

The Comfort of Belonging, the Justification of Entitlement

by *Deborah Cousineau*

If there was ever a time in my life when I was uncertain as to where I stand culturally, it is now. It would be very easy to ignore and quell my confusion were it only myself I was dealing with, but it is not. I look to my eldest daughter who personifies Native beauty and heritage in her facial structure and deep eyes and know I have a duty to pass on some roots to her, some pride.

Growing up was not a cultural experience. I straddled a fence between what I was (Native), and what I was told I should wish I was (white). I was raised in southern Saskatchewan, in a white foster home. In retrospect, their upbringing of me was done through "Christian deed," as they were prejudiced against Natives. Any wrongful act on my part, though a child's error, was judged according to my Nativeness. Being a "stupid Indian" was the order of the day and I grew up with as much hatred of Natives as I was surrounded with.

Since I was not only the token Indian for this family, but the token Indian for the area, my hatred was turned inward. This hatred was helped along with ignorance. In school when we read about Indians killing the white settlers, I felt the looks and took the blame. My childhood nickname was "Cochise."

As I grew older into my teens, I took a stand by hating not only Natives but white people as well. I isolated myself from cultural involvement until I met my husband who, though he had very little Indian blood, was proud of the fact he had some.

It was very embarrassing for me to go to Native dance celebrations and he would get up and dance and so would my daughter!

I would watch them, hoping there'd be no one there. I knew who would see these two idiots acting like they were Indians — which they were.

My daughter took an active interest in Native ways and asked me to find someone to teach her proper Native dance. I have procrastinated for the last two years and have seen her pick up on my uncertainty, as though there was something wrong with what she wanted.

Recently I have become friends with a Native lady. She is very intelligent, she doesn't fall down drunk, nor does she wear rubber boots all the time. I have never been to her house, but I'm sure that her child is dressed and clean and that they are not burning the baseboards, in the oven, for heat. She's shot my whole stereotype — my reasons for distancing — right out of the window. I would easily set her as a role model for my daughter.

Through her example and my daughter's insistence, I have had to face quickly my reluctance. I have enrolled my daughter, at her own request, into Native dance, craft, and language, although I am still uncomfortable with my Nativeness. I will stand on the fringe and watch my daughter be what she chooses. Perhaps through her awareness I will gain mine and eventually feel the comfort of belonging and the justification of entitlement.

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