

IN HONOR OF THE LESSONS OF THE ELDERS

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As a member of the Saginaw Chippewa tribal nation, the author learned many lessons from the elders; including the importance of their culture and unwritten history, and how to attain inner peace. This narrative describes the positive memories and interactions the author had throughout her life, and how these experiences have influenced her profession as a social worker, professor, and gerontologist.

As a member of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, I have had a wonderful opportunity to observe and experience the aging process from an American Indian cultural perspective and an intergenerational viewpoint. I was raised with the traditionally grounded cultural value of respect for the elders. I was taught that the elders are treated with high regard and held in high esteem. The roles of elders are part of an intergenerational construct within the culture. They are often in the role of keepers of the culture, kinship keepers, teachers, mediators, unifiers, counselors, healers, and caregivers (Bahr, 1994; Emick & Hayslip, 1996; Ryan, 1981; Shomaker 1989). In some tribal nations, a person becoming a grandparent defines elderhood, in part. Bahr (1994) states, "The expectation that grandparents will play a major role in the physical care and training of their grandchild is common among most Indian people. In fact, it is one of the notable similarities among the wide diversity of tribes" (p. 236). In present day, these traditional roles remain true for many, but not all of the elders.

Hendrix (2002) defines the term "elder" in the American Indian community as "a position of leadership, based on experience, spirituality, and community services, rather than chronological age" (p. 8). There are variations from tribal nation to tribal nation, however. The Indian Health Services consider Indian elders as those who are 55 years of age and older, while there are some tribal nations that consider members as elders at 40 and 50 years of age. It is clear that there

are many considerations when defining elderhood within the American Indian population.

The elders have played a significant role in my life and interest in gerontology. However, as a sign of respect for their privacy, they are not named. In fact, the elders view themselves as a collective who are fulfilling their responsibilities to the tribal nation by making contributions without individual recognition. In the American Indian culture, one is considered extremely skillful if he or she can make a positive impact on the tribal nation without receiving recognition for the good deed. Additionally, two of the elders referenced in this narrative are medicine persons who prefer their names not be revealed in oral or written form.

My story begins with my mother, who was born on the Saginaw Chippewa Indian reservation located near Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. She was then removed from her home on the reservation and taken to a U. S. government boarding school at the age of seven. She was placed in the boarding school along with her younger sister and brother. She remained there until she was seventeen years of age.

My father was raised off reservation land in an Indian settlement and did not attend a boarding school, avoiding being sent by being what has been termed in the community, a runner. When the government people came to remove the children in the settlement community, the children ran into the woods and hid. They remained there until an elder came

to let them know it was safe to come back home. This is one of the ways my father and other children in his community were able to avoid the boarding school experience.

The United States boarding schools were created to civilize the savage (Adams, 1995; Archuleta, Child, & Lomawaima, 2000; Churchill, 1997). Many elders have reported being treated harshly at these schools (Adams, 1998; Bloom, 2000; Jones 1995). The rules of the government boarding school were strict; the students were not permitted to speak their language, pray, or worship in their own cultural traditions. The children were severely punished if they broke the rules (Archuleta et al, 2000). My mother and many of the elders have shared several accounts of the maltreatment they experienced while living in the boarding schools. Through these accounts, I learned quickly that the school I attended in the city was extremely different. I couldn't imagine not being allowed to come home to be with my parents at the end of the day, during vacations, or for the summer months. The historical treatment and family experiences provided two lessons: 1) respect the elders for they will protect you and teach you how to survive; and 2) it is a privilege for children to be able to live with their parents.

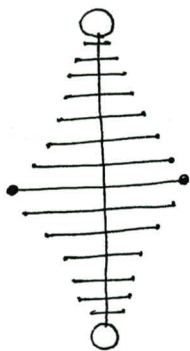
Inclusiveness

My parents married and moved approximately one hour away from the reservation to the city to find employment. My father worked in an automotive factory and my mother worked in the home and was involved in several American Indian community efforts. I traveled with her to various American Indian communities within the State, both on and off reservation land, to meetings that focused on tribal issues. During the drive to the location of the meetings, my mother would talk with me as if I were an adult. She shared what she thought was going to occur at each meeting and then, on the trips, would analyze what had happened at the meeting. She

discussed the roles members played during the meetings and the probable rationale for their point of view. This was my introduction to the political structures of the tribal nations and organizations.

As a family, we spent almost every weekend and most of the summers on the reservation visiting relatives and extended family members. We attended events, which were referred to as homecomings or camp meetings, that were held on the reservation. These events are best defined as a meeting of tribal members and their families to pray, participate in traditional ceremonies, dance in celebration, trade arts and crafts, and partake of traditional foods. It was always an exciting time because someone would be named, honored, adopted; or there would be a celebration by someone who had a good year. It was a privilege to be part of it.

I have had several special moments with the elders in my life. However, my first memory with the elders was at a homecoming event. At the age of five, I sat with the elders, both male and female, and listened to many of their life stories. Although I had some awareness of my body being different, I felt as though I was an equal participant in the conversations, a member of the group. There were times when I could not understand some of their conversation, because of the interchange of the Ojibwa language and English and, in part, my young age. However, I learned to read body language and the patterns of speech to gain an awareness of the emotions which accompanied the topics of discussion. The elders shared their boarding school experiences, their concerns for the young people, and the positive events that were occurring in their families such as naming ceremonies, honors bestowed, or the loss of loved ones. Often humor added levity to these discussions. As I sat with the elders, my mother strongly encouraged me to go and play with the other children and "let the elders be." The elders in kindness with a uni-



fied voice, that they thought I had an "old soul" and to "let me be." I was pleased to be allowed to stay with them and each time they met, after that day, I was included in their discussions. The lesson learned from this experience was the elders see you as an individual at any age.

So, You Are Not a Basket Maker

The elders were willing, and most of all patient, in teaching basketry, the art of beadwork, the making of shawls, the dressing of dolls as children's toys, and the creation of my own traditional dance regalia. They also shared the meaning and importance of each task and skill. Without their teachings throughout my childhood and adolescence, I would not be able to clearly understand my cultural heritage. They taught me not only the arts and crafts, but more importantly about life.

At eight years of age, I had my first basket-weaving lesson. Several of the elders, both male and female, were working on baskets and invited me to participate. I was comfortable with the elders as they taught me how to make the base of a basket with the reeds from the white ash tree. I tried several times to do as I was instructed. However, my basket base kept falling apart and the reeds would simply shoot out of my hands and onto the floor. I was aware that the elders were observing my attempts and mishaps, but they did not say anything to discourage me.

While working at the table, they took the opportunity to discuss tribal concerns and family issues, both challenges and honors. They also told stories, which often revolved around animals that acted out behaviors that transgressed a cultural norm. The transgressions resulted in a rationale as to how the animals looked or moved or why they lived alone. Even though I was frustrated with not being able to make even the base of a basket, I enjoyed listening to the life stories as well as thinking through the moral of the folk

tales. After several attempts at basketry with little success, I felt I had let the elders down. I wanted to be successful, not only to be allowed to watch the elders calmly make beautiful items, but to be able to continue to sit at the table and listen to their stories. After a few days of joining the elders at the table, one female elder looked slowly around the table at each of the elders that had observed my lack of success. I understood there was non-verbal communication that had taken place, but I was not sure what it meant. She then made the statement, "Maybe she will be a beader." With that statement, I was simply moved to the next table of elders who were beadwork artisans. I learned numerous lessons from my basket weaving experience. Most importantly, I learned that if you are unsuccessful, you may just need to be doing something else that you can be successful at.

Beadwork is My Forte

The elders at the beading table made a space for me, and I became comfortable with this group of elders within just a few moments. They began their instructions on beadwork with no commentary on what I felt was a failure at basket weaving. Each elder shared the importance of the colors and designs of the different items he or she was in the process of creating. My first assignment was to thread a needle. I then began threading the needles for some of the elders who were visually impaired. I received quiet praise from the elders and felt good to be of assistance and successful at this task. Also, I thought they would share the news with the basket makers, so I felt I would be redeemed in their opinion of me.

I learned the elders at the beadwork table had their own concerns and discussions on tribal affairs and family issues, many of which were similar to basket makers. However, they told a different set of folk tales which I would not have had the opportunity to hear had I not left the basket maker's table.

My beadwork improved over time and became more complex. During childhood I made rings and necklaces and then progressed to the beading of belts and headbands. The elders, at what I have termed the "learning table," acknowledged the improvement in my work, and they indicated they looked forward to my next accomplishments. At that moment I knew I was a beader.



During my adolescence, I made traditional dance regalia for myself with the assistance of the elders, the aunties, and my mother. As a young adult, I created dance regalia for the children who were interested and enthusiastic about participating in the ceremonies and pow wows. I also taught them the meaning of the colors, designs, and utility of the items. The lesson learned from this experience was to enjoy your success and share your knowledge and skills with others.

Now, I not only enjoy creating beautiful items, but I think of all the elders who were at the "learning table." I often recall their stories, concerns, and sense of humor that was used to lighten the discussions. When I was older, the elders shared more of their hardships, not to seek sympathy, but to share their experiences so that the generations to follow will be knowledgeable and therefore more able to avoid similar life events. They shared the importance of strength, courage, and the care of others. When I am engaged in beadwork, I feel connected to all of the elders who have passed to the other side. I remember the conversations at the "learning table" and I feel their strength and power; it gives me a sense of renewal. The lessons learned from the elders are to share your skills, culture, humor, and peace. As an adult, my beadwork has brought treasured, peaceful, and reflective moments.

Meaning of a Woman's Shawl

In addition to beadwork, I learned to make shawls for traditional dance regalia. I was taught the traditional and practical uses of the shawl. In the past, children were wrapped in the shawls when they were carried. The shawls were used around the head and shoulders of women to keep them warm. An elder once told me, "You are not to borrow a shawl; you must have one of your own when coming to ceremonies and cultural events." The shawl symbolizes womanhood. That is why every young woman needs to have her own shawl.

The colors of the shawls represent each woman's own personality, role, and stage in life. The fringe on the shawl represents the numerous commitments a woman has and is cut evenly, representing all of the woman's commitments as equally important to her. The hand-tied individual lengths of fringe to the fabric of the shawl represent the connectedness. Therefore, the woman's traditional dance regalia is not complete without a shawl.

I have made my own addition as to how a shawl can be utilized that represents connectedness and family concern. The first shawl I ever made, which was a part of my traditional dance regalia, was used as a wrap for my mother at the time of her burial. She had requested that she be cremated, and her request was granted. Although I had difficulty with the thought of putting the container into the ground, and as much as I did not want to part with my shawl, it felt appropriate to wrap it around the container that held my mother's remains. Then I was more comfortable when I put the container in her burial plot with the permission of the medicine person. This experience allowed me to be at peace with the loss of my mother. The lesson learned from this experience was that you can utilize a traditional item to bring peace of mind.

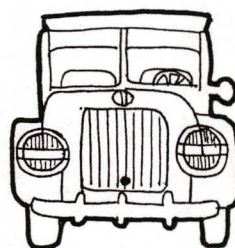
Naming Ceremony

Red Horse (1980) describes the naming ceremony as a ritual that varies from tribal nation to tribal nation with some tribes "performing the ceremony shortly after birth; other tribes perform the ritual when the child is several years old. In either case, this ritual is illustrative of formal kinship adoption" (p. 465). Regardless of when the ceremony is performed, the name given to the member comes with responsibilities that the individual is to fulfill within the structure of the family, extended family, clan, and tribal nation.

Within the traditional culture of my tribal nation, elders name each member twice: once at birth and the second the person becomes a young man or woman. I do not recall my first naming ceremony, but my second ceremony is etched in my memory. It was a wonderful experience even though, at times, I felt uneasy being the center of attention. The ceremony was conducted over a two day period. The elders of the tribe observed my behaviors and interactions with others. They also consulted my mother at different times during those two days. I was curious as to the purpose of their discussions with her, but I felt it would not be appropriate to ask her what the elders had said. At the closing of the ceremony, an honor song was performed for me by the drummers, the elders, and the tribal community. The elders conducted a prayer and the name Breshiinh kwe (Birdwoman) was bestowed upon me. My name is significant to my family, extended family, clan, and tribal nation because it follows the clan line and it also provides a spiritual and familial place for me within the tribe.

During the honor song I stood in the middle of the sacred circle. Each elder and then each community member danced in the circle and then into the center where I stood. The elders were the first to offer their gifts to me. The gifts were put on my person or handed directly to me. These items included necklaces, pins, medallions, earrings, and hair ties.

Many of the items were prized possessions and had significant meaning to the givers. For example, one elder presented me with his eagle feather fan that he had had for 37 years; another elder gave me her necklace that was part of her traditional dance regalia; a veteran gave me a part of his headband that was shaped like an eagle and beaded in the colors red, white, and blue. The value and sentiment of these gifts indicated that I was no longer a child, but a young woman who had earned the responsibility of these memorable and valuable items. The naming ceremony signified that I now had major responsibilities, not only to myself but also to my immediate family, the elders, and the community members. There were several lessons learned during the naming ceremony: the recognition of adulthood; the role in the community; the importance to the elders and community members; and that you have a name and an honor song in the language of your people.



The Transporter Role

In my early twenties, I assumed the role within the community as a person who provided transportation for the elders whenever necessary to assist them in traveling to funerals and other important community events. As a transporter for the elders, I learned of tribal issues, health concerns, methods of coping with loss, and the traditions that occur during the time of bereavement. Presently, even though I have earned three degrees, I still have the responsibility of assisting the elders with transportation. Of course, as a social worker

and a gerontologist, I have provided other services for the elders and to several tribal nations. However, my first "responsibility" to the community remains as a transporter. I am sometimes amazed as to how everyone has a role to perform without being asked, so that we can all take care of each other and no one is left out during life's most challenging times.

Formal Education

When I began college, an elder shared that she was pleased that I had this opportunity, but made the statement, "don't get lost." Her statement had several meanings: come back for ceremonies and celebrations while in college; do not get lost from who you are by behaving in ways that are harmful to your body, mind and spirit; remember to return to the community after completing college. Once I began college, the meaning of the elder's statement became clear. I learned that it was important to stay connected to the culture, for it helped define who I was and the rationale for the goals I strived to accomplish. Participation in the culture makes contributions to the balance needed for a healthy life. The lesson learned at this time was not to forget who you were and where you were from and to remain connected to provide a sense of balance and centeredness to your life.

Professional Social Work With the Elders

My first professional experience was a temporary position at the Lansing Indian Center in Lansing, Michigan. I was hired to contact the elders in the community who were 55 years of age and older to conduct assessments of their need for a congregate meal site. If there was a need for the site, the director of the Center offered the agency as the site. It was a great experience to visit with the elders in their homes to conduct the assessments. They shared their life stories as well as their current needs. After the completion of the needs assessment study, I knew that

the congregate meal site would be beneficial for the elders. I was pleased when the congregate meal program came to fruition. For many years it provided meals and a meeting place for the elders who lived in the greater Lansing area. My mother, at the age of 55, became eligible for the benefits of this program. Later, in her last year of life when she was diagnosed with leukemia and needed assistance at her home, the elders who participated in the congregate meals became her companions as her health declined. They came to visit her, prepared her meals, and listened to her last stories.

The second position in my professional career was as an interviewer for the State of Michigan, State Office on Aging (Michigan Office of Services to the Aging, 1990). I was assigned to conduct assessments of American Indian elders in the eastern region of the State. This position provided a wonderful learning experience. I was able to interview elders from various socioeconomic levels and from the healthy aged to an individual who had had a heart transplant. When I interviewed the elders, I quickly learned that they were responding to the questions in story format. So, I patiently listened to their stories, completing the questionnaire as the responses to the questions flowed with an array of emotions.

All of the elders were unique in their own right. However, there was one elder whom I will always remember for her response to the question: "Is there anything you feel you need immediately?" She was a retired teacher who lived in a three-story apartment building with no elevators or air conditioning. On a warm August afternoon, I climbed the staircase to her apartment. She had referred to her living quarters as an apartment when I spoke to her on the telephone, but in reality those living quarters would most accurately be defined as a room with a kitchenette and a half bath. I knocked on her door that was ajar and I heard her voice inviting me to enter. As

I entered, I noticed that she was wearing a black patch over her left eye and a lightweight cotton dress. She sat on a narrow bed covered with only a single white sheet. Throughout the interview, she remained upright on the bed, leaning against the wall as a brace for her back. She would intermittently tilt her head toward the window next to her as if to catch a breeze, even though the air was still. She offered me a seat in a dinette chair that sat next to her bed. It appeared that this chair served as a nightstand when she did not have a guest.

As I sat in the chair and began to comprehend her living situation, I felt saddened for this woman who had dedicated most of her life to being an educator. She responded to my questions in a direct manner. She was knowledgeable of the disease processes that were occurring in her body and spoke of them as if she were talking about someone else. She indicated that she had impaired vision due to cataracts and diabetes. In addition, she was diagnosed with emphysema and congestive heart disease. As the interview came to a close, I asked her the question about her immediate needs. She responded, "Honey, I have seen everything I have wanted to see and done everything I have wanted to do. Now, I want to go to the doctor when I am sick, go to church on Sunday, and stay warm." I brought the interview to a close and as I left her apartment, I felt uplifted and wondered if I would be able to make the same statement when I am at her stage of life.

After my life experiences and the two employment experiences with the elders, I decided to learn more about the aging process and the needs and services available to the elders. The best fit for my educational needs was the Master's in Social Work degree program at the University of Michigan and the Institute of Gerontology in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was satisfying to learn about the field of gerontology and how I could be of assistance to older adults.

My field placement for the MSW degree was at the Tri County Office on Aging. I was assigned to conduct needs assessments to determine service needs of the older adults in the tri-county area. Again, I found myself out in the field conducting home visits to assess the needs of the elders. However, this time I was also in the classroom, learning more about the population, issues of older adults, disease processes, and implications for social work. Upon completion of the MSW degree and the gerontology certificate, I worked at Michigan State University as a clinical social worker in the counseling center. Although the work was primarily with students, I continued my tribal responsibilities with the transporting of elders. As a professional social worker and gerontologist, I presented at conferences, conducted in-service training sessions on aging for tribal organizations, and invited the elders to events on campus, such as the feasts sponsored by the American Indian students.

While earning a Ph.D., my first teaching position was at the local community college. I was hired to teach a course entitled Health and Aging. There were only seven students enrolled in the class, but it was a wonderful opportunity to share with students my newly acquired knowledge of aging coupled with my personal and professional experiences in the American Indian communities. I enjoyed teaching and decided to continue to do so as a professor in social work with a gerontological focus.

The first offer of a full-time professorship was made by Arizona State University, which I accepted. Again, I had the opportunity to work with the American Indian elders as a consultant for tribal nations and to present at conferences that were attended by many American Indian elders from the tribal nations in the southwest United States. In addition, I was assigned as liaison to the students who were interested in gerontology field placement sites. I visited the agencies and met with the field supervisors to monitor the students'

progress. This was an opportunity for me to become more familiar with agencies and programs that were beneficial for the elders. While at ASU, I was able to develop and implement a cross-listed course for graduate and undergraduate students entitled Policy and Aging. It was an enjoyable experience and the students were enthusiastic learners. Guest presenters were invited to participate in class and to share the important aspects of gerontological social work in a large urban city.

My second professorship position was in a rural setting at Central Michigan University. Again, I had the opportunity to design and implement a gerontology course, Social Work Practice in the Field of Gerontology. Social workers and gerontologists were invited to the class to speak on the issues of the elders in rural communities with emphasis on how they were expected to do more with less, especially in the isolated areas. I was also able to arrange for the students to visit and have breakfast with the elders at their congregate meal site on the Saginaw Chippewa Indian reservation. Both the students and the elders were pleased with the interaction. The students became more aware of the differences between the American Indian and non-Indian populations (i.e. younger, equal gender representation, environmental differences).

In my present position as an Associate Professor at Michigan State University in the School of Social Work, I have developed a gerontology course to be taught in the spring semester of 2004. The course will be cross-listed for both graduate and undergraduate students with a focus on social work practice in the field of gerontology. I am currently conducting research in the areas of American Indian grandparents parenting their grandchildren and the maltreatment and abuse of American Indian elders. My life experiences, training, and employment in working with both American Indian and non-Indian elders has increased my interest in the field of gerontol-

ogy. I am involved in national and state gerontology organizations, and students seek me out as the professor of record for their independent study projects with a gerontology focus. I continue to offer consultations and conference presentations on aging and cultural issues. I have also had the opportunity to work with graduate and undergraduate students who became involved in my research studies, and we have co-presented at professional conferences.

This past semester I was able to secure a small grant, which was used to facilitate eight elders from an independent living center to visit a Foundation of Social Work course for three sessions. The elders were between 82 and 98 years of age. They shared their life stories with the students enrolled in the course on the topics of the depression, transitioning to the independent living center, civil rights movement, spirituality, the definition of wisdom, etc. The direct contact with the elders in the classroom taught the students that the older adult population is diverse, dynamic, and concerned for the well-being of the young people, their families, and their country.

As a gerontological social worker and an educator, I have implemented some of the lessons that I have learned from the elders at the "learning table" into the classroom. Students learn firsthand from the elders during interactions in the class sessions and in the elders' environment. Those students who were in the role of research assistants learned what the needs of the elders are by observing and listening to the elders' mishaps and successes, and that some successes come in the accomplishment of small tasks. These intergenerational interactions provide a forum for the older adults to talk with the students about their challenges, honors, culture, and concerns while providing a unique opportunity for the students to experience the elders' sense of humor and life events, and to learn how some elders have attained inner peace.

Finally, the elders in my tribal community are proud to have an earned doctorate, a social worker, a gerontologist, and an educator as their transporter. In reciprocity, when I have a need, often times the elders are the first to provide support even though our life experiences differ significantly. The elders have enriched my life. I was able to share my appreciation of their teachings by a display of my artwork for the month of November in 2001 at Central Michigan University. The art exhibit was entitled "In Honor of the Lessons of Elders."

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