation Secretary-General's Climate Action Summit in New York; and the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Each time, she proudly wore her traditional water dress, which her mother made for her.

At a conference in New York she told world leaders, "We can't eat money or drink oil," a quote that sent shockwaves around the globe.

Autumn's environmental leadership and activism have been recognized around the world. She was named one of the 30 under 30 climate leaders by the North American Association for Environmental Education; she received the 2019 "Planet in Focus" Rob Stewart Youth Eco-Hero award; and she has been featured on the BBC as one of the 100 most influential women in the world.

Maybe most importantly, on a personal level, she was named the chief water commissioner by the Anishinabek Nation — carrying on her family's legacy, and the position once held by her dear great aunt Josephine.

For Autumn, the global spotlight is not what is important. Rather, it's the message behind her activism that she wants to see resonate, to have a ripple effect around the world.

"Anybody can do this work, and everybody can make a change," she says. "It's not only young people that are already making change, it's everybody."

For Autumn, who is now 16, the immediate goals are clear. More than 100 First Nations tribes in Canada are still on short-term water advisories at any given time. As some of her people gain access to clean water resources, others lose it. She is committed to doing whatever she can so that this number is decreased to zero.

Her mission, in addition to carrying on the work of her great aunt Josephine, is a deeply personal one. The first time she ever encountered a community with a water boil notice, she was shocked to learn that many kids from communities much like her own had grown up their entire lives not knowing what it was like to simply be able to use water from the tap.

"And I was just like, 'Why, for 20 years, has nothing been done about this?'" she asks.

The Canadian government has begun to take the problem more seriously. Its 2016 budget provided nearly \$2 billion for clean water projects across the country. But there's still a long way to go – not only in Canada but around the world.

Nearly 850 million people worldwide lack access to clean drinking water. Many of them are located in Sub-Saharan Africa, but that's not the only place where this is a problem. Even American cities like Flint, Michigan, and developing countries like South Africa experience water shortages that have lasting negative side effects. A lack of access to clean drinking water can lead to water-borne illnesses, difficulties in school, and even mental health issues later in life.

This is why Autumn marched alongside her great aunt Josephine around the lakes, and this is why she has continued to hold truth to power through her activism.

“When I speak to decision makers, I tell them that their decision is going to impact not only their grandchildren; it's going to impact our future, and our children's future, and our great grandchildren's future,” she says. “So, I feel like the decisions they make today need to be more thought-through.”

As women, we are carriers of the water. We carry life for the people.

Josephine Mandamin

Call to Action: Respect water. Take a stand for the water rights of indigenous peoples. Follow and repost: Autumn <https://www.instagram.com/autumn.peltier/>.

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
www.soup4youngworld.com