



Mary Anne Caibaiosai, "Looking to the Ancestors Before the Dance," watercolour, 15" x 22", 2007.

This painting, as well as the one on page 145, were part of an exhibit called, "Evolution of the Pow Wow," held in M'chigeeng, Ojibway Cultural Foundation, Manitoulin Island, 2007.

Role Models

An Anishinaabe-kwe Perspective

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L'auteure démontre la façon dont sa mère, ses tantes, ses grands-mères, ses cousines et ses amis ont été les meilleurs modèles pour les femmes fortes, des Anishinaabe-kwe. Par leur enseignement les aînées de cette tribu ont influencé leur cheminement pour devenir une "bonne" femme. L'auteure insiste sur l'importance d'observer les femmes de leur famille et les aînées qui les ont devancées et qui ont donné l'exemple d'une Anishinaabe-kwe responsable qui peut aider sa famille, sa communauté, sa nation.

Aanii. Renée Elizabeth Mzinegiizhigo-kwe Bédard ndi-zhinikaaz. Waabzheshii ndodem. Dokis First Nation ndoonjibaa. I was always told to introduce myself by my Elders and my family. My name is Renée Bédard. I am Ojibwe (Anishinaabe-kwe) and Marten Clan, from Dokis First Nation, along the French River. I am an Indigenous Studies Ph.D. Candidate at Trent University, studying the creative processes of Anishinaabe women artists. I write and paint about the Anishinaabe women I know, grew up with, and see in Anishinaabe communities. My passion as an Anishinaabe woman scholar and artist is to highlight the voices and experiences of Indigenous women in a positive manner.

I send out a *miigwech* (thank you) to all the Indigenous women who have crossed my path, offering knowledge and experience on how to be a "good" Indigenous woman. I have had many Indigenous women role models. My mother, my aunts, my granny or grannies, my cousins, my sisters, and my friends were my best role models on how to be a strong Anishinaabe-kwe (woman). Anishinaabe women Elders have also been influential role models for learning what is the best path to being a "good" woman. The Elders speak of the concept of *mino-bimaadiziwin*, which speaks of a "good mind," a "good way," or a "good path" that an individual takes in order to live a healthy and well-rounded life as an Anishinaabe. I look to the women in my family and the Anishinaabe women Elders who have walked before me for examples of how to live

mino-bimaadiziwin, as well as grow into a responsible Anishinaabe-kwe who can help her family, community, and Nation.

In the Anishinaabe seven stages of life, I am still in somewhat of the "wandering and wondering" stage, full of questions, looking for teachers and answers to what are the secrets of life. In my late twenties, I am young enough to appreciate the freedom of my youth and yet I feel the doors opening up to a new stage of life that includes knowing my future goals, and starting my own family. I find myself looking back and around me at the Indigenous women who have informed my sense of womanhood. It is those Indigenous women who have come before me that inspire and encourage me to be a "good" role model for the young girls who follow in my footsteps.

Over the years, I have spent time with Anishinaabe women Elders, listening, watching, and internalizing any guidance or knowledge they might share. It is the importance of Elders as role models that I wish to talk about first in order to highlight the important work they do for us young women. Through Elders, Anishinaabe women and girls learn a sense of community, love, family, and esteem (for self and others). After the passing of many of the older Anishinaabe women in my own family, I realized that the knowledge of those generations who came before me would only continue on into the future if I took action and made the effort to learn and remember as much as I could from my Elders. For myself, I feel it is a treasure to spend time with Elders; it is a gift. Anishinaabe women Elders do more than just educate our young women and girls. They shape our feminine identities as Anishinaabe-kwegag (women) in ways that lay the foundations for a sense of self-worth and self-respect.

The *Gathering Strength* volume of the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (RCAP) states that Elders are important because they are the:

Keepers of tradition, guardians of culture, the wise

people, the teachers. While most of those who are wise in traditional ways are old, not all old people are elders, and not all elders are old (3: 527).

The knowledge and experience of women Elders teaches us how to be a strong, responsible, Indigenous woman. Their wisdom is not only personally learned, but also comes from the shared knowledge and experiences of their ancestors and their Elders, which is described by Pam Colorado (Oneida) as a “collective effort to know throughout time” (58). As Joseph Couture (Cree/Métis)

ences (Colorado). The Elders’ role at the community level is to act as “cultural” guides and models for how to live life in a healthy, well-rounded manner.

As well as our valued Anishinaabe women Elders, many of us Anishinaabe-kwewag (women) look to our mothers, gannies, aunties, cousins, sisters, and friends as our most influential role models. The adult Indigenous women around us who we meet and spend time with can be significant role models for us . Many of these Indigenous women might not even be related to us, might not be from our Nation, but still they inspire, teach, and guide us when we need

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points out, the ways of knowing expressed by Elders guides people to learn to live in balanced relationships with all other living things:

There is an observable Elder “psychology” implicit in what they do and say, Elders, as highly aware persons, and as carriers of oral tradition, are the exemplars, the standing reference points. When guided by Elders, the apprentice learns to perceive and understand something of such dimensions as the nature itself of the knowledge, of the centrality of primal experiences, of the “laws of Nature,” as this in Elder sayings.... Evolved Elders arrive at and preserve a sense-rooted thinking which knows the world as a spiritual reality. He who “knows,” experiences a spiritual nature in the perceived world. Reality is experienced by entering deeply into the inner being of the mind, and not by attempting to break through the outer world to a beyond. This positions the Native person in “communion,” within the living reality of all things. His “communion” is his experience of the ideas within, concentric with reality without. Thus, to “to know,” to “cognize,” is experiential, direct knowing (57).

As an Anishinaabe-kwe, I have been taught that Anishinaabe women Elders are significant for the development of Anishinaabe knowledge, worldview, and ways of being or interacting with the world. Colorado explains that: “Elders guide us through our experiences, usually by identifying appropriate rituals or processes so that we gain insight and understanding of ourselves, the universe and our place in it” (56). Elders are our historians, philosophers, helpers, leaders, teachers, and healers (Cajete; Colorado; Castellano; Simpson 1999, 2000). Elders are our experts, specialized in traditional cultural knowledge and experi-

someone to steer us towards the future. The Anishinaabe women in my family taught me about my identity as an Ojibwe or Anishinaabe-kwe, my history as a member of Dokis First Nation, and my sense of connection to the lands of my people along the French River.

Odawa Elder Liza Mosher says:

I have no heroes. I have lots of role models. My mother was my best role model. My grandparents were my best role models, so was my father. Because your Spirit chooses those as your parents as your Spirit leaves the greater side. You learn from those parents, that’s what you came for. It’s good even though you go through a lot of pain (148).

Sometimes we need not look farther than the women directly around us in our families to find role models. Sometimes all we have to do is look beside us to our sisters and friends to find someone to inspire and look up to. For myself, my older sisters and my now deceased Ojibwe mother and grandmother have remained the constant reminders of what my responsibilities are as a young woman and as a young Anishinaabe-kwe.

I find myself building a web of relationships with other Indigenous women in order to learn what are my responsibilities as an Indigenous woman. [The adult Indigenous women in my life are role models of how to respond to, act, and live out my responsibilities as an Indigenous woman. Many Indigenous women define themselves through responsibilities of family, community, and nation. We rely on each other as Indigenous women to show each other how to survive, raise our families, and attend to our community obligations. Indigenous women’s identities are tied to the inter-relationships we have with the women in our families, communities, and connections we make with

Indigenous women outside our communities; oftentimes our friends, Elders, teachers, and acquaintances. Together, as Indigenous women, we work to determine our identities and responsibilities as women by talking and spending time with each other. Together we share both our happy times and hard times. Each connection, each relationship helps shape our knowledge of our feminine responsibilities in the world and makes us stronger. Indigenous women look to other Indigenous women in their lives as the most immediate and profound role models.

Besides Elders and other adult women we share our lives with, it is important to note the influence of the young girls, children, and babies in our lives. It is often through the eyes of the young that we learn to value our lives as women. Have you ever noticed how women often rush to hold a newborn? Babies are close to the Spirit world and the Creator. Liza Mosher notes: "At the first stage, the child is half Spirit and half human. It's more in the Spirit world than in this reality..." (156). The young are special and cherished—a reminder for women that they are the creators of life.

Women feel the pull of that closeness to the Spirit world, which is pure and open to new experiences. Being able to bring a new life into the world and raise-up the young is something we need to thank the young for. The young give many gifts to women. It is through the very young that we learn how to be mothers, aunties, and grannies. Without the young, Indigenous women would not experience these roles and responsibilities so key to our feminine identities. The young teach us compassion, humility, generosity, and kindness. As women we need to look up to the very young as the grandmothers and grandfathers of the next generation (244). In this way, babies, children, and youth are also our role models.

With all the negative images of our women bombarding us in the media, and with the rise of other forms of violence against women in our families, communities, and western institutions (e.g., prison system), it is important to highlight the "good work" women do in our communities. I am inspired by the women I see raising awareness about the *Lost Sister's*, our women missing or lost due to violence and murder. The *Lost Sister's* campaign has made me want to write and paint images of the women I know, love, and look up to, to change how others see Indigenous women. We need not look further than our family and friends or the faces of our young children to find healthy and strong images of Indigenous women around us.

If we want to change how our Indigenous mothers, sisters, friends, aunties, and grannies are seen and treated by the world, we, as Indigenous women need to speak out. Indigenous women need to show the world our faces, share our voices, opinions, and acknowledge each other, so that there are role models for the young women to look to in the future. We have to say to the world, "I am an Indigenous woman," and "I am Anishinaabe-kwe." I am not the Pocahontas as portrayed in the Disney movie,

dressed in skimpy clothing to be rescued by a man or objectified as a sex object. I am a smart, passionate, and fearless woman. I and other Indigenous women will not be abused or violated or mistreated. I will be honoured, respected, and treated with value by the world. As an Indigenous woman, an Anishinaabe-kwe from Dokis First Nation, I am proud to acknowledge the many Indigenous women role models who have had an impact on my life and send out a *Gchi-miigwech* (Big thanks!) to all of them. I, in turn, will be a role model for the young girls and women who follow behind me.

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