On Dreamcatchers

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But should enough people care and recall Nana'b'oozoo into their midst by learning their ancestral language and espousing their old traditions, giving them new meanings and applications in the modern age, the spirit of Nana'b'oozoo and the Anishinaubae people will be restored to its rightful place in the lives of the Anishinaubae people.

Basil Johnston, *The Manitous*

To serve tribal change, Indian storytelling must remain a dynamic, continuous site of theoretical investigation, evaluation, and revision… Even the old ways and values vital to a Native community at times require reflection and revision to ensure that tribal people adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world.

Sean Kicummah Teuton, *Red Land, Red Power*

When I was younger, dreamcatchers seemed inexplicable to me. They had been in my house, hanging above kitchen sinks and in the corners of rooms. There were dreamcatchers above our beds, stitched into our blankets, and tattooed onto the skin of my relatives. They were a common sight, but I marvelled at them. The perfection of the pattern that the sinew made up within the hoop of willow—how could one create a web that rivaled nature?

Because that's where the dreamcatcher comes from, or so the story goes. Spider woman gave them to us to protect our children's dreams. But I won't tell that story now; it's not my place. They say that we shouldn't tell stories like this in the summer months, that we should only tell them during the winter when the spirits are resting and we won't offend them. Though we are on the cusp of snowfall as I write this, I'm not sure when you will read it.

But can't you see it? The similarity between a spider's web and the dreamcatcher? Something that beautiful could only have been inspired by the mystery of perfection that is nature.

I first learned to make them when I was around twelve while on an overnight field trip with my school district's Indian Education program. Having gone to school in the suburbs where there was a low Native population, it was the first time that I had been around so many kids like myself. Joining Indian Ed. felt like returning to cousins and aunts and uncles that I hadn't seen in a long time—it was like coming home to a family that I didn't fully realize I belonged to.

We were all gathered into a large room with many tables, and at the end of each row was a white paint bucket filled with water and willow branches. One of our instructors and elders,

MaryBeth, stood at the front of the room, demonstrating how to craft a dreamcatcher. At the same time, she was telling the story of how Spider Woman gave them to us. We bent the willow branch into a hoop, which was malleable from having been soaked in water, and tied the ends together with sinew.

"Valentine's Day is right around the corner, guys," she said. "Maybe you can give yours to your *niinimoshenh*."

I remember looking up and blushing, feeling my eyes go wide. *Niinimoshenh*, or sweetheart when used colloquially in English, was a word I had recently learned from one of the other students in the program. This was the first time I'd realized my Native teachers weren't like the other ones I had in school; they were more personal, acted more friendly, and cared in a way that resembled family, like there was a strand that connected each of us.

"Now you'll be making these sort of loops," she said, demonstrating for us the intricate way that it's done, her tongue sticking out on the side, "Until you spiral close to the center. But not all the way—leave a hole, 'cause that's where the good dreams come through."

I remember my mouth physically hanging open after she said this. Up until that point, I'd thought that people tied little bits together, that each line of the web was an individual piece. I looked down at my hands, a roll of sinew in one and a hoop of willow in the other, and didn't know where to start. Thankfully, MaryBeth came over after her demonstration and further explained, showing me how to make the first couple of loops.

After accidently knotting up the web a couple of times, I eventually finished mine, complete with a bead and feather dangling from the center. I ran to Kathy, the advisor I met with once a week in a little room at the back of my high school library, and showed her my new creation. She got this big smile on her face and said, "Well, look at that!" She gave me a hug and told me how proud she was.

Words can't begin to describe this woman's importance in my life. The first day I met Kathy, she was in a room filled with other students sitting at a table with her, already all conversing. When I walked in, everyone stopped and looked at me. She smiled and said, "Well look who's here. This is Brad, you guys. He's new to the program." She immediately made me feel at home, a sensation I hadn't often felt at that time.

As I met with her over the years, she taught me all of the things that they wouldn't teach me in school: Our history, our culture, and bits of our language. She taught me that our story

didn't begin in 1492, that we had technological advancements, doctors, medicines, and governments that preceded the arrival of "civilization."

So perhaps she was proud that day because of the circumstances and the history that came behind this moment. This was a woman that had reached her twenties before she was granted religious freedom, a woman who was insisted upon by society that the word Indian equalled dirty, stupid, ancient, dead. She was an elder looking down at a child, smiling at the continuation of a story, at the creation of another loop in the web of our continued existence.

Because that's how a dreamcatcher is made—with loops. You begin with the loop of willow, the ends tied together with tight loops of sinew. Then you secure one end of the sinew (or thread, I suppose, though I've never used it), and make a continuous succession of loops until you reach the middle, where there's a hole left at the center.

Maybe she was smiling because it was an actual Native person who had made it. You can find dreamcatchers sold at gas stations, gift shops, truck stops, clothing stores, drug stores; you can win them at carnivals and state fairs, receive them in the mail from online catalogues. I even found a kit to make one at a bookstore the other day. These dreamcatchers, however, will say Made in China, or Vietnam, or Indonesia. The art was not taught with love and hope for the future. They were not made with stories in mind, but produced in a factory, designed to be sold for commodity.

So I suppose that, because I've been thinking about dreamcatchers, I've also been thinking about making art in a world that wants to sell your likeness. There's always a person wearing a headdress at a rave; college kids are getting dreamcatcher tattoos to symbolize their "free spirits;" we're mascots at sporting events, noble savages crying at the sight of polluted rivers; we're the ones destined to die in old westerns, or just in general.

Or perhaps we are a commodity, something to be sold. They always ask what the big deal is, it's just a picture, it's just a tomahawk chop, just a dreamcatcher? It feels like *I'm* being sold when I see these things, that my memories and loved ones are objects to be consumed.

I think of *wiindigoo* when I have these thoughts. A monster, a cannibal, a being who cannot stop consuming, consuming. I think of this being when I see these moments of appropriation because it is like we are being eaten, bit by bit, craft by craft, until we are nothing but a dried photograph resting in the tomb of a photo book. The mass consumer mentality and its voracious fascination with all things Native is the *wiindigoo* of this day and age.

In a way, I'm glad I think of *wiindigoo* because it helps me remember that we can look to our own cultures and traditions to explain contemporary realities. Consider the dreamcatcher: What knowledge can be gained from observing the method in which the dreamcatcher is crafted, or the way it looks when it's finished? The artist uses one continuous piece of sinew to create the web, one that has many intersections and meeting points—even though it appears disjointed, it's really part of one singular strand. When I see this image, I am reminded of the interconnectivity of all things.

There was a dreamcatcher that used to hang in my grandparents' dining room that was made by my aunt. Instead of a loop of willow, the web was tied into a hole that was cut out from the back of a turtle shell. When my grandfather died, it was passed to me and it now hangs on my bedroom wall. It's the first thing I see in the morning as I'm trying to wake up and it forces me to remember my place.

Among Natives, North America is commonly referred to as Turtle Island because of many creation stories having to do with the land of this continent being placed on the back of Turtle during its formation. So when I see a turtle shell, I am reminded of my origin and the place that many peoples now inhabit. And when I see the web of the dreamcatcher stretched across it, I am reminded that I'm connected to everything and everyone around me.

If I represent one of the intersections of sinew on the web, so does the squirrel that is running up the side of the tree that is across the street from me as I write. So does the tree. So does the bird that is currently making its home among the tree's branches. So does the water that it bathed in this morning. So does the child that played in that water. If Native communities from Minneapolis represent one of the intersections, so do ones from Oakland, Detroit, and Seattle: We are connected individually and communitively.

The web of the dreamcatcher is made up of one strand. Although it looks like there are multiple pieces, multiple knots and intersections, there's only one. When I was younger, my grandfather once told me that wherever there are Native people, you're home. I think he understood this notion that I am only now arriving at. Across Turtle Island, we Native Americans are connected like the web of the dreamcatcher. Though we come from different nations, speak different languages, have different customs, and practice different religions, there is a strand running through us all that makes us one.

Not in a way that lumps us all into one term, *Indian*, nor in a way that ignores our

sovereignty and independence as nations; we are connected in a way that unites us and combines our individual strengths. We are looped together in a web that holds each of us up.

Wait, you might be thinking. *What about the center of the dreamcatcher? What does that symbolize?* A commendable question, one to which I offer a deceivingly simply answer:

I don't know.

I was speaking to a professor about my thoughts on this matter, and she said that if I were to use the dreamcatcher as a symbol, I had to account for what the center signified. So I racked and racked my brain, but I couldn't think of anything. Eventually I kept repeating in my head, *I can't think of an answer*, as a sort of mantra for the better part of an hour until a random thought occured to me: *It's a mystery*. And all of a sudden, it made sense.

Gichi-Manidoo translates to Great Spirit, like *gichigami*, the name for Lake Superior, translates to great sea. The word *manidoo* can also mean mystery, making another possible translation for *Gichi-Manidoo* Great Mystery. Ask why enough times and you'll eventually reach the only answer left: I don't know. You can spiral down a string of logic until it runs out, leaving a gaping hole at its center.

This sense of mystery is something to be respected. It is the underlying reason for everything; it is what lies at the end of every intersection on the web of life. The hole at the center of the dreamcatcher is a great mystery, and that's just fine with me. Seeing it every morning reminds me that I don't need an answer for everything. However, that doesn't excuse us from reaching for solutions to the problems directly in front of us. And one doesn't have to look far to see them.

Dreamcatchers were traditionally used to protect our children, but perhaps the children have grown up and still need protecting from things like cultural appropriation, the destabilizing of communities and cultural ties, and a government encroaching on tribal rights. In recognizing that the dreamcatcher can also serve to symbolize that the Anishinaabeg, Lakota, Ho-Chunk, Oneida, Commanche, Cheyenne, and all the other nations are connected in an intrinsic and experiential way, we can stand against anything. That no matter where we go, we're home, and that no matter what, this will always be our home.

To the best of my knowledge, a fraction of that held by some of the great Native women and men whom I have the privilege of knowing, the dreamcatcher is not traditionally thought of in this way. At least, it was never told to me. It's a good thing, though, that we can turn to our

own art to make sense of our own lives, even if that means adding to the meaning that is already there. This is what Basil Johnston and Sean Kicummah Teuton were referring to in the quotes at the beginning of this essay. We must continually bring forward our old traditions and apply them in new ways. In this way, we're endlessly lucky that they have survived and persevered through so much.

To this, I can only think to say one word: *Miigwech*.