

My Skin

By: Mitchell Rose Bear Dont Walk (Salish)

The memories of my first Christmas are contained in an ornament. The objects are similar in stature and adorned by the same simple pattern. My first moccasins are hung on our tree every year. I recollect nothing of wearing these moccasins but when I put them on our tree, I'm reminded that from my beginning, I am an American Indian. Throughout my life, I claimed to be Native American but I never really knew that meant. When asked what kind of Indian I am, I would spit out the well rehearsed answer of "Salish, Crow, Chippewa, and Shoshone Paiute". I gave little thought to the tribes I belonged to. All I felt like I knew was their names.

I wore my Native American status like a necklace, a necklace that added to my character. The necklace of my "Indianness" was on the outside of me. I could not explain what it was made of, embellished with or where it came from. I am Salish. I live on the Flathead Reservation home to the Salish and Kootenai. Living here and being a descendant of the Salish tribe, I felt disconnected from that part of myself and I never felt the need to explore.

I did not know what being Salish meant. I took part in certain Salish traditions and ceremonies but I never got the gumption to ask why. My mother explained some traditions to me, and reminded me that culture is far more than just a few traditions. I come to realize that a crucial issue facing my community is the lack of young people perpetuating our language and culture, not just for the benefit of the tribe but most importantly, for their own identity. I wondered if there were other young Native people

that felt same as me. When they see their brown skin, do they feel like they belong to their tribal community?

By the beginning of my junior year, I was able to begin asking and answering those questions for myself. Now what I see are pieces of Salish culture instilled in me. Much of that confidence is due in part to a job I had the previous summer. Along with other teens, I would learn the Salish language every day. We would also be exercising, learning leadership skills and helping community elders. My initial thought was “*Getting paid to learn Salish? I’m in.*” For the summer months, I studied Salish and went back to school in the fall, more knowledgeable about the Salish language. Before this opportunity, I don’t recall hearing Salish used often or at least paying attention when it was used. This year, ceremonies I attended held a new fascination to me. I realized that many songs and prayers of the Salish are, in fact, in the Salish language. Not only did I recognize them as Salish, but I also was acutely aware of what was happening because I now understood what was being said. I began to reflect on the idea of becoming more culturally aware of my tribe.

Currently on my reservation, there are less than fifty fluent speakers of the Salish language (Brown, 2010). Many of them are over the age of fifty. In my generation, there are no fluent Salish language speakers(Id.). This simple fact made me realize, that it’s possible that the language is on the verge of being lost. I wondered why I, as a member of the Salish community, have I not taken action in preserving such an important part of the culture. I thought of the other teens on my reservation and wondered if they were concerned about losing our language and culture.

Many young people don't see the need to learn about their culture because they think that it will be around forever. They do not take into consideration that the people that are upholding traditions and are knowledgeable enough of the culture, are the ones who have been doing it for many years. Salish elders are guides to upholding culture and what it takes to maintain it. The elders constantly are reminding us how important it is to become familiar with the culture (Bigart, 1996). However, many young people are not listening. I wasn't listening. But my experience that summer made me hear; not just Salish, but truth of what our elders have been telling us. Addressing our culture and language means to identify ourselves and be part of our community. This is why I continue to learn Salish. Being a young person, I now feel that it's my job to keep the language alive and inform others of the need for young people to be involved. I hope that others will look at me and see what I'm doing to make a difference, and will want to do the same. I am addressing this crucial issue in my community with short and long terms goals.

A short-term goal of mine is to know enough of the Salish language to be able to test out of it and use it as a language credit on my Honors Diploma. Another goal is to continue to bring awareness to my peers about the need for them to be a part of language revitalization efforts. Recently, several of my friends and I were able to be in a Salish language play. We also made a Salish language video for elementary school learners. The great thing has been the chance to collaborate with other teens like myself who have the same goals for the language. These projects helped spark interest in language learning with some of my other friends.

My long term goal is becoming a highly fluent speaker of Salish. Fluency is something that means a lot to me and so does my family. Two of my little cousins are learning the language as well. I want to be able to have conversations with them. An integral part of Salish culture is family. My identity is tied to my family but it is heavily influence by being able to identify myself with a community. Our tribal communities are based on tribal languages. In order to be proud of our culture, we have to belong to our language. And our language has to belong to us, to be a part of us all the time, like our skin. Being Salish is now on the inside of me, not the outside. I have much to learn still, but for now I feel like the language is mine to learn and to share.