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The Hunt for the Inner Spirit

It’s one thing to enjoy a culture from a distance, but when you find out you’re part of it, you have to find your way inside

By Evan Davits

MY MOTHER – before the cancer took her – discovered and then revealed an English-Cree family bloodline. She told me about it when I was 21, and left me lost in the gap between two worlds.

She died on a breezy afternoon in June, a month and a half shy of her 52nd birthday.

When she was told she had only months to live, she went to the Alberta provincial archives in Edmonton with her brother. They searched through records looking for the family history, and discovered our Cree ancestry. It’s hard living with not knowing the truth about who you really are. I guess that feeling increases tenfold when you know

you’re going to die. Somewhere along the way, the truth about our aboriginal ancestry had been covered up, but she found it.

One day, my frail, disintegrating mother sat me down next to her and handed me a sheet of paper with a collection of names, places and birthdates connected by lines like veins.

Our family had known since the mid-1990s that we were the descendants of an English settler named James Curtis Bird. What we didn’t know was that he married a Cree woman named Mary. They had a son named William, who married Venus Hay. They had a son named John Thomas, who married Frances Elizabeth. And they had a son named Francis Henry: my grandfather.

That sheet of paper left me wondering who is staring back at me when I look in the mirror. Sometimes, at night, I wake up struggling to remember. Then, reality flows into place as I trudge out of the gloom and into the yellow bathroom lights. I drag my warm, moist fingers down the length of my face, squinting as my eyes adjust to the fluorescent light. I study the reflection: the boy I used to know, the man I barely know. Soft chocolate eyes stare back. My dark brown hair is prematurely turning grey as my father’s did, just above the temples. My golden brown complexion highlights my proudest attributes – the high cheekbones and unique nose I inherited from my mother.

I almost always had a humble connection to the culture and its language, as well as a quiet fascination for all First Nations culture and history. But now, I have discovered a sense of pride that comes with being part Cree.

When I was a child, my mother took me to Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump on the edge of the Rocky Mountains in Southern Alberta. My best friend’s kokom (grandmother) taught me how to sew and string beads. Aboriginal boys in the schoolyard shared dried deer and moose meat with me. But I was a respectful outsider. Now that I know that I am part Cree, those feeble connections are not enough. I need stronger ties to this culture I didn’t know was mine.

My journey to reconnect led me to a Cree elder, who sent me to the sweat lodge – to seek that spiritual connection.

IT DOESN'T MATTER what background you come from," Junior Buffalo, an elder at the Poundmaker's Lodge in St. Albert, tells me. "We are all part of Mother Earth. A lot of people that come here don't know how to bring their inner spirit out. The sweat lodge helps them to release, relax and ease the mind. The more you go, the more you feel better about yourself. It helps you communicate with your inner spirit. It helps you to find your own connection, your own belief, your own role for yourself."

Poundmaker's Lodge Treatment Centre, named after Chief Poundmaker, is an addictions treatment centre on the outskirts of St. Albert.

Mulling over his words, I wander the dim halls of the lodge, pausing to observe the stuffed hawk, the mounted buffalo head and the hanging bear fur. In Cree culture, buffalo represents wisdom and healing. I hoped it was an omen.

I circle back the way I came and ask a bespectacled lady behind the counter where I can find the sweat lodge. She peers at me through her black-framed glasses, trying to identify me. When she realizes she doesn't know me, she kindly asks a gaunt, puffy-eyed woman to show me the way. The second woman obliges, leading me through the cafeteria to a door on the east side of the building. She points through the window of the door at a long brown-stained cabin in the distance. I thank her. She nods and forces a smile, then turns away to leave.

I push open the heavy door and step into the chilly, damp air, lumbering down the trampled narrow path across the lawn toward the cabin. Tiny drops of rain fall from the smooth grey sky on my hair, face and hands. Halfway down the path, I smell the fire, and it reminds me of childhood camping trips and sweaty tents. I spy the billowing smoke, concealed behind a makeshift, horseshoe-shaped tin barrier. A young, shirtless man with a fair complexion and long, dirty-blonde hair chops blocks of wood between puffs of a cigarette that hangs from the side of his mouth. His eyes widen as the axe rises and falls, splitting the wood almost directly down its centre. The ground is scattered with small chips of wood and bark, and the door of the cabin is open. The round, smooth stones in the centre of the fire are white-hot and the surfaces occasionally spark orange and red. Some of the stones have fallen apart from the intense heat, but most remain whole.

“The stones are like your foundation, like your heart, your love,” Buffalo had said to me. “If you want a solid love in your relationship, make it as hard as stone.

“Build your foundation. Your foundation is your body. Your foundation is Mother Earth. Everything you learn is like brick. The more things you learn in life, you’re stacking bricks on top of your foundation.”

All the leaves have fallen from the trees, and there are hundreds of blue, pink, yellow, white and red cloths hanging from the bare tree branches and shifting in the light breeze. I approach a petite woman in a white muumuu and asked her the significance of the cloths. Her eyes widen as she explains through a permanent-yellow smile how each cloth represents a prayer that is blessed inside the sweat lodge. People pray during the sweat and then hang their prayers in the trees afterward.

“It’s very symbolic,” she says.

Buffalo had told me about these cloths, before I got to see them hanging there and fluttering in the wind. “For a lot of us, they’re offerings to the spirits in the spirit world,” he said. “In our language, they call it manitowekiwin – something godly.”

I POKE MY HEAD through the door of the cabin; the dome-shaped hut stands roughly a metre and a half high and takes up three-quarters of the space inside. It is made of strong, thick willow branches draped with large cloth tarps. The gaping oval entrance faces the open door of the cabin; the interior is dark and mysterious. There are a few older men behind it, changing their clothes and speaking Cree. One has his hair tied into two dark black braids. He has an eagle tattoo on his left shoulder. I nod my head at the men and step inside the cabin. The glorious scent of sweet grass fills my nostrils as I search for a place to sit and watch the preparations.

A group of women are sitting outside on a stoop on the left side of the cabin. To the right, a few shirtless men sit quietly, smoking cigarettes. A braid of sweet grass is burning in a black dish full of ashes at the edge of the stoop.

Flags, including a red Metis one, hang from the wall of a meeting area. Every two weeks, Poundmaker Lodge administers a sweat lodge that is open to the public.

A short, chubby elder with medium-length white hair walks out from behind the hut to the smoking sweet grass and sits down cross-legged on the floor in front of it. He lights the end of the black-tipped sweet grass and begins cupping the smoke with his hands, guiding it to his face and through his hair like water. He murmurs a prayer in Cree, and pulls a few cigarettes from a package and passes them through the ascending sweet-grass smoke. He gently places the cigarettes on a flat ashen stone next to the black dish, takes another cigarette from the pack, places it in his lips and lights it.

As he puffs the cigarette, he blesses a long wooden peace pipe, a folded pile of various coloured sheets, and several wooden rattles adorned with feathers, the same way he blessed himself and the cigarettes with the sweet grass. When he's finished smoking, he takes all these items – except for the cigarettes – into the hut, calling for the men to join him.

Later, in shorts and with a towel draped around my shoulders, I smudge the sweet grass smoke over face and through my hair. Then, I crawl into the hut to find the chubby elder in the middle of a preamble.

He tells us of his upbringing in Saskatchewan. How his parents had gone to residential schools, where they were physically, emotionally and sexually abused and forbidden to speak their language. How as a young child, he was taught to build traps and live off the land until he was taken away from his home to live with foster families. How he was called a "worthless savage."

Eventually, he says, he resorted to drugs and alcohol to numb the pain. He had to make the choice to change his life and reconnect with his culture.

His transformation began with the sweat lodge.

The sweat lodge, he explains, is our connection to the Creator and to Mother Earth. The fire represents the sun, which gives the gift of life to all, and the hot stones represent Mother Earth and the everlasting nature of the Great Spirit. The sweat lodge is the Great Spirit's gift to us; it purifies our bodies, kills off any pathogens and clears our minds. He cautions that we should never take this gift for granted. The sweat lodge is the womb of Mother Earth. When we leave the womb, we are reborn.

The elder repeats a Cree prayer, and raises the long wooden pipe in the air and spins it around. Then, he lights the tobacco, inhales the smoke and passes the pipe to the man on his left. It is passed around, clockwise, four times.

LOUIS VANDERZEE, a 41-year-old Métis from Humbolt, Sask., tells me that he goes to the sweat lodge whenever he can. He says it has helped him tackle his demons and get off the drugs.

“It helps now,” he says. “But, before, it was basically a sense of loss. I was brought up in a white family. I’ve lost my culture. Actually being in a sweat is helping me reconnect with my culture.

“Whenever I hear there’s a sweat going on, I’m there. I’ve got to go. To me, it’s better than going to a church. I get more out of going to a sweat than I do going to a church with a sermon and all that.”

The chubby elder calls for 11 hot stones to be brought in and placed in the pit – the nexus – at the centre of the hut. He calls for the bucket of water, berries, corn and fish.

I’m sitting at an angle, behind the man with the eagle tattoo and in front of a young man with “D-R-U-G-S” tattooed across the five fingers of one hand. I sit with my legs folded under themselves. Then, the entrance is closed and the hut’s insides go completely dark.

I can see nothing but black, and the heat is immediate. The elder begins singing and shaking his wooden rattles as he pours the first splash of water on the hot stones. The wave of intense, humid heat smacks against me, and sweat oozes from every area of my body. I’m not ready for it. My heart pounds in my chest as I struggle to breathe. I close my eyes. I close my mouth. I slowly breathe in and out through my nose. I focus on the chanting and the powerful drum beat. With my eyes still closed, I begin to move my body to the beat and join the chanting.

I hear a young girl crying and think, “No. Please don’t. I’m scared, too.” But she continues to sob, as the women try to console her. I imagine myself in her place, and lose focus. My body is burning and dripping sweat. I’m boiling to death. I wonder how much longer they’re going to torture us like this. I tap two fingers on the back of the man

in front of me and say, “I feel like I’m going to pass out.” He tells me to breathe through my nose and to lie down. The first round is almost over, he says.

I have no room to lie down, so I bend over, put my nose to the ground and suck in the wonderful, cooler air. At that moment, the chanting ceases and bright light comes flushing through the flipped-up opening. I slowly raise my head and strain my eyes to look out of Mother Nature’s womb.

In Cree culture, the buffalo is believed to bring wisdom and healing. “Everything you learn is like brick,” the elder said. “The more things you learn in life, you’re stacking bricks on top of your foundation.”

“When you go in there, you shut the door and you feel the steam,” Buffalo had said. “You allow your body to relax. Once your body goes through that relaxation, you find it easier to pray. You find it really soothing – especially after the sweats. Your body and your mind, it feels like you have a couple pounds lifted off your shoulders.”

I crawl out on my hands and knees into the sunlight shining through the doorway and open windows. I take a deep breath of the crisp air. The air wraps itself around my body like a cool, gentle sheet. A deep sigh escapes my lungs. I’m soaking wet like a newborn. My mind is clear and my senses are sharp. For the first time in a long while, I feel connected.

I am proud to be Cree.

Photos courtesy of Poundmaker Lodge