

COMMUNITY VOICES

Traditional Native Culture and Spirituality: A Way of Life That Governs Us

BESSIE MAINVILLE

Bessie Mainville is an Ojibwe Traditional Elder who resides on Couchiching First Nation. Bessie was born in Manitou Rapids. When her mother died at an early age, Bessie was left with her aunts to raise and take care of her. She experienced pure love from her aunts while being raised in two households. At the age of 18 she was united in marriage with Elmer Mainville and then moved to the community of Couchiching. Being new to the community allowed her to make many new friends, but it was the older ladies of the community that became the closest. Later in life when her children were all gone to school she would join the Catholic Women's League and visit with these ladies on a daily basis. She felt very blessed not only to have a big family with lots of children, grand children and great grand children, but to have a mother and father in law who spoke the Ojibwe language fluently. Feasting and gatherings in both communities is very important to Bessie, and she participates in both spring and fall.

Pipe Ceremony

When the Elders and Leaders were negotiating with white people in regards to land claims and the exploration of resources, the Elders and Leaders were told that whatever resources or land agreements came out of their talks they would share with them. The agreements made between both parties were always sealed with a pipe ceremony, the Elders and Leaders truly believed that thru the ceremony performed with the pipe that the agreement came from the heart and was a "true" promise or agreement. This is still done in today's society. The elements used thru the pipe ceremony are fire, tobacco, stone and wood representing the four directions, as well as the four races of man. Tobacco represents kindness, the bowl of the pipe is faith, the stem represents the honesty,

and when the bowl and the stem being used together this represents sharing and caring. The bowl made of pipe stone represents faith, when the pipe is smoked you feel the faith. The sharing and caring are for our brothers and sisters, for whom the pipe is being smoked for.

Language

The mother tongue has a lot to do with how you get used to the way things are done in the traditional way, its more understanding and felt at the heart. When you hear the teaching and ceremonies being done in the Ojibwe language it touches you in a way where it makes you think of who you are. This is why it is important for a child to be spoken to in Ojibwe, so that it is instilled in their thoughts at an early age so that in return the language can be in that child's heart to learn as they grow.

It's much more meaningful when you hear things in Ojibwe, it helps you concentrate and really take in what you just heard. This is why it is also important to teach the language at a very early age. That is how I learnt the language.

Ojibwe traditional customs are more meaningful when the language is used. I want to express living the traditional way of life to everyone so that they can experience it, they can listen to the teachings and learn by watching the many beautiful things being done with our way of life. When you hear our language or traditions in English it calls for a little bit more explanation and meaning, it leaves more questions than answers. To me, that's where the language comes in again and the two thoughts and languages can be used to help each other in unison to understand. As a child you learn by what you see, you pretend to cook and you pretend to be a parent. This is living by example. As a child I was so fascinated by English teachers, therefore I liked to pretend to be a teacher. I would try to get my peers to play that way as a child. I (as an English teacher) would prepare their learning materials so I could play teacher. This would be a good example of how we, as Anishinaabe people, could learn as we go along with our daily activities.

Clan System

As a whole, a long time ago this is what Anishinaabe went by to guide them. Initially when I first thought about this, I thought to myself "how in the world did they do that along time ago without any communications?" In one area they went by their mother's clan, in another area of the world they went by their father's clan. If you were from the east they went by the mothers clan, if you were from the west you went by your father's clan. Where I come from, we go by our father's clan.

Long ago everything was so fresh before the white man came. There were fast runners a long time ago. These runners were important to the clan system. It was an ordered group, the clan system was an ordered group of action and conduct.

Man and woman should not marry into the same clan because the clan you belong to are like brothers and sisters, it's a family. I could not marry into my clan, the Bear Clan—that was a rule. This is an example of Anishinaabe law, this is all lost now. This is lost because we either don't know our clan or we don't care. However, I often think about how unique and special our culture is because from birth till you leave this world, your life goes on in a certain order—that is Anishinaabe. There are important events as you go along in life. I have experienced all this, I've heard it in my language and I believe all this. The sad thing about this is that I have also experienced the shift of how things happened with our culture and way of life. We were asked to become another culture. Some did a good job at this, but most are stuck, the ones that are stuck are the ones who are struggling with acceptance when it comes to the way of life in the new world. When I talk about the life's journey, I'm thinking about the four stages. In our journey of living there are things that happen in our life, thru the help of our Elders helping each other, we overcome the hurdles that we went thru. Speaking from experience I could not stay there, I had to move on because I had children that needed me. This is what I mean when I say I notice that people are stuck with moving on. We need to help each other.

Legends/Stories

When I was younger I would think of story telling being “a window to the outside world.” I was always so fascinated by our stories and legends. As a young girl I would never fall asleep until the last story was told, I always wanted to hear more stories. I was so interested in the stories, especially about Nana-bozhoo. These stories about him were about how he lived. How he lived as a little boy with his mother and then grandmother. The stories were all about his life experiences. Today when I look back on these stories, I think of them as creation stories. There were stories about him naming trees, animals and so much more. Being a human he was mischievous at times, but through his mischievousness there was always something to learn from his personal experiences and outcome.

There are other stories that were told to me that are now lost, at least three that I can remember. And many stories about animals and why they look and do things the way they do. I remember the story about the rabbit and how he got brown feet. In the story I recall visualizing the little rabbit dancing on wild rice and singing, it still brings a smile to my face. Funny things like this are

what made the stories fun and exciting. We learned from story telling. Thru story telling there were many teachings.

Code of Conduct

Like I said before, through our daily tasks throughout life, our daily routines, a child sees everything thats happening. How we behave carries on through out life. Listening is very important. You have to listen to what you are being told. When I went to live in the bush, I was told through a vision that if I listened to what was being told and if I did what I was told, that this would help carry me thru the future. Listening is calming and opens your heart. Be kind, do not talk about or make fun of your friends or relatives, because you do no know what you are going to be like. Elders reminded people about whom we are, about our culture and that there are certain ways we do things in mind, body and spirit.

The Importance of Sunrise

The start of a new day awakens all life on earth. In the Anishinaabe way of life, we believe that some ceremonies should happen before midday because the sun stops waiting for us to say our thank you's. At midday it is also the brightest time of the day.

Physical Beginning of Manhood and Womanhood

This happens around the age of 14 for boys. The father, grandfather or Elder would take that boy out to go fasting. The first few days the boy stays with someone in their time away from home. This happens during what the white people call puberty. The father, grandfather or Elder stays with the young man and does things about learning how to handle himself when surviving in the bush. The boy is taken for a cedar bath in water up to his neck and is bathed using cedar boughs.

For a girl this process would usually occur around the age of 12. Grandparents were the ones that took time out to be with a girl anywhere from four to eight days.

This custom is very powerful in the message for love and caring, respect and responsibility that is very much a part of our traditional upbringing. What must have been very helpful for the young girl or boy is that when they were in the bush they paid attention to that time in your life because there is a great change happening. Especially for the girl, many teachings are in place to learn from. It made a great impact on their lives at that time to be spending quality time with the grandparents. I talk about this because I experienced this and

it was done for me. I learned about courage and strength, something I use in today's times. I am so thankful that this was done for me. My two aunties loved me very much to help me thru this time in my life.

Teachings for a Young Couple

It's all about traditional values. They too were guided by parents or Elders, especially when it came time for a young couple to live together. When a woman became pregnant it was considered like they were both pregnant. They helped each other. There was a whole long line of things to do during pregnancy. Diet is very important. There are foods a young woman can't eat during pregnancy because whatever you eat affects the baby such as oranges. The baby's nose will look like an orange. You can't eat fish heads. The baby will have a high hairline. The physical part of it is she used to be careful not too have a big fall so that the baby would not be injured or show signs of injury later during birth. This hurts the baby. There is a long line of stuff the man does. He is to be very attentive because sometimes a woman is in a bad mood because of the changes happening, this is when the man should help her thru this. It's almost like it's a time when you should be taking good care of herself and the baby, this was very important. And to try not to be moody because it will affect the baby, whatever the mother does it affects the baby, especially if the pregnant woman is upset all the time.

After the baby is here you must be very careful of the soft spot on the head. There are many teachings about when having a natural birth. When a pregnant woman is having birth they are to get right up when they are turning on the other side, no rolling over, sit up and turn to the other side. I guess the baby in the womb doesn't get all tangled up, this prevents that from happening. At birth it is important for the helper to talk to the baby in the womb, it is important to say "I love you" and "you are a little boy or little girl." It is believed that that is a very important moment to talk to the baby, also when being named.

Also when a woman is pregnant there are certain ceremonies a woman must stay away from because the woman is honouring herself. This is why she should not join or participate in all ceremonies. Woman couldn't dance at a pow-wow when they were pregnant. This was done because they are to be resting. You take time out because you love the baby.

The Eagle Feather

They are not smudged but are used to the service of praise. You see this praise being used at pow-wows during certain parts of a song. The feather is used for being honoured. It is the highest gift given in the Anishinaabe culture.

*“The traditional native culture and customs is the right way
for Anishinaabe people to practise living in peace.”*

– Bessie Mainville