

By: Decker Paul (Navajo)

I am not who I am. This thought occurred to me sitting on the edge of the sagging porch of the trailer home in which my grandparents lived. All my life I had been living as someone else, someone I'd fooled myself into believing was me. Someone I never was, nor ever had a right to be. For my entire life, I had thought that these people, these Navajos, were my people and I thought I was one of them. But I wasn't.

My father is a Navajo. One of the last it seems as this newer generation has been growing up in cities or has been living with the customs of the whites. iPods, cell phones, cursing, and heavy metal now seem to plague the youth. There is no respect for the elderly even though every old person is your grandparent and every child your cousin. No, there is none of that in this new generation.

But I, I was different, or so I thought. I had learned the stories, some of the old ways, and had learned to treat all living things with respect. I had been raised to be a Navajo. My father had taught me all he could. That was the only way he knew, and he'd passed it onto me. I remember once, we were driving home, just going down the freeway like any other day. And he said to me "You're very strange because you try to live by the old ways. You're not like most of the children." And I was proud. Proud to be able to hang on as one of the last.

So throughout my youth, I made it a point to try to do everything, learn everything, and pass on everything as a Navajo. I believed that's what I was, even though

I didn't speak the language, even though I lived in the city, even though I had no clan. But I fooled myself into believing it. I just had to be one.

A clan is essentially your family. It is your bloodline and your common relatives. This title is passed on by your mother's side of the family. But, my mother is not a Navajo. My mother is white, so she had no clan to give me, and without that, I feel as if I can not be a real Navajo. Without a clan, one essentially cannot be part of the family; the bonds deteriorate between relatives as they might not actually be related to you by blood. Thus, the problem is very clear. (Lapahie)

We used to go to the reservation throughout my youth. I remember being able to run as far as I could and not encounter any fences. I remember being able to walk as far as I could and not find another person, to hear someone else's footsteps, being able to get away from everyone. I remember watering the cows and looking for fossils. I remember that we would always go there for the Fourth of July just for fireworks, and being able to look up into the night sky and see Mars, and the constellations. I remember waking up at night and the moon would be so bright it was like day. And I remember being home because this was my home. This was where I belonged. This was where I could be free from the city, from the pollution, from the noise, the people, free to be myself, free to be anything!

This is what it meant to be a Navajo. To be able to run, and sing, and be free. Yet, there was something wrong. The adults would speak in Navajo, my grandparents still having problems with English it seemed. And I wouldn't understand anything. They would laugh and laugh. And I was left out. A stranger in my own land.

As I grew older, we weren't able to visit the Rez as often as before. I started doing things in summer, going to camp, going to faraway places for study, visiting other relatives. And I was stuck in the city for a long long time. Eventually, I too received a cell phone, and started working on a computer, and hanging out with the loud cursing mob of school children. But I still thought about another life. A life where I could make things better. I would build my grandparents a new house, I would make it so that the Rez would grow green again like it was for my father, and I would make it so we would return to a quieter life. A life where people don't just destroy things for profit or pleasure, but rather think of the animals and plants as equals. But here I was, in the city, just dreaming of another life.

Eventually, I became a Student Ambassador and was to go to Europe one summer. My grandparents were so proud; especially my grandfather who had political background and had served on the Tribal Council for what seemed his whole life. He found pride in the fact that I may be like him someday and that this was my first step in what would certainly be a glorious life as a world correspondent. They invited us up so that they could speak to me before I left. And we sat down on the edge of the porch. We talked a little about how school was, just dancing around the subject. Getting reacquainted. Eventually, my grandfather said that no matter where I went or how long I was gone, that I should remember where I came from. He said that I must remember my people and walk with honor and dignity and represent the tribe. To represent the family. And he told me to remember my clan. And he said my clan was of the white man.

But I know that I'm not the only one with this problem. I know that there are others even those who have clans and who are full members of the society that are experiencing this disconnect. I know that this is a problem. And like any problem, I know that there is a solution. So I propose that in there future there be places where these people can go, where they can reconnect with their culture, with their families. I propose that this place be able to both teach these people and others about our tribe, our traditions. I also say that this place will be able to help the others like me cope in this split society, this limbo, in which we are affronted by modern society while having to protect our traditions. But, in order to do this I will need an education. I will need to gain a worldview and be able to meet new people who will help me in this endeavor. I will need to find the others like me and I will need to get their help to show them and others they belong.

Work Cited:

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