

Honoring My Indigenous Roots

My father's mother was from the Abenaki Nation in Peru, New York. There are precious few stories about her: she lived a life behind the scenes, and what memories I do have of her are often painful. Over the years, I've been on a quest to deepen my awareness and appreciation for my indigenous roots. In many ways, I've tried to honor my grandmother through my work at the Stone Soup Leadership Institute.

When my grandmother was married, she moved with my grandfather to the backwoods of Jonesville, Vermont. Their little family lived in a small cabin with very limited facilities. When my 17-year-old father returned from the war, his parents moved to the capitol city of Montpelier.

My grandmother was a walker: she would walk miles from her home to downtown to buy groceries and supplies. In the summers both sides of my family would gather at their camp on Nelson Pond in Calais, Vermont. People remember my grandmother as a fun-loving, caring person, who stayed mostly in the kitchen. The only photo of us together is of me as a 2-year-old "helping" her with the dishes.

As a 12-year-old, growing up in an all-white community in Massachusetts, I was very curious to know about my family's roots. My father had fastidiously documented his father's family tree. He was proud of all the genealogy books filled with colorful stories connected with our family name. However, when my grandmother tried to share stories about *her* past, my father would hush her. Even at that early age, I saw how my grandmother's voice was being silenced.

When she was 60 years old, she moved from Vermont to live with our large, and growing, family. She lived in the basement and kept to herself most of the time, joining us for family meals. It was then that I got to know her a little bit, as a person, as an elder. From her, I learned to love the land, and how to work with my hands. She loved to work in our family's gardens. She quietly taught me how to care for seedlings, how to thoughtfully companion-plant, when to water and when to weed. She taught me the joy of seeing a job well done. I helped her by carrying the weeds out to the compost pile. I remember that the harvesting of the tiny cucumbers was especially fun. She taught me how to make pickles with them, and eating them during the long winter months reminded me of the warmth of summer and working in the garden with her. Coming home from school to the smell of her freshly baked bread was warm and welcoming. On Saturdays she taught me how to sew. She showed me how to adjust a pattern so that the fabric would fit well. Initially, when I was in a hurry, the thread would get tangled. She would calmly and carefully get it unstuck so I could finish a new dress in time for Saturday night. I took great pride in being able to make many of my own clothes.

My grandmother had lived through war, and through severe poverty, so she saved everything. One of my favorite memories of her is of one Christmas morning when eight of us children were feverishly unwrapping our gifts, with eight new little puppies running around the room. She quietly collected all of the paper and ribbons. She reused everything, at least once. I first learned about sustainability from her.

In her younger years, she had experienced racism and abuse, and suffered a head injury, which I learned later had led to her brain tumor and her frequent epileptic attacks. It was very scary to see her in such pain. She had two major surgeries that changed her personality and left her even more agitated than before. The noise we kids made when we were playing really bothered her. One time, when she overreacted to my siblings yelling and I stood up for them, there was a dramatic reaction from my father. Triggered by the tragic death of his first son, my father now repeated the outbursts he'd witnessed as a child. First to his mother, then to me. Our lives were intertwined for life.

Trying to make sense of this turbulent emotional confusion, I, like my heroine, Anne Frank, started writing in journals as a 13-year-old. And my journey to heal from both childhood trauma and life-threatening asthma led me to search for my own voice.

Then, when I was 25 years old, living on the land as an herbalist and health educator in Clarksburg, California, I was invited to serve on the medicine team for the Lakota Sundance at the D-Q University in Davis, California. Governor Jerry Brown had granted Dennis Banks political asylum after the occupation of Wounded Knee on the

Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota. By organizing this transformative religious ceremony, Dennis Banks was aspiring to rekindle traditional ways, including the use of herbs and healthy nutrition, especially among the younger generation. From him, I first learned the history of the First Nations, including the history of the American Indian Movement. To be on the medicine team we had to be purified by participating in their ancestral sweat lodge. Dennis Banks was a powerful teacher: he initiated us into the traditional ways, taught us about appropriate etiquette, dress, the women's tent, smudging. We were taught to ask permission before entering the lodge, and to say *Mitakuye Oyasin* ("All My Relations"). He was famously known for his use of hot sweats, which he believed strengthened one's prayers, for our ancestors and for the world. It was an intense, life-changing experience. I was the only non-Native American who lasted through all four rounds of the sweat.

It was there that I met the Hopi elder, Thomas Banyacya. This gentle man had been named by the elders as one of four chosen to reveal the Hopi traditional wisdom and teachings, including the Hopi prophecies for the future, after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. After the Sundance, it was an honor to have him bless our farm and healing center, and join us for a sauna.

A few years later, when I moved to Marin County, I was invited to attend the Indigenous Peoples Sunrise Ceremonies on Alcatraz Island. Called the Unthanksgiving, the Alcatraz ceremonies commemorate the protest event of 1969 where the Alcatraz-Red Power Movement (ARPM) occupied the island. It was there that my friend Trude and I met the medicine man Bedeaux Wesaw from Pine Ridge. He invited us to his regular sweat lodges in Sebastopol. From him, I continued to learn about First Nation people's history, and respect for their traditions and cultures. Later I was honored to be invited to be at the birth of my friend Trude and his child.

In 1996, my dear friend, Oakland Captain Ray Gatchalian, nominated Nane Alejandrez from Barrios Unidos to be in my book, *Stone Soup for the World: Life-Changing Stories of Everyday Heroes*. Nane is one of three indigenous people, including Ada Deer of the Menominee people in Wisconsin, and Philip Stevens from Pine Ridge in South Dakota, in this book, which includes the stories of 30 other people of color as well. Nane is a Lakota Sioux/Mexican who works with young people, and shares his traditional indigenous teachings with them in practical ways. After I wrote his story for my book, we developed a long-lasting friendship. It was an honor to be invited to his sweat lodge in the Santa Cruz Mountains, to meet his wife and family, and to join in Barrios Unidos events and celebrations. Nane became a founding board member of the Stone Soup Leadership Institute, and has been an integral elder of our annual Youth Leadership Summit for Sustainable Development for the past 16 years.

From the Institute's first Summit, held in 2004 on the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico, to our 16th Summit in 2020, Nane has joined us in blessing our young people, and encouraging them to share their voices, and aspire to become leaders of their communities. He has been an invaluable guide to me on my journey to work alongside indigenous people, and other people of color. Each year, before coming to be with us at the Summit, he always asks permission from the local indigenous peoples. On Vieques he led a feather ceremony to initiate a youth leader, at the site of a 4,000-year-old medicine man. For the four years that I lived and worked with the young people of Vieques, we learned about their Taino traditions from the last of the blood line to create our Cultural Arts and Entrepreneurship Initiative. There young people learned how to create indigenous designs and handicrafts using local seeds and calabash. They especially loved climbing the trees to first gather, and then clean, the gourds before transforming them into gorgeous lampshades etched with Taino designs.

When Nane arrived for the first of eight Summits we held on Martha's Vineyard, before beginning the Summit, Nane and I met with the First Nation Wampanoag chief so Nane could pay his respects. And whenever he came to be with us for the Summits on the Vineyard, he enjoyed fishing and sharing stories with Wampanoag legend Captain Buddy Vanderhoop. At these intensive, week-long summits, Nane and I facilitated powerful learning sessions for our youth delegates from Caribbean islands, Hawaii, and Martha's Vineyard. Our Hawaiian youth delegates shared how their cultural renaissance had led to a renewal of their language, their traditional dance, and their cultural traditions. Our local Wampanoag youth shared about their very early stages of learning their own language. And one of our Institute board members, Judith Kurland, was instrumental in gaining federal status for the Wampanoag Tribe on Martha's Vineyard.

In Hawaii, Nane paid his respects to my Hawaiian *kupuna*, Keala Ching. During the eight years I spent living and working with Hawaiian elders on the Big Island of Hawaii, I studied with him to learn the Hawaiian language and cultural protocols. It was also an honor to work there with my dear friend Kaiulani Pono and with her students at the Kanu o ka Aina Learning Ohana. There I developed a deep respect for the Hawaiian values, traditions, and sustainable practices that were the foundation for their intensive immersion program. Their self-sufficient campus and gardens are a beautiful manifestation of the Hawaiian concept of *mālama*—caring for the *'aina*, the land.

In 2011, our first Hawaiian youth delegate and I were invited to speak at the Asian Pacific Economic Council (APEC) Summit with Native Hawaiian navigator Nainoa, president of the Polynesian Voyaging Society. It was there that he announced that he would be making a three-year journey around the world with the *Hōkūleʻa*. Two years later, when this traditional Hawaiian voyaging canoe arrived on Martha's Vineyard during our Summit, our indigenous youth delegates from Hawaii and Martha's Vineyard were the first to welcome them with handmade leis that had been made by our youth.

Cultural respect is woven into all aspects of the Institute's Summit, as well as its year-long programs. For the last 16 years, the heart of the Summit has been to encourage young people to embrace their indigenous traditions, share their voices, and develop the tools they need to become leaders who can help build healthier communities and a more socially just world. From the leadership cards that are translated into 10 different languages so that each day we can learn a new word in another language, to our tradition of hanging flags from each youth delegate's country of origin we are striving to celebrate and promote appreciation for the rich diversity of humanity. We've now collected over 40 flags, representing all the youth delegates who've attended the Summit.

For my new book, ***Stone Soup for a Sustainable World: Life-Changing Stories of Young Heroes***, I'm honored to spotlight indigenous youth leaders like Evon Peters (of the Alaskan Gwich'in Nation, and the Indigenous Leadership Institute); Autumn Peltier, of the Anishinabek Nation, Canada; Trevor Tanaka, from Hawaii; Jessa Garibay, from the Philippines; and Lucia Ixchiú, of Guatemala's K'iche' Maya people. We look forward to shining the light on these brave young indigenous leaders, who are carrying on the legacies of their elders, working hard to undo the damage that has been done to our planet—and build a better future for all.

When I think back on my grandmother, I think about not only all I learned from her; I also think, with regret, about how much more I could have learned from her, had she only been encouraged to share all she had to share with me. I wish that she could have lived long enough to see my efforts to offer opportunities for indigenous people to share their rich traditions, their wisdom, their values. We need their wisdom, their knowledge, their traditional values, so desperately in our troubled world.

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June 2020