

The Role of Witness

In traditional West Coast ceremonies, witnesses are intended to ensure the community members and guests witness certain events such as those within a Potlatch and that ceremony is held to the highest standard and done with great respect. Chiefs will speak eloquently with heart and passion, dedication and commitment of their roles and their responsibilities to the community.

Specific individuals are called to witness the event and are usually given payment as acknowledgement for their work of witnessing, this in turn validates the ceremony making it legal and binding with the responsibility for the individuals to share further what they witnessed or heard. Those who accept to witness are responsible for ensuring that the community knows of the event and to vouch for the integrity of the ceremony for future reference. This is not an easy task, or one you should take lightly, you may be called upon to remember what happened, who said what and so on.

Finally, gifts are laid out on the Big House floor and money is distributed, first to the Chiefs, the Old ones, singers and then the guests. Guests are given gifts (the gifts are purposeful so that when the gift is being used, the person can recount the event, so oral history is maintained when using the gift) for witnessing the events that have taken place. This is a very old and respected tradition, like in other communities, the stories of events are told to others in expectation of change or working together, to keep our history or stories alive and that all are involved in one way or another.

As a witness it is your responsibility to remember these events and pass on the knowledge. Those who accept the invitation to bear witness have a responsibility to remember and to take the story forward. It means opening yourself to the truth of others, allowing yourself and others to be changed by it. In essence, relating what was said or done, not what you think was said or done. The Elders in ceremonies I have witnessed were masters at what we call today "Deep Listening". How do you think the understanding of the Two Row Wampum belt have survived, the Covenant Chain and many others? It was through witnesses and the retelling of the importance and significance of these events.

Everyone who attends community events or ceremonies is a witness. We share a collective responsibility to make things better and to act upon our learning while listening to others, because if we do nothing, nothing will change. The witness is usually chosen for not only wielding influence but for demonstrating through their own lifetime of accomplishments a tremendous commitment to education, social justice and the welfare of all.

That is all I know about that....