

Essay Submission

by **Tristan Picotte**

Long ago, a man gathered his supplies, some sinew, a buffalo robe, some bones to dig with, and his patience. He'd go out onto the plains and find a spot close to the vicinity of an eagle nest. He'd dig a deep pit, as wide as his arms, and even deeper than himself. Using nearby branches he'd make a weak frame to lay his robe on, he'd throw dirt over the robe to disguise it. After placing bait, fish or some other meat, he'd get into the hole, pull the robe over it and wait. The man knew he could wait for a few hours at a time, but today he was lucky! A spotted eagle had landed and taken the bait! The man reaches through the hide, grabbing the eagle and pulling it down. Quickly he would grab the eagle by its neck, and twist, snapping the neck of the sacred creature. He'd take it back to his small camp to purify it and send prayers. Having gratitude for a fast hunt, and giving thanks for the eagle, he would be on his way to put his catch to good use.

In old times, the feathers of spotted eagles were used in a number of ways. Feathers often commemorated a great act by a warrior, whether it was given for counting coup, or showing great skill. They were not given lightly, and even today, respect is shown to these feathers. My father explained to me that only the feathers of wanbli gleska, spotted eagles, were used. The spotted eagles were known as the solar bird, flying so high that they touched the heavens. Wanbli gleska is said to carry the prayers of the people to the heavens, so that Wakan Tanka may hear them. It is because of this reason that they are used. There were different feathers for different acts, and events. A man wounded in battle would earn a feather dyed red, black tipped tail-feathers would be given to warriors for war honors. Women would receive eagle plumes for acts they were recognized for. A baby would get an eagle plume when they were named. Feathers were meant to be honored through display, and to simply put one away was considered disrespectful. To keep the feathers in sight often

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reminded their owner of the acts they had done to earn it, and keep in their hearts the values demonstrated in earning it. They commemorated bravery, determination, cunning, skill, and even marked moments of life such as marriage, and birth. A feather was not simply a thing to be owned, it was an honor to be earned.

To date I only own two eagle feathers, one given to me when I was a baby to mark my naming, the other I was given when I first became a sundancer. When I see that plume I was given, I recall my name: Canwakan Yuha Mani, "Walks with The Sacred Tree." A simple name that reminds me of where I come from, my traditions, the values I was taught as a child, and the expectation to respect my values. They keep me Lakota, they keep me determined. Once we were a proud people, strong and wise. Today we are plagued by so much disease and oppression. I look at the feather and I'm inspired to rise up and go past my expectations. I was taught to always put in the extra work, and there are benefits to doing more than you need to. Sometimes they aren't even for yourself, but the good of others. My other feather reminds me that I am no better than anyone else, and at times that I am there for others.

I think that it is more important that native families continue this practice today, than in ages past. Not only does the continuation of tradition keep those beliefs alive, but it encourages the youth to learn more about their culture. Today, where education is lacking on reservations, jobs are scarce, alcoholism and homelessness are rampant, I think one would do well to remember one's roots. I try to take actions that would make my ancestors proud, and try to encourage others to as well. What we once had was a prominent, beautiful, diverse society. A few territorial wars going on here or there, but they happened. Once we were given the tools to do so, we made beautiful works of art, fine jewelry, and even today our dances are considered a spectacle to watch. When we were able to come to peace with each other, we did many great things, we had something of a renaissance.

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It seems like that culture got lost in translation, and now life puts a gray cover on top of it. I think if more families took part in their traditional beliefs that maybe our culture could be better recognized today, and not just for aesthetic looks, but also to bring back the values that seemed to be so rare anymore.

One of the most important things that feathers preserved was pride in our values. They were given to honor and commend exemplary acts. When good acts happen today, they get a praise from word of mouth. A person must be taken at face value, not necessarily a bad thing, but when someone can call you on a particular act it's humbling. In Lakota culture, I couldn't say much about others, we had our values; Spirituality, Compassion, Generosity, Wisdom, Respect, Honesty, Humility, and Bravery. These values can make someone a better person, and I think praising them and recognizing them would bring back the urge, or even the standard that we used to have. A lot of times in today's society, natives are stereotyped into being a certain way, or having habits or lifestyles that are just a bit ludicrous. Being disrespectful, or selfish, cowardly or lazy doesn't help these stereotypes. With these values guiding a person to do better, it reflects that much better on their community. When someone is praised for helping an elder with work, or pushing themselves to do well in school, or win a championship in basketball, the drive to do those things more often, not just for the praise, but because it is the way to be. To be kind, and compassionate, and to be able to become better at something is one of the key points in nature. I think that the feathers did more than just honor a person, they pushed the culture forward in an attempt to better the people and not just the individual. We used to do things for the good of others. Oyate kin yanipi kte lo, "So that the people will live." We can strive to be good like we once were, all we need is a little motivation.

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