

What We Share

THERE'S AN AIRY sort of confidence in knowing that you've seen your share of ups and downs. Staying on your feet, answering the bell for the next round, is what we mean by maturity. But for many years I found it difficult to see my life as anything but a series of injustices and slights. Being a Native person seemed a prescription for agony. I wrestled with a need to square the deal.

For a long time, my main motivation was payback. Every success, every forward step, was an opportunity for showmanship, for sneering in the face of society. I had a "look what I can do despite you" sort of swagger. Anger creates barriers. Resentment builds distance. But I didn't know that then. All I knew was that indifference relayed back to the source was what life asked of me, and I was hell-bent on delivering.

It made things difficult, that constant measuring up. Some good people are no longer in my life because of my relentless cultural and political one-upmanship. I broke hearts and relationships because I couldn't see any other way of easing the churning in my belly. Then I met Jack Kakakaway.

Jack was an Ojibway man who'd fought in a war, beat the bottle, found his cultural centre and reclaimed a ceremonial,

traditional life for himself. He was a teacher, and a good one. I think he saw a lot of himself in me. He recognized the angst, the feeling of being lost that was masked as protest. Jack Kakakaway understood my heart and spirit far better than I did, and when he began to guide me I think that was his own form of payback, a thanks for the gift of grace in his life. He led me to ritual and the stories of my people. He helped me to see who I was and led me to a vision of who I might become.

Jack and I were talking one day about the challenges I saw to my burgeoning sense of identity. I spouted off about the Canadian mosaic and the displacement I felt as a First Nations person. I felt threatened by the new Multiculturalism Act. I believed it was an assimilationist document that would cause us to lose our identities and our rights as First Peoples.

Jack listened as he always did, with an expression I couldn't quite read and a half smile at the corner of his lips. Then he said something I'll never forget: "All tribal people are the same." He took his time answering when I asked him what he meant. Elders do that a lot. They force you to sit with your question, so that you understand there are no simple answers in matters of the soul. By making you wait, they help you to develop patience. They guide you to mindfulness and a sharpened ability to listen.

"There are no pure cultures any more," Jack said finally. He meant that everyone has to let go of something in order to get something else. As First Nations people, he said, we had to let go of snowshoes and toboggans to get snowmobiles and pickup trucks. We had let go of smoke signals to get telephones. Ultimately, we had let go of our languages to speak English. It was the same for everyone everywhere, he said. The world asks us to sacrifice something in order to be included.

What we need to look for in this world, Jack Kakakaway told me, are the things we share. There are as many things that make us the same as there are those that make us different. The difficulty is seeing them. The things that join us are as basic as breathing, as small as a tear. We all began as people huddled in a band around a fire in the night. We all longed for the comfort of a voice in the darkness. We've all sacrificed part of our identity to become a part of the whole. What we've lost is what binds us, what makes us the same.

Old Jack has been gone more than sixteen years now, but I've always remembered his teaching. It changed my life. I moved away from my us-and-them mentality and started looking for what makes people alike. That's what life really asks of us, and it's the most humble, yet profound, gift we can offer one another.

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I AM A VICTIM of Canada's attended a residential school. However, my parents did. The pain they endured

At the time I was born, personal nomadic ways of travelling territories surrounding western Ontario, they fish home was a canvas army frame. Some of the first sensations of Ojibway talk. My communion with my maternal aunts, uncles and cousins.

But there was a spectre

Having attended residential school, my family returned to traditional, emotional and spiritual staunch declarations in language. She'd found things there—she'd found to keep a house—she wa