

“The Foundation”

My Perspective on The Two Row Wampum

Everybody has a story. This is mine- or at least part of it. Hopefully it's nowhere near coming to an end, but I suppose I should start at the beginning.

My name is Emily Brant, and I was born November 29th, 1991. I was born into what I consider to be the world's greatest family. I have two amazing older sisters, and the best parents anybody could ask for. My dad is full Mohawk, and he grew up in Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, where he and my mom chose to raise us. My mom is a Scottish and English Canadian with only slight traces of Aboriginal ancestry. Her and my father have a story of their own, which dates back to before I was even born, and it involves many family and social struggles over the fact that they come from two different cultures. This is an issue that is often explored in story telling and media, but what about the children that are a result of these two very different people coming together in love to start a family? Please allow me tell you about my journey and experience as a “half-native” Aboriginal Canadian, struggling to find balance and a sense of what makes me who I am.

Is it the colour of my skin that makes me who I am? If it does, then I guess that makes me “white” and I am assumed to be part of the majority here in Canada. Most people are shocked when I inform them that I come from a native community and that I am Mohawk. I get comments such as “Oh, really? I never would have guessed!” or “Oh, you don't do all that protesting, do you?” (Referring to the recent years' protesting that has been going on in Tyendinaga and on other reserves).

What's worse than these “polite” - yet slightly offensive - conversations, though, is people talking negatively about Tyendinaga, a place that I now feel constantly defensive of. It also hurts to hear people talking stereo-typically and badly about Aboriginals without realising they are standing right in front of one, because I am not visibly native.

In recent years, Tyendinaga has had several incidents of community members being arrested for protesting in our area, for issues that are sometimes relevant and sometimes not. Some of these individuals are even family members of mine. The thing about them doing this is that people assume that they speak for the whole community, and I wish there were a way to let everyone know that they do not. They are certainly entitled to their opinion and have their own rights to express concerns, but I believe that there are more peaceful ways of solving issues and I was taught that we are a people of respect, peace, and unity. The issue with finding unity is that not everyone in the community has the same outlook on how to express and live out our culture and traditions. Some of our traditions have gotten so lost and we need to find a way of getting them back, but we need to do so in a positive way and I believe that we can.

What if I don't participate in protests? Does this make me a “bad” native? What if I did participate? Would I be accepted among the same people I hung out with in high school, who were non-native? What if I attend meetings at a church instead of Longhouse ceremonies? Does this mean then that I am breaking what some say is the agreement of the Two Row Wampum Belt or “Kaswentha” as our people call it?

The Two Row Wampum Belt was made to represent a basis of agreement between the Haudenosaunee nations and other nations of people. It is symbolized by two parallel rows of purple beads, resting on a bed of white beads. When our Haudenosaunee ancestors first encountered the European nations they realized that these newcomers may not be aware of the principles of peace that they lived by and feared that they may disturb the way of life that had been established among their people. Therefore, they introduced them to the Kaswentha, which was used as the framework for the principles which formed numerous agreements and treaties that followed.

Some say that the two rows of purple beads represent two separate vessels (or peoples) travelling parallel to each other down the 'River of Life'. They travel side by side, carrying out the agreement. The white beads were meant to stand for the purity of the agreement of mutual friendship, peace and respect, and as much as they separate us, they also bind us together.

I have heard native storytellers say that we should not have one foot in our boat on our side of the river, and one foot in the other, or we may lose our balance and fall in. Neither nation should try to steer the vessel of the other or interfere with their travel.



The Two Row Wampum Belt

My struggle with this is that I was born belonging to *both* sides of the river, both vessels. I was raised with the culture of both Haudenosaunee and European Canadian influences. At times, I view this as a challenge. At times, I view it as confusing, frustrating and difficult. I have witnessed racism against my mother for being non-native and married to my father, and for working at the Mohawk school on our reserve, and I hate seeing it hurt her. Why should we discriminate against someone because their ancestry is different than ours? I understand why Aboriginal people are sometimes leery of letting other nations in, given our history, but if my mother has chosen to join our community and celebrate our culture with us, then why not welcome her as we would our own brothers and sisters? I know many people that do, and already have, but I know there are still others who will disagree with me. They still believe that the two sides cannot cross.

On the other side of the 'river', I also have first-hand experience with racism and ignorance against myself for being Mohawk. Last year, I had an interview as part of an application process to get in to the Interior Design program at a highly reputable university. The professor interviewing me was intimidating, but seemed excited to be meeting with me until I mentioned where I was from. When I told him that I am from Tyendinaga, he blatantly asked me if I blocked highways and bridges (again, referring to the protests), with a disgusted look on his face. I can still remember his ugly expression and thinking of it makes me feel sick with disappointment. There were two other students in the room assisting with the interview who looked just as shocked and embarrassed as I was that he had the nerve to ask such an irrelevant question. I can vividly remember the look on their faces as well.

For the rest of the interview, I could not focus on any more questions. I could not focus on who my favourite designers were, why I wanted to go to that school, or why I chose to draw a spiral staircase for my portfolio. All I could think about was how someone could be so prejudice and the only question I then had for him was “So what if I do protest? Would you let that affect my chances of getting in here?”...but I could not bring myself to ask this aloud. I could only stumble my way through the rest of what was a very unsuccessful interview, one that I had been preparing for and anxious about for months. One that had gotten completely thrown off because of how much one person’s ignorance affected me.

In the centre of the Two Row Wampum, the three rows of white beads symbolize the purity of the agreement. As much as they keep the two nations separate, they also bind them together. It is the foundation of the mutual respect, friendship and peace. This foundation is something that should never be forgotten. Both peoples agreed to live peacefully together and racism is not part of this agreement. Each nation deserves equal respect, just as we agreed to.

Being a part of both nations does not *define* who I am but is, and will always be, a large part of what makes me the woman I am today. I often reflect my dad’s quietness and shy approach to new situations and people, until I am comfortable around them. I have his seriousness at times, but also his sense of humour. I have my mother’s bubbly and perky personality when I am around friends and family members, and I have her quick wits. From both parents, I have the ability and capacity to love other people to the fullest, as they have loved me.

I have come to the conclusion that having one foot in each vessel is not so dangerous after all. If I do fall, will I not have the foundation of our agreement beneath me? The foundation of mutual respect, friendship, and peace.

This is how I am choosing to interpret the Two Row Wampum and this is my story. You may not agree with my interpretation, and I will respect that. I have heard it said that different individuals telling stories is like a crowd of people standing in a circle around a tree. Each person is going to view the tree differently from where they stand; we all have different perspectives and that’s just a fact. Sharing our perspectives with each other will give us some insight and teach us something we might not have known or seen otherwise, and it may even encourage us to open our minds.

I am proud to be Mohawk and hope to continue learning and sharing about our culture. I am proud to be Scottish and English, and my mother’s daughter. I am proud to be from Tyendinaga and I know what it means to me. I will always call it “home”. I am proud to now live in the Toronto area and chase my dreams that I was always taught I could achieve, while never forgetting where I come from, and always having the support of my community members cheering me on and giving me a safe place to return to.

I am choosing to not let racism-from either side- define who I am or how much I will succeed. Every struggle I have had has both taught me a lesson and shaped who I am today. I am choosing to embrace both cultures that I am blessed to be a part of, and to embrace anybody who is interested in gaining knowledge or involvement in either one...in either side... in either vessel. Both rest upon a foundation which is something that we should never forget, and we will always have the Kaswentha to remind us of that.