

Dispirited

My father always said “you have to know where you come from, to know where you’re going.” Although, I never quite appreciated the aptness of such reference at the age of 12, I came to understand it much later in life. *Notahwi*, which means *my father*, told me our people once were vibrant and thriving, that we were once strong and mystical like Greek Gods. He would always tell me what a privilege it was to be one of the First Peoples.

That’s not the picture I saw when I looked at Aboriginals. What I saw was listlessness and poverty. I saw a colourless, self-absorption among us and I didn’t understand it one bit. My father shared the stories. He demonstrated his comprehension of the oral tradition as he narrated the quiet ravaging of our race. He told me of the tragic history of Residential Schools. Little did I know this history would come to shape what was now my experience as an Indigenous person.

He spoke of malnourishment and abuse, festering wounds that never heal and degradation beyond anything I could ever imagine. He disclosed horrors of rampant disease and death and told me how he had wished death would come for him as well. I asked why he would ever stay in such horrible place, to which he responded “we had no choice, as our parents had no choice.”

He went on to speak of how our family were once trappers, rich in furs and reputation. That was many, many years ago, when ‘currency’ could be earned by way of life. At that time our people were at an economic advantage, before the Almighty dollar was something to be attained by merit, who you knew, and the colour of your skin.

He painted vivid pictures of a world in which our people were free, prosperous, and fearless. He spoke of skinning and tanning hide, hunting and fishing, of pounding the drum and dancing in unison. He discussed how the Inuit carve incredible sculptures from soapstone. He showed me how the Métis made their own culture, rich in Michif language, fiddle music and political leadership. My father said First Nations invented hockey, something most Canadians don’t know, let alone First Nations people. He said the words toboggan and Canada are rooted in Indigenous origins. I learned of the incredible “Indianity” of our people who are rarely credited for all their innovation in a pre-modern world. Our people used maple syrup to boost their energy and today, Canadians use ginseng. We used bark to make canoes, berry juice for dye and decor, rocks for knives and animal skin for shelter, clothes, blankets and so much more. Our people were smart, savvy, and self-sufficient.

I knew not of that world. I knew isolation, desperation, addiction and pain. What happened to our people? How is it that Aboriginals are overrepresented in the judicial and Child Welfare system, and underrepresented in the education system and workforce? When I think about our people from a historic standpoint, I recognize we have so much to offer. I recognize today outsiders looking in resist our value, deny our worth, and publicly shame us. Just as they did when they sailed over searching for spices.

I used to think ‘why are our people so lost? So helpless? Why do we struggle so hard? Why do we drink, if alcohol enrages us so? Why do we harm one another through lateral violence or physical violence, while the rest of society already beats us down so harshly? Why

are we killing ourselves, and each other? Why do we hurt ourselves, our children, our families, our communities? Why do we hurt at all? Why are our men so mean? Our women so broken and abused? Why are we missing and murdered, incarcerated and alone?

I didn't understand it, and because I couldn't comprehend, I too, got *lost*. I became dispirited, broken and ashamed. I became resentful, spiteful and angry. Angry with others, angry with my own kind. I didn't belong, or so I thought. I was alone, or so I thought. Desperate to numb the loneliness, the demons that consumed me, I too found refuge at the bottom of the bottle, or so I thought.

The power of addiction is irrevocably unwavering. Using is liberating, at least momentarily, and that is where our people get stuck, in that instant gratification. That pseudo-emancipation, the feeling derived from alcohol that your problems have all disappeared, only to find you have created more. Your relationships crumble, your children are taken away, the whole you have dug yourself becomes an abyss and the only thing you turn to, is the only thing you know, alcohol.

I continued to dig myself an early grave for years. *Addiction*, a slow suicide they call it, and for me it was no different. That was until I began to foresee the pattern for myself. The pattern in our people, the vicious cycle of intergenerational trauma that began upon contact, colonization and cultural genocide. Only then did I begin to know who I was.

My father, like many generations of my familial lineage, died in an alcohol-related incident, he was young, as was I. This pattern befell me also. Blindsided by immense grief, I crumbled and shattered into a million pieces. I tried anything and everything to relieve the pain. Pain that was already building over a 19 year period and set off like grenade the moment we laid him in the ground. My methods of self-medicating had been passed down from generation to generation. In my family, you don't talk, you drink. You don't journal your feelings, you smoke cigarettes. I fell into a deep depression, I didn't have the support I needed, no one knew how to give me support, nor did I know how to receive it. I wanted so desperately to be in a better place I started making plans, plans to join my father in heaven. I hit what they call "rock bottom" and in the midst of my hopelessness, I discovered some riveting truths.

One, our people are a dying. Dying of disease, addiction, suicide and broken hearts. Two, just as our people are dying, our people are grieving. Grieving the loss of their language, their culture, their spirits, their families, and we have been grieving a very, very long time. Three, our people are hurting, and hurting one another as a result.

How do we know ourselves, our history, if it was beaten out of our ancestors? The long-standing, intergenerational effects of Residential School, the 60's Scoop, and overall assimilation in general has created quite a mess of things. Our youth have been handed an ever-lasting legacy of disappointments and depression, of confusion and suffering.

What is intergenerational trauma? Well, it's like this, my paternal great-grandmother, my *chapan*, attended a Residential School, as did my maternal grandfather, my *moosum*. I have a familial history of attendance on both sides, which means I come from a long line of shame,

pain, and dysfunction. Abuse, in all its devastating forms, is rampant in my family, as it is widespread in our communities. Our ancestors were stolen, beaten-down, humiliated, and marginalized; their descendants now fill federal prisons, treatment centres, foster homes, and homeless shelters. This cycle ensues as we walk through this world unknowing of our past, our history, and ourselves.

Before, I thought our people were what everyone else thinks we are, a weaker version of the human spirit. Now I see we are trying to save ourselves from drowning and the only life preserves we have been handed are gluten, barley, and prescriptions. What other outcome is to be expected? How do we find healing in a world where suicide is contemplated on a daily basis? It took me years to figure out that for our people, storytellers, the answer is catharsis.

Catharsis, as I understand it, is the liberation from one's inner demons by way of artistic expression. I discovered in the midst of living in the darkness and shadows, I should have been painting it. Instead of feeling the blues, I should have been singing it. Rather than shamefully concealing my pain, I should have been writing it. The opportunities for achieving catharsis, for an Indigenous person, are, miraculously, everywhere. You can find it in a Sundance or a sweat, a Pow Wow or a talking circle, it's real and far more powerful than any pill or magic "potion".

If you do not know your history, especially as an Indigenous person, you are predisposed to wander this world confused and misguided. Our young men identify with a thug culture, because they do not know their own. Our young women place worth on their bodies over their brains as a result of enduring colonial misogyny and sexism. We are lost and discarded, alone and abandoned.

We must ask questions, seek answers, and know ourselves, our history. We must express our pain and emotions productively, artistically. We must educate the world and ourselves about what it means to be Indigenous, not fifty years ago, not one-hundred years ago, but what an Indigenous person is today. What our depth, intellect, and resiliency looks like. Only then do we come out of the darkness and shadows, only then can we truly move forward.

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Kristen F. McArthur