

Ojibwe

by Sheila Luecht

Sitting on the ground next to my brother and my cousin, dusk began to fall. The fire was leaping as the elder came from the sweat lodge. I could almost see the smoke entering into his ears so he could hear what the spirit wanted him to tell us.

“It was in the old days that French explorer came through here. He married a woman who was Ojibwe and together their household numbered many. They were trappers and lived in a combination way taking from both cultures and respecting their union. Together they brought many children into the worlds which were more Ojibwe than they were French, because as time moved on the old French explorer died and the path led back to the Ojibwe way.”

As I sat before this old grandfather I was fascinated how he mingled a modern vocabulary with the cadence of the old language. “This language traveled over many generations” he had explained and “it lives today in our land and beyond, as many of our people reach out across the land between the two giant waters of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.”

I did not speak the language of my ancestors, but I understood a few words. I could not have understood the story in the native language, but I was not alone. Our reunion was filled with many cousins and aunts, uncles, people who were long separated from the old ways and the language.

We were on the expansive farm of a distant cousin, gathered for the first time in 10 years for a family reunion called by this elder to pass on the family story in the old way. In the past our ancestors

relied on story telling to share our history and keep the ways of our people alive.

Our clan reunion was marked by a designation, that we were all of the Bear Clan. Some others came to mix with us, they were from various clans and we greeted each other in a traditional way, in the native language by saying, *Aaniin gidoodem*, and a version of "What is your clan?" The various other clan names translate to pin tail duck, bullhead, crane and moose, with bear being the largest.

Usually these meetings were held much more frequently but as time had expanded and the Bear Clan had grown so large, it was difficult to get everyone in one place. This meeting was heralded for a few years prior, in an effort to make it well planned and convenient for families to attend and to participate in their heritage. I just came for the story telling because there was something important coming up in my life and I wanted to see the past through these eyes to find my future on the right path.

I grew up knowing that in our culture were many old traditions that some people had long abandoned. I wanted to feel close to who I was because in reality it had given me a great deal of support in my life. I believed in the spirits. I felt them guide me on many occasions and I knew that I needed to understand the origin of my family to find a deeper understanding of what I felt they were now telling me. How can you understand the guide, if you cannot understand the story? How can you understand the story if you do not know it?

As I sat there, I closed my eyes to hear the story better. I shut out the breathing of my relatives, there was no chatter. My cell phone was off, my mind not focused on the beginning night sounds, only the voice of this old grandfather.

I heard the distant caw of a bird and a tinkle of some sound so ancient yet familiar to me, the sound of Miigis, white shell, cowrie.

I heard the story, but even better I could see the story in my mind. Somehow as the sky whirled around outside of my closed eyes, the stars began to pierce my lids with their brightness. The knowledge of the past was crawling through time on all fours and deep into my consciousness. I could hear, but I could see. I was inside myself, yet outside of myself.

The spirit who was speaking through this old grandfather, was speaking to me. This spirit formed a bridge into my mind that was intended for only me and no longer in the voice of the old man, a strong voice, an Ojibwa voice spoke.

“My son” he began. “You are here to find a way. I can give you the path, but I must know you are ready for it. “Open your eyes,” in my mind I opened them. “Do you see the land, the water, the sky?” Yes, I answered him. I could see all these things. The voice disappeared.

I was now alone. Suddenly I could no longer just see them, I was in them.

I wondered how it would be this way, but decided I did not fear. I decided that I could never be lost here in the spirit world. Running in different directions to feel the grass beneath my feet, I was untethered to the real world, I was alive, and present, and feeling another. I was deep into the spirit world. Here another Spirit who was Bemidii, (means river by a lake) was waiting for me by the river with a canoe. He motioned me over to him, calling my Ojibwa name, Buegoneguig, (means hole in the sky). I greeted him as my brother. I took the paddle he handed me and we set out.

“I will take you to the place of your birth. You will recognize it. Here you were born many seasons ago, too many to count in years that you now count your age. You are stepping back into your old self. I will show you this self, his birth, his life, his death. You will remember what you need to know to find your path, so you can tell your story again, with the right ending.”

I became confused. So much of this was not making any sense to me, “ Brother”, I said, “Who are you to me?”

“I am your spirit, I am your guide, I am your spirit guide. I live always. I walk with you, you and I are together. I send you dreams, to help you, even in this life, to see what you are, what you must do, how you must live, When you live I live still, when you die, I come back and you are part of me, we are still together. We walk again with another pair of feet. We work on all that must be yet accomplished.”

“You are me?” I could not believe this. I was starting to feel confused, queasy, like my lunch was coming up. It was the water, the current, the splashing of the canoe as it rose and fell with the waves. “ I do not understand. I am wondering what this means.”

Bemidii said “ I am your brother, I am you. I will not let anything happen to you trust me. I am here to show you something that will help you on your path. You are at the crossroads. I will let you see the direction at this fork. I have watched you and waited for this moment, when you are open to the old ways, when you were ready to see.”

Did I have a choice? Could I just open my eyes, did I have to ‘see’ as he was telling me now I could? I decided to go for it. What did I have to lose? This was all a dream, too much driving to get here, too much reunion, too much food, too much beer. Or not enough beer. I

was at a crossroads. I was facing an important decision. I was facing a life changing decision that was reversible, but not without much pain. If I took that first step down that path, it could change everything I had known, yet it seemed to be a natural conclusion to a long process. I would not regret this path, I just knew it, yet something ached in my mind and heart about it. I did not have my father to ask. He had died a long time ago. He would have known what to say, how to reassure me, how to hold me up on my first step in a new direction.

I was alone when I found him. He had been out in the shed doing some work with the lawn mower, getting ready to have a seat on it and cut the north field. It was the one place that we let go wild every year so that we could do some hunting there, flush out a few pheasants, wild turkeys and sometimes even deer on their way to the forest. I had grown up to my 12th year and was a big strong Ojibwa boy. My father had a job in the town and everyone knew him. When the elders had decided to move forward on the plan for a casino to make money for the tribe, he had helped them get the licensing and did all the work with the state to ensure its success.

It was successful and every year the tribe elders thanked my father for their good fortune, because he had believed there was a way out of poverty for our nation. He had said yes to the change and led those who were not sure forward, in the background, quietly and in his place.

He died there on the grass, the tall grass of the open north prairie, amongst the birds we used to hunt and deer we used to see. I found him. He had taken the mower out and then fallen off the seat before it could be started. I had just wandered back there and found him.

I was the man now. I was the leader in the family. I grew and helped my mother and sister. I was alone but not alone. Many men in

my extended family and my tribe cared for me and helped me into manhood. My father had given me the best start. He gave me pride in my clan. He gave me a foundation of good family, self discipline, a focus on my education, and a solid financial foundation. He did not live big as the annual portion from the casino profit share would have allowed. He saved the money, he invested some of it, he was intelligent and he never stopped working.

When I went to the white high school I found her. She was porcelain skin, with dark hair and eyes. She was a sparkler. I was attracted to her like a bee to a flower. She did not seem to see me. She was older, just a year. She had many adventures. She was fearless even then. She wrote her own script, she had her own story. I was lucky enough to capture a date with her. A very important date with her because she was in between loves and adventures, it was magical. It was her senior prom. She was a vision of loveliness and she let me take her to the dance. I was dancing on every cloud in the sky. I knew it would only be for that moment, but I lived a million years in those hours. It was perfect and almost mystical. I radiated moonbeams and sunshine and she glowed in that light. To me. It ended as it began quickly and with no expectation.

I went on with my senior year and another love. I began a long relationship with a worthy woman but she was not this one that was.

Somehow some of that radiance was left on me and when we met again many years later, it lit a dark part of her up and we were like lightening bugs dancing in a night.

Bemidii disturbed these thoughts with a laugh. "Ha, you begin to see part of the end before you see parts of the beginning story. Do not rush me my brother, this is not meant to be unfruitful for you; you will enjoy all that you will see and learn about. It is my gift to you, to help you see the path. There is sorrow, but as in all life it

must be there if you are to feel. I was sent to you by many fathers before and after your last father. I set before you the universe of family. It is all the same, each person, we come back and watch our same love over again, we try new things, we are one kind of spirit, yet individual, with free will. This is why I have come for you now, to show you a path; it will be up to you to choose it."

"Bemidii, can you see my thoughts?" I ask.

"Only here so that I can help you understand", he says.

I ask him, "Do you know my thoughts always?"

"No, I can only know what you want me to know then. I stay with you and I see everything, but I cannot hear your voice unless you allow it. I sometimes know what you do, but I do not know why. I listen from my heart. If you do not speak from your heart to me, I cannot hear you."

"Bemidii, I don't know how I have spoken to you even in my heart; I only just met you today!"

"That is where you are mistaken my brother, every time you called out in your dreams, I was there listening and even guiding you. Every time when you were awake and you were without your father, but called out to him, both he and I were there. We, together tried to speak to you, but you could not yet listen. When your mother would answer you we sometimes put words there for her to use. Sometimes she would choose them because she did not have her own words. We have spoken to you many times, but only now will you know this, when you are awake."

