

Grandmothers, Mothers, and Daughters

BY SHIRLEY O'CONNOR, PATRICIA MONTURE AND NORISSA O'CONNOR

As the leaders and future leaders of the Ontario Native Women's Association, we often question and discuss what the role of the association is and what the future for First Nation's women in Ontario is. As traditional women, we understand the role of the association to be the same as our roles as women, mothers and grandmothers. This is what we strive to have the association reflect. Women are warm, loving, and caring. We are the first teachers.

I have had the unique opportunity to speak to two women, Shirley, who is a mother and a grandmother, and one of her daughters, Norissa. As I spoke to them both, I realized they both repeated many times "as I have come to understand this." I also realized that many of the Elders and traditional people I have heard speak, speak in this way. There is no force or persuasion involved. I think this is very important to understand if you want to understand what traditional people are all about.

It is also important for you to know that I have put the spoken words of both Shirley and Norissa into my own in the process of writing this down. Any inaccuracy or vagueness must become my responsibility as the one who has woven this article together. The other explanatory note I wish to add is that the use of the term 'First Nations' is my own personal choice. It is a political choice which reminds the people who came to this country and their descendants of a truth in history that is often forgotten. *This is our home and we are the original people of this land.* Many times when Norissa and Shirley spoke they used the word 'Indian.' I have changed their language into a consistent form. For me, when I was growing up 'Indian' is the word I learned to describe who I was. Since then I have come to understand that it is a word which has a strict legal meaning. I have, therefore, decided to try to use 'Indian' only in that legal way. This is much easier to accomplish

in my writing than it is in my speaking. My use of First Nations includes all of the original people of this land. This includes the Metis people. As I have come to understand it, the Metis are the descendants of the people who made a stand in the Riel Rebellion in Manitoba. I do not believe a useful definition of Metis is anyone who is a 'half-breed.' All First Nation's people of mixed blood come from specific nations, even though sometimes through adoption and assimilation they have lost this knowledge. I believe that all individuals who have become lost to their First Nations, still maintain a rightful place in that nation.

SHIRLEY: In order to ensure the survival of First Nation's women, and all people for that matter, we must ensure that we are helping Mother Earth heal. There are two ways we can accomplish this. We can work to ensure that First Nation's voices will be included in the decision-making processes in this province and this country. We also believe that we can only ensure our futures by understanding our own history.

Life today is so confusing. Many of us feel overwhelming helplessness. This is reflected in high suicide rates, alcohol and drug abuse, and over-incarceration. When an individual is able to understand from where we came, from proud and strong people, it is not so bad anymore. When we look at our present through our history, then we can see a future that is good.

There are many points to be made. It is like looking at a puzzle and we as First Nations must begin to understand how the puzzle goes together. There are issues of justice, health, land, and pollution. All the things in the air that are effecting all living things. Slowly our bodies, our minds and our spirits are being poisoned. We cannot sit back and wait for the government to wake up. Everywhere we look there is depletion and crisis. A good ex-

ample is all the fish that used to live in the waters around Kenora. The sturgeon are now gone. White people panic in the face of crisis. They worry. But Indian people are strong. We have faced so much oppression and so many efforts to assimilate us.

As 'Indians' we must learn to respect ourselves and each other. We have a very important job to do and that is to teach. We can teach how all nations must begin to work together. This is where the future of the Ontario Native Women's Association rests.

NORISSA: We must go back to the grassroots. This is where you get strength and knowledge. There is such an emptiness inside when you are without your traditions. How can you help someone else when you are not yourself whole? Traditions and wholeness just have to be done.

Women are the strong ones. We are strong because we are the givers of life. You learn from your Elders—your aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers. That is where to go looking for your answers. That is where our youth will again find their answers and their strength.

SHIRLEY: Being a grandmother now means that I have a second chance to teach. As a child I was brought up in a good way. If we think about our children, we know that they test us. They do not always listen to us. And that is the way they are meant to be. We tell a toddler whose job is to explore, "don't touch!" But, they touch anyway. We tell our teenage women, "don't go out with that boy!" But they go anyway. We always challenge life no matter how old we get. It is only when you have your own children that it begins to make sense. We then do what our mothers and grandmothers taught us to do. Life repeats itself.

The hardest thing to do in life is to let go of your own children. When you become a grandmother, you then understand you have a second chance. This is why grandmothers are always accused of spoiling. Grandmothers have learned a kind way because they have learned to let go. They are no longer responsible for the disciplining of those children in the same way

as a mother is.

Even as grandmothers, we never stop learning. We go to our Elders and to our daughters and to our grandchildren. We see that there is continuous teaching all around us. We know that you can learn important lessons from the smallest living thing to the most vicious human being or animal.

The means to survival is to find the positive pieces of the puzzle and improve. Without that insight you become bitter. We must always be reminded to look for the beauty in yourself. If you cannot see that, then you will not be able to see the beauty around you.

It is necessary to share your experience to be able to find the beauty in yourself and in others. This is where we come back to the Ontario Native Women's Association. The association is one way we are able to share with each other. ONWA is like family to me. Each child in a family is different. We each have different gifts. Every woman who is involved with ONWA, I can learn from.

The Ontario Native Women's Associ-

ation is kept together by sharing a common vision. As President, the women around are my children. When they do not behave it is my responsibility to pull us all back together again. And my strength to do this comes from knowing my traditions and going to the Elders for help.

Sometimes we are told we are a political organization. I have wondered what politics are. As I have come to understand it, politics come naturally from within. In the traditional way of life, politics, education, spirituality, family, do not come apart. We cannot separate them. Politics is like a beautiful flower. When we cut it off from the rest of the plant by picking it, it will eventually die. That is what 'government politics' reminds me of sometimes, the control and the removal of beauty. That kind of politics is just like a picked flower. It will lose its beauty and die. If you do not pick that flower, but water it and nurture it instead, it will grow. That is the beauty that the First Nation's way teaches.

What should be is a strong woman who sees the beauty within. And politics should be the woman who sees true justice.

