

Smoke Signals

From the minute I sat in the waiting room that Monday afternoon, every moment of the following hour is still engrained in my memory, even though that morning has become a distant blur. I know the morning was full of nerves, excitement, wondering and fear; a rapid, internal debate that I knew I wouldn't win. *I should probably just cancel | You can't cancel | Maybe next week is better | You've said that before.* Sitting alone in the waiting room, I recalled deciding to keep the appointment, though I also remember consciously choosing to walk through Allen Gardens to get there, if for no other reason than a means of a last-minute escape. *There are several paths in and out of that park, you can always just turn right and be a no-show | No, you're going.* I'd called a few days earlier, not realizing how quickly I'd get a spot. *How did I get here so fast? I only called four days ago. Is this really happening? Now?!* I don't know why I was nervous, but I was.

No matter now. You're here | I could probably still leave, couldn't I? | No. It's time.

"Lance?" A voice from the other side of the room called out my name.

Nope. No leaving now | Why did I ever start talking to Big John?!

Big John – a big stereotype of an NDN¹ with his "Native Pride" ball cap, long braided hair, and t-shirt embossed with a howling wolf profile – is a next-door neighbour who convinced me to see a Traditional Healer. "This Ceremony will help guide you in discovering your identity as you find your path," he insisted. *But I already have an identity. Don't I? And, do I really need a path?* I'd listened to him for weeks, months, as he helped guide me as far as he could, and this was the next necessary step.

"That's me," I said as I rose from my seat and walked over to the 'skawbe². We walked through the waiting room, past frame after frame of traditional artwork. I recognized the scent of sage, sweetgrass, and tobacco as the aromatic air filled my nostrils, and I felt myself begin to calm instantly. *You can do this.* We began to climb up the three flights of stairs. "Elevator's broken."

The door slowly opened to a densely smoke-filled room. An old, frail man sat on a bear skin rug, cradling his Pipe in his left palm, an ominous buffalo skull in front of him, an abalone shell filled with smoldering sage on the altar behind him. 'The One Who Sits in the Centre', as he's known, didn't look up as he gestured with a nod of his head to guide me to a seat; his long grey braids shifted in their symmetry as his head moved, and he pointed with his lips to the direction he wanted me to go.

Except, that's not how it happened at all, was it Lance? That's just what you were expecting.

The reality was far less romanticized. The 'skawbe and I opened the door to see Pete, as he's known, relaxing off-centre on a leather armchair, one leg draped over its arm and the other on the floor. Pete,

¹ A term and spelling that many First Nations people use to identify themselves, reclaiming the derogatory term "Indian".

² A short form of 'Oskabewis', the Anishinaabemowin (Ojibway Language) word for 'Helper'.

with his short-cropped hair, tight moustache, and welcoming eyes, nodded at me. He wore denim shorts, runners, and a white t-shirt. No buffalo skull, no bear skin rug in sight. The smudge had not yet been lit. As the 'skawbe took a seat at the computer, I handed Pete a tobacco tie, a customary offering when seeking advice or Ceremony from a Healer. He accepted it. "Hey, I'm Pete," he offered along with his gentle handshake and a smile.

"Lance." I responded, before asking, "Where, uh.... Where should I sit?" as he reached back for his Tim Hortons cup. *One milk, two sweeteners* I can still remember, for no reason whatsoever.

"Wherever you like. Just not in my chair, unless you want to sit in my lap." In unison, the three of us broke into a typical NDN laugh - loud, heads back, tongues out - and I instantly relaxed; laughter is an unofficial sacred medicine for First Nations people.

Ice broken, we embarked on a deep conversation that remains ingrained in my heart, mind, and spirit. All nerves were gone and we discussed my past, my path, and my journey. *He's really easy to talk to. Like an old friend.* We discussed the colonized history of my upbringing and my family as far back as my great-grandparents, as best as I could recall or have been told. I talked about my grandparents' experiences with the Pass System³, Residential Schools, and the criminalization of our language. We discussed how the Indian Act had succeeded in its purpose for my family - we'd be stripped of our culture and identity long before I was born, and here I was, in my 30s, feeling diasporic while on my ancestors land. "Being raised outside my culture has left me feeling lost and hallow. Resentful. I'm in a space now where I am ready to get on the path that was stripped from my ancestors."

"Back." Pete corrected. "*Back* on your path. You may not feel like you're there, but your Spirit *is* waiting for you there. You just need to get *back* on it. This is true for all people, not just those of us who come from Turtle Island⁴. Every person on this planet needs to remember that we are all connected to our past, to our ancestors. Knowing that and knowing who you are and the role you play in your world is one of the most important lessons. Whatever path you walk is your path – but doing it without knowing who you are is like walking it without a map. It's difficult, if not impossible."

Without words or further explanation, Pete reached for his Pipe, which indicated to the 'skawbe that he should stop taking notes and reach for his Drum. The Ceremony began and I would soon learn the two key parts of my identity that were never given to me: my Spirit Name (how do you know who you are if you have no name?) and my Clan (what role do I fill in my community?)

I was given no direction as to what I should be doing. *Just sit here and try not to look stupid. Or scared.* The 'skawbe made four slow, distinct beats on the Drum then upped the tempo which continued for the remainder of the Ceremony. *The heartbeat of Mother Earth.* Pete blew a few deliberate notes with his Eagle Whistle and, with a quick match strike, lit his Pipe – *Wow! He's allowed to smoke inside!?* – began to shake his Rattle, and smoke.

³ A Canadian administrative policy that, though illegal, forced First Nations people to remain on Reserves unless granted a travel permit (a 'pass') by an Indian Agent. This system remained in effect for over 6- years and limited First Nations peoples' ability to hunt, visit family, and run day-to-day errands. It remains deeply hidden in Canadian history.

⁴ This is the Indigenous name for the land now known as North America.

As a cloud filled the room I remained unsure of my role or responsibility, so I sat frozen and let my eyes wander. As my mind drifted, I recalled a story by Richard Wagamese, an Ojibway author, in which he is, himself, getting advice from an Elder he only refers to as 'Old Woman' on his own journey of reconnection. She tells him:

We arrive here covered in spiritual qualities like innocence, humility, trust, acceptance, and love. But things happen and those qualities get removed from us. Those qualities get churched off, spanked off, schooled off and beaten off. Sometimes we rinse them off ourselves with drugs and booze and poor choices. But when we start to walk with the Creator again, we're graced with the opportunity to recover ourselves in those qualities.

While smoke continued to fill the room, the Old Woman's teaching suddenly became clear to me for the first time. Ceremonies such as the one I was in were commonplace for my ancestors, but had been stripped away from my people through centuries of assimilation, colonialism, and genocide. But her teaching reminds us that our Spirit is not dead - *I guess that's what Pete meant when he said it is waiting for me* - and our ceremonies live in a space that cannot be killed by mere policy. I realized that this teaching was not only speaking about me and my ancestors, but was the crux of the cultural revitalization movement in which I was now engaged. Reassessing my life and my identity was a step towards decolonizing 'me.' This realization made my heart fill with pride and my eyes began to water, though tears eventually never fell. I sat a bit taller in my chair and I stared aimlessly at nothing in particular ... until I saw something I couldn't believe was actually there.

As the sun streamed through the open window, I could see an undeniable shape in the smoke. Wide spanning wings, occasionally flapping. There was, without question, an actual bird flying toward me through the smoke. *Bird Clan: the storytellers. I knew that I would be Bird Clan. I knew it!* I couldn't take my eyes off it for the remainder of the Ceremony - I only watched it as it soared towards me while remaining in one spot of the smoke. Suddenly, as the Rattle and Drum stopped in unison, Pete opened his eyes and the bird was gone. Dissipated into the air and open window.

"You are part of the Bear Clan," Pete began with no transition. *But... he must be wrong. I just saw the fucking bird in the smoke.* "Bear Clan are the protectors of people and Mother Earth. There is huge responsibility that comes with Bear Clan, but Spirit is there to guide you." *Neat story old man, buuuuuuuut I just saw a vision of a bird, so clearly you don't ...*

"And your Spirit Name is Northern Thunderbird." *Wait ... What?!*

"This name carries a lot of power." Pete said as he looked me straight in the eye. *No. Seriously. What?!* "Thunderbirds bring great change. They carry a great deal of control, which they use only for love. And so much power and change comes down from the North, along with the Northern winds. A lot of responsibility and duty come with this name, but you must carry it. You need to sit with it, sit with your Clan, sit with your Colours, and find out what this means for you as a Plains Cree man." *But, isn't he just supposed to tell me? What do I know at this point? I'm only a recent born-again NDN.* "And we're here to guide you and to teach you. Keep listening to your teachers, your Elders, and friends like John. You'll learn."

Then it was over. No fanfare. No cake. No cheers. I was left walking out of the room with a transcript of our conversation and a million questions. *What am I supposed to do next?*

I left the building, sat on the front steps, and lit a cigarette. As I gazed across the street, I took a long drag and began quietly humming along to a verse that was running through my head, harmonizing with Buffy Sainte-Marie as though she was singing directly into my ear:

On some reservation, your purification's begun
 It's the fifth generation the young and the old are as one
 Singing come back to the Sweetgrass, come back to the Pipe and the Drum
 And be your future.
 Ke sakihitin awasis

In my ancestral language, 'Ke sakihitin awasis' means "I love you, baby" which Sainte-Marie repeats throughout this song she's written for all Indigenous people who are standing up against assimilation and returning to the path of their ancestors. Suddenly this verse had a completely new meaning for me: whether we are NDN or Indian, from Europe or Ethiopia, we all carry our ancestry with us, and inter-generational memory never leaves our Spirit, as each one of us defines it. My Spirit was once connected to our Sacred Medicines (such as Sweetgrass) and to Ceremony (the Pipe and the Drum), so, just as Pete had suggested 20 minutes earlier, I had already made the decision to come *back* to them. I had made the decision to live my path and 'be my future.'

Just across my view from the stairs was Allen Gardens and, as my eyes adjusted to the August sunshine, I heard an unmistakable sound that broke my introspection. I looked up and watched a single hawk soaring above me from the North. It cried four lone calls. *Four calls. Once for each direction.* I am not generally one that looks for signs in every little thing, but I felt like my hawk brother was calling directly to me.

For the first time in as long as I remember, I am comforted and comfortable with my identity. I stand up and begin to walk home. My journey has begun.

Welcome back, Northern Thunderbird. Ke sakihitin.

Works Cited

Sainte-Marie, Buffy. "Ke Sakihitin Awasis." *Power In The Blood*, True North Records, 2015

Wagamese, Richard. *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*. Douglas & McIntyre, 2016