

The Seven Grandfathers



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The Anishinaabe Ojibway people teach their children a set of principles known as the Seven Grandfathers. The story goes that seven grandfathers (spiritual beings) were given by the Creator the responsibility of watching over human beings. The seven grandfathers sent a messenger to earth to assess the condition of the people and to choose someone to whom the grandfathers could teach the principles necessary for bimaadiziwin, “the good life” in the Ojibway language.

A baby still in his cradleboard was brought to the seven grandfathers, who agreed that this was the one they would teach, and who would be sent back to earth to teach the people. The messenger took the baby and went around the earth for seven years, then brought the boy, back to the grandfathers, each of whom sang a song and gave the boy a teaching.

From the Beaver Spirit, the boy learned wisdom.

- Wisdom is given to each of us by the Creator to be used for the good of the community as a whole. The beaver’s gift is his sharp teeth, with which he cuts trees and branches to build a dam. Cutting wood with one’s teeth wears them down, but fortunately, a beaver’s teeth continue to grow. If the beaver did not cut wood with his teeth, they would grow so long that he would no longer be able to eat and he would die. Human beings must likewise use the gifts and talents that they were born with for the good of the community.

This is why Native people are troubled by the Western attitude of individualism as expressed in the phrase, “every man for himself.” Although they agree that each of us is a unique being, we are all charged to use our unique abilities for the good of the whole. The market mentality of charging what the traffic will bear or gaining profit without benefiting the surrounding community is completely opposite to their system of values.

From the Eagle Spirit, the boy learned love.

- Our first love is God, but our love for God is expressed through love for ourselves. If we cannot love ourselves, we cannot love others. The eagle represents this principle in the respect that the eagle flies higher than any other winged creature. The eagle teaches human beings to “fly high” and to maintain a pure connection with Divine Spirit.

This principle can best be expressed within a framework of spirituality that is not kept separate from daily life. To Native people, life and spirituality are one and the same.

From the Buffalo Spirit, the boy learned respect.

- In the old days, the Natives depended on the buffalo for many things in life, including food, tools and utensils, clothing and shelter. No part of the animal was wasted. Natives saw themselves as caretakers of the buffalo, and developed a sustainable, symbiotic relationship with them. The Natives showed respect for the buffalo, for all of the gifts it offered them for their use in daily life. This respect is extended to all forms of God's creation.

Native peoples share a belief that human beings are only one part of God's creation, but not necessarily the apex of creation. Human beings share living space with all forms of life, and must respect and honor each and every form for its contribution to Creation as a whole. Natives were and are still troubled by the Europeans' view that animals are inferior to humans, and they are very upset about the fact that buffalo, in particular, are in imminent danger of extinction.

From the Bear Spirit, the boy learned courage.

- The mother bear exhibits a ferociousness in protecting her cubs from harm, and in this, she shows us courage, which is defined as having the moral strength to overcome our fears in order to live life to its fullest potential. We must approach each challenge in life with the same energy as a mother bear shows in protecting her young from danger.

Today Natives are calling on that courage to fight against the institutions of oppression that have been used against them by the mainstream of American society. They are taking back their languages, their cultures, and their spiritual practices, and they are once again stepping forward to identify themselves as the caretakers of Mother Earth.

From the Sabay Spirit (Bigfoot), the boy learned honesty.

- Long ago, a giant known as Kitch-sabe walked the earth. His job was to remind the people to be honest in observing the laws of the Creator, as well as to be honest with each other. When we are honest, we keep our promises to each other and to God. For Native people, one of the highest forms of praise was to say, "There walks an honest man. He can be trusted."

Since the early days of their association with Europeans, Natives have been troubled by the colonizers' dishonesty as they broke the promises given in treaty after treaty, and they still wonder why the United States government abruptly switched to a policy of no longer honoring the treaties that they signed with various Native tribes.

From the Wolf Spirit, the boy learned humility.

- When we recognize and acknowledge that there is a higher power than human beings, we express humility. We express deference and submission to the Creator by accepting and honoring all of God's creation. We give consideration to others' wants and needs before our own. The wolf puts this lesson into practice when he will not take food until it can be shared with his pack.

This is why Natives find it hard to accept the concept of human beings as the apex of creation, and the concept of gaining power over others without consideration for their welfare.

From the Turtle Spirit, the boy learned truth.

- For Natives, truth is a practical thing. To know these natural laws and to put them into practice in our daily lives is to practice truth. Grandmother Turtle is present in the world to ensure that human beings do not forget these lessons. On her back are markings of 13 moons, each representing one cycle of the earth's rotation around the sun, and 28 markings, representing the moon cycle of a woman's body. We are to speak the truth at all times, and never to deceive ourselves or others.

This is why, for Natives, spirituality is expressed in daily life, and cannot be separated from it. This is why Natives have little respect for politicians who bend the truth to tell us what we wish to hear.



By the time he returned to earth to teach the people, the boy had become an old man. He gathered the people together to tell them about his sojourn and his meeting with the Seven Grandfathers. He told the people that each of these teachings must be used together with all the rest. None of the teachings are to be left out.