Growing up with Elders

This week Joe will be talking about an essential part of his upbringing. When Joe was young, he remembers going to live with his grandparents and the values they taught him. Some of the things he wanted to note off the bat, is that he never felt abandoned or unloved by his parents. He knew there was love and care put into how he would develop. Going to live with them, he felt they were always very strict, yet not the strict we’ve known in the media and life today.

The discipline that came from these elders made sure that there was a mutual respect given by Joe and those that raised him. Eventually they knew that Joe had to head off to school. At the time, there were schools run by people of the church. His grandfather made sure to tell him, “don’t pray.” Joe didn’t understand that until he started at school. Off at school, there were different sets of kids that would pray every day… and those that were deemed “heathen” for not.

These old people were what we would call “traditional.” They were always participating in ceremony - making it a priority in life. No matter what, they would be at the ceremonial dances, Mide, etc. They were able to make some money the same way that countless Ojibwe people did a long time ago - making birch bark baskets and ricing.

Something Joe remembers vividly is when a Ceremonial Dance was taking place. An Ojibwe woman who was intoxicated came in screaming, “You’re all going to hell!” This sparked noticing the difference between what can be categorized as the “traditionalist” and those that have been converted - not only from boarding schools, but society as well. At that age, it got Joe thinking that he’s the same as those Christian counterparts, but he wasn’t forced to practice anything - it was just part of their life. There was a noticeable difference in the fact that the crazy women didn’t know that Joe was growing up just fine, despite there being bad things going on within the reservation. Even when asking his grandpa, it was brushed off never for it to be revisited.

Joe would go and play basketball at the local gym on the weekends and always seen it was very busy. Before they played, the benches would come out and there had to be time for religious instructions. After that, they had to clean up the floor and rest of the gym so that they could play. This was a local event that community members would come and watch. During all these times Joe would notice the development of modern things, such as “Indian time”.

Joe then would go and listen to these Christian people and what they had to say. It made a lot of sense to him. He came home and told those people who raised him. They said “that’s the same messages that they are giving to their people, as we are giving to ours.” They continued, “however, we don’t tell people that if they refused to come, or practice, that there is a bad place they’re going. We only pray for them and wish them the best, never wishing ill.” About middle school they passed on. To this day, Joe never had to figured out much when it came to Christian religion. Even when he got married to Rita, he knew that as long as they were doing what they were going to be taught, that those people’s lives would be good.

A while later, when Joe got into the army, he was getting his dog tags. “What’s your religion?” they asked. He told them, “I am with the Indian religion/Ojibwe.” They surprisingly asked, “You must’ve been with the Midewin?” That was shocking to Joe. It was comforting to get that put on their tags, knowing that those veterans that came before them could have set that in place. On top of that, the elders told Joe that his clan would look over him throughout his life, even though back then Joe didn’t think much of it. Even when in that Army, taking all those oaths, he noticed that the same indoctrination was happening as he had seen when he was younger.

And with that Joe went to combat! He was ill prepared for the things he had to do and the things he seen - only being told that it was the enemy, or you. One day Joe was in a bad firefight overseas. Many comrades died. Joe knew that it is not a good situation to be in. He began questioning where he was, his faith, and what happened if he died. It was comforting to know that if he passed, then he would head home to the place of his friends and relatives, and that if he lives he goes home to the living people. Joe knew it was a win-win scenario. For a few seconds he thought about those that tried to condemn the Indians and if there really was a hell. Joe asked, “God, if something happens, watch over me…” and then, again, “Manidoog, if something happens, watch over me.”

That’s the last thing he remembers about that battle. “You went over to the other side for a split second,” Joe’s uncle told him years later when they were trading war stories, “but the Manidoog pitied you and took care of you”.

Years later, after a feeding of the ceremonial drum, there was an Ojibwe guy who was making fun of the way those Christian people pray. Later, that same uncle of Joe’s said, “as long as their prayers come from their heart, that’s what matters. I’ve worked for them, am friends with them, and are related to them. There are good people, but there are also bad ones.” He went on to further explain, “We have those same people - as long as they stay true to their heart, we are no different.” Even to this day Joe is the same way - the good and the bad. You cannot have good without the bad. You still have compassion for those on both sides of the isle.

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