

The Literacy of the Land ...A Lost Skill

By: Joy Asham

I think it was about 3 weeks ago that I felt it happen. Just a little bit of edge to the glamorously sunny day. It snuck up a shirt-sleeve and whispered in muted purrs in my ears. It was the omen that summer had peaked and autumn was on its way.



Outside my bedroom window stand three sentries. I live on the fourth floor but these wonderful trees dwarf my room, splaying their branches throughout summer – hiding deep within their magnificent foliage all kinds of life. There are at least five big squirrels (I look at them with delight but my ancestors might have seen travelling stew) that bound about in the leaves and along the tree's crooked highways.

Several nests of birds dot the green landscape, not really obvious to the untrained eye but there if you know what to look for. I was lucky enough in my life to be exposed to many people who were literate in such things and they passed their power of observation on to me.

One was an Ojibway from Big Island. He had quite the story to tell as he had been in residential school and then an Indian guide for a fishing camp. He had seen one of the last grand sturgeons in the English-Wabigoon River system: it weighed 240 pounds he claimed. This was the greatness and power of Mother Earth back then – a grand provider.

I will call this man Ray. His life had begun on the trapline. His parents could not speak English well and when they finally came back into town with the baby Ray, they went to the Indian Agent to record his birth. When asked about the date of this event, his parents' answer became translated as "the end of February". That year was Leap Year, so his birthday was entered as February 29. This become very problematic as he grew up.

It used to be that often the relationship between Indian Affairs and Indians was very strained. It often resulted in "working to rule", the bureaucrat in power finding whatever way to deny one her/his most basic rights.

In Ray's case, it was decided that he was only an Indian in the years that his birthday happened, in other words, one year in every four.

Ray then went about getting medical services one year out of four, status payments in the same year and no others, even selective schooling. In a way, the latter might have worked for his benefit as this meant he only spent a short time in the residential school system.

These withholdings though, meant other things. In the sense of reading and writing Ray was never fluent. He was more comfortable in the Ojibway language than in English. The years he was not in school were spent with his parents, in the bush, on the trapline learning a lost skill: the literacy of the land.

His powers of observation and visual memory were amazing. One day he picked up a felt tip pen when we were talking and an old T-shirt. A few squiggles and the shirt was transformed into an amazing picture of a moose in the wild. After a while, he took me out on the lake, and hence continued my "bush" education that had been lying dormant since I was a kid.

We moved across the surface of the lake, between jutting cliffs. We spent three weeks out there: fishing, shore lunches, returning to camp only to sleep. We explored and listened, allowing the land and lake to talk to us and whisper of their secrets. He taught me how to read the sky and the boreal forest. Before I knew it I could pick a bird's nest out of the greenery and tell direction by the tree tops. I learned (once again) how to make a fire, what rocks could be tools and how very much the understory of the forest was just as important as the trees.

One cannot even touch upon literacy of the land in three weeks. But I got pretty good at finding life just about anywhere. So today, I have a pretty good idea of the community that thrives in my three trees.

And now as fall dusts upon us and the leaves leave for the winter, those wonderful little communities will be exposed to all. Look at a tree for me, and, if you are a big sap like I am, hug one. And learn what you can about the boreal forest while it still exists and show your children, every year. ><

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