

An Aboriginal experience of transformation

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An Aboriginal Experience of Transformation

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Abstract:

The author presents a personal narrative of a boyhood disconnected from others, and feeling depressed in mood. Rather than a psychiatric intervention, his great aunt convinced his mother to have him follow his undiscovered aboriginal path, which confronted his feelings of low self-worth and low self-esteem. His uncle was a guide of the sweat ceremonies in rural Alberta, and the author participated in these, which included the teachings of his people and regard for the earth and all its creatures. The experience was transformational, and he never again was troubled by feelings of low self-worth.

Jack McDonald is an advocate for urban aboriginal people of Canada. He walked barefoot for forty miles along the Trans-Canada Highway during the 1995 Walk Against Poverty.

Key words: aboriginal, transformation, aboriginal purification rite

“Always remember that as beings in this universe, we have access to the energy from the center of the earth which brings us our groundedness; and to the heavens, which brings us our intuition. These are there for us to use at any time.”

- *Meditations of Virginia Satir,*
(Edited by J. Banmen, 2003)

I was born in October of 1956 and am the oldest of nine siblings. I am a descendant of the Métis people of Canada and have Aboriginal and European blood flowing through my veins. As a young boy growing up in within my family structure, six of my siblings were born nine months apart, couple this with a harsh disciplinarian father and an overprotective enabling mother I soon discovered many inadequacies within myself. I often viewed myself as a small worthless child and had a sense of disconnectedness from my parents and siblings. I felt different from them and my feelings were not real. It was only after spending a summer in Alberta in 1967 that I discovered my path, the Aboriginal path which has been my source of strength from my pre-teen years through to adulthood.

My low self esteem, my continued sense of floundering, the overwhelming disconnectedness, and many dark depressing days filled with hours upon hours of sleep was my early life. Days seemed to flow into one another in one long lamenting cycle. It was my maternal grandmother who convinced my Mother to send me to her sister's place in Alberta for help. So instead of visiting the local psychiatrist I was taken on a journey which immersed back into the traditional way of life of my people, the Métis People.

I arrived as an 11 year old boy one summer day in 1967 at my great aunts farm located about twenty miles east of Vermillion in Alberta. Here was the start of my journey back into my culture and back into my Aboriginal path of consciousness.

My Uncle was a pipe carrier and as such believed in the healing powers of the *Sweat (aboriginal purification rite)*. So my first sojourn as a pre-teen was the experience of my first *sweat* in a traditionally built sweat lodge made from a frame of tree shoots or branches which were covered with animal hides making the inside completely black. The only doorway was located on the south side. There was a shallow pit dug out in the centre of the lodge where hot stones were placed. I entered the sweat lodge by crouching down and crawling inside.

Over the next several months I would take part in several traditional purification ceremonies (commonly known as the *sweat lodge*). These *sweats* comprise of me stripping down to a pair of shorts and crawling inside the sweat lodge where burning rocks were placed and the door to the sweat lodge was shut so that I was in total blackness.

Once inside the heat and darkness began to work. Water was gently poured over the rocks as my uncle chanted and prayed and a gentle steam engulfed me, I wanted to get out of there but a little voice deep within me began to speak and I reluctantly stayed. The heat is unbearable the air is so hot. The darkness is overwhelming and still the chants went on. Suddenly I hear a drum beat very soft at first then it picked up tempo and I focused on that drum beat. Trying to breath in rhythm with the beats of the drum rather than gasping for air.

The heat is getting hotter, the steam hissing on the rocks and yet that little voice in me which I have not heard in many years began to gently speak to me about remaining calm and still. The sweats lasted hours and after each sweat when the opening to this dark place was uncovered cool air would rush in and re-energize me. That little voice inside me always remained constant as the drum beat slow and steady. We ate a meal after each sweat and I became so relaxed and calmed that I could actually hear my own heartbeat. Something which at the time I had not noticed ever before.

I was encouraged by my Uncle who did the sweats to ask one question before each sweat began. These questions would be answered only when I was ready to hear the answers. I wanted to know who I was? Why I felt different from everyone else? Why I did not feel alive? Why people treated me different all the time? Why I felt sad and tired so much?

With each question there was no answer. We would repeat the sweat ceremony day after day. Through it all the one constant I was aware of was the drum beat. As the sweats progressed I began to become aware of things happening inside me. Feelings and thoughts were stirring. I could hear clearly now the sounds around me. The wind blowing through the trees, the song that the birds made, the whispers on the wind. I could feel the sun on my skin. I could feel the night coolness!

I would go for walks with my uncle through the back acres of trees and scrub and he would show me the different trees and ask me to touch the bark, feel the scrub, wheat, and canola, and watch the deer, muskrat, and birds and coyotes.

On numerous occasions he would leave me alone to experience what was happening around me. When it rained we would hear the raindrops fall on the leaves, listened to rain drops bounce off the lake, and watch the stream grow.

One day we went to his workshop and here he taught me how to make a drum. The drum is made from a deer hide stretched over a rim and tied together with hide. The drum handle is made from deer antler. He taught me how to beat my drum. Slowly and gently and to listen to the voices of our ancestors as they spoke, slow and soft and when I did this for hours on end I began to sense a change within myself. An awareness, an awakening. My Uncle spoke of the Creator and the hidden life force in all animals and creatures. He spoke of the importance of life's journey to always stay on our true paths wherever they led us. He spoke of our ancestors as being free and nomadic. How one obtains their inner power is through life's experiences. He taught me about belief in oneself and belief in the creator and the Mother Earth.

My uncle would tell me the stories of buffalo hunts, river trips, horseback journeys, tracking grizzly bear and cougar. Hunting moose and elk and white tailed deer. Fishing for lake trout. He would tell the storey about the hardships of our people. How we were treated by others and how we should treat others. Each story had a message for me. About growing up, of being proud of who I was, about respecting our Elders, about following my path in life no matter where it took me. He told me that to be a man meant experiencing life to its fullest. I was about to experience that first hand.

It was during the last week in August that my uncle drove about thirty miles out into the back forty and told me I had to find my own way back to my Aunt's Farmhouse. I was given a small container of water and a pocket knife and my drum and a used saddle blanket.

It was around 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon when he drove off. I was quite apprehensive, nevertheless I knew what was being asked of me. On the prairies the sun seems to stay in the same spot except when its dusk or dawn. I decided to gather some wood and grass and to find a suitable location to bed down for the night. It does not get dark until around 9:00 p.m. so I had several hours to get ready for nightfall. I made a "lean-to" and failed miserably at lighting a fire using a broken bottle. My uncle had taught me previously that if you could not get a fire going then remember to sleep with one ear to the ground so

you could hear a big animal coming towards you. This was a safety tip especially at night when it's dark.

As the sun went down I began to feel a little apprehensive and began to gently beat my drum. As I beat my drum I began to lose the apprehension within myself. I lost all sense of time and soon realized it was late.

I stopped playing and prepared myself for rest. It was at this point in time I began asking myself who I was? It was answered very quietly from that place within me where the drum beat once was. I am Métis. I am from the land. My people have lived on this land for centuries. I am not afraid. I know who I am! With these thoughts I waited for dawn to come.

The next morning I set off in a south easterly direction cutting across fields of wheat heading towards my Aunts farm. With each step a new thought crossed my mind, why was I different from other kids? Why can't I feel? Why was I tired and sad all the time? These thoughts raced through my mind with each step I took. The sun came up and I felt its warm rays on my hands and forehead. I felt the sun! How warm it felt. I rested a bit and as I did so I noticed a family of grouse foraging the grasslands ahead. I wondered if these little grouse birds felt different from other grouse birds? The answer was no because they are grouse and they know nothing else. Could that be the answer for me as well? Am I really different or is it we are all different and that's okay because that is all we know? Seemed to make sense. Maybe that's it. I didn't know for sure but it seemed to make sense. That day was a good day - I could feel it.

Over the next three days I wandered over the wheat fields listening to that drum beat, hearing all the sights and sounds that life had to offer me. At night - that was the best time for I had to face my fears and seek answers in the darkness. It was while I was beating my drum that those answers came.

They came from that place deep within myself where there seemed to be a never-ending summer. That place where I locked away all my first time experiences.

That summer of 1967 allowed me to become whole again and I never looked back. I am able to still go there in my heart and when I do so, I seek the essence of who I am in all that I do. I still beat my drum and listen to the voice within. It is as if I have always done so.