Memory and Métissage: Three Creation Stories

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I started out my life washing dishes. At least that is my earliest memory. We - my three older brothers, my parents and our family dog - lived in a three bedroom home on the south side of Edmonton. As the baby of the family by over three years, I have always felt strangely different from my brothers in the interests and feelings I hold towards life, other people and identity. I think it has something to do with my physical appearance. You see, I am darker than they are. My skin is much darker, so is my hair and so are my eyes. In fact, I am so much darker than them that my brothers used to hold their girlfriends spellbound with stories of my former life in Bangladesh and how I came to be adopted by the family.

I still find this story funny in some ways, but it is also very revealing. When your own family notices and comments on your physical appearance, it tends to have an impact on your self image. I don’t think that my brothers and their trickstering scarred me in any way. But I do believe that it is part of what has caused me to feel and act differently from them. Take the dishes as an example. I can remember waking up early on weekend mornings well before anyone else in the house had even thought about getting out of bed. Many children would have preferred to have watched television or played with toys. I washed dishes. My routine was always the same: Don’t turn the light on because it might wake someone, be quiet, clean the gunk from the drain thoroughly, apply dish soap and then slowly begin filling the sink with water that is so hot that you can barely put your hands in it. First cutlery was washed, next glasses, and finally plates
and pots. I don’t know if I did a very good job of it. I do know that I washed the dishes because I wanted to help my mother.

Mom was tired from the effort required to attend to the needs and demands of four growing boys, and she looked it. Tired and probably feeling the stress of being alone with her boys most of the time. You see, my Dad is a truck driver and back then he drove the Alaska Highway and was away from home for weeks on end. My mother was left to take care of us—and all the other family related business—on her own. We never suffered as children but I know she did as a mother and wife. Many people found it scandalous and sad that a pretty young woman from a successful, white, church-going family would marry an Indian. Several times during my childhood, my mother received anonymous phone calls from people who told her that she and her dirty, rotten Indian brats were not welcome in the neighborhood. Many said nothing good would ever come of her marriage to my Dad, and there were predictions that all four of their boys would end up in jail—especially with their father absent most of the time. It was lucky for my brothers and I that our maternal grandmother did not see things that way. Grandma Peterson had a stern nature and always believed in doing the right thing. She supported my mother in the choices she made.

I think that Mom was proud of the physical appearance of her boys, especially me. Not that she loved me any more than the others, but I do believe that she saw her children as symbols of her success in raising us, in spite of all of the negative attitudes. My mother and I were drawn closer together because I was the youngest and perhaps the one most vulnerable to bad experiences because I looked the most like Dad. She babied me, spent free time with me, cuddled me, read to me and protected me from my older
brothers. My mother was able to devote so much more time to me than to my brothers because they were all in school by the time I was three years old. Part of the way that I returned those feelings of affection to my mother was through washing the dishes. It was the least that I could do.
Dwayne: Chocolate Bars

My Dad always brought chocolate bars home with him after being on the road for several weeks. They were usually the kind with nuts or coconut in them. Not that it mattered; the important thing was that he came home. We had an old brown polyester couch with light brown feet that sat against the wall in our living room. It was my favorite place to sit, mostly because the dog always sat there. She, like me, was waiting for Dad to come home and chose the couch because it was directly opposite the front door. Sunlight would often shine through the window in the front door, especially in the winter months when the sun was low in the sky, and Peanut and I would warm ourselves in it while we waited patiently on the couch for the door to open. She was very tolerant with children and I would often lay my head on her back as we waited. I would sniff the scent from the pads of her paws and feel the texture of her nose made dry from sitting in the sunlight. Often, I would gently bite her ears, growling the whole time and hoping to get a reaction out of her. She just sat, patiently, waiting. She knew Dad would be home soon.

Finally, Dad would walk in the door. He had his work clothes on and wore cowboy boots on his feet. With him he carried a suitcase and his shaving kit. I always remember my Dad being very neat and tidy. Even while at work, he wore clean clothes, shined boots and kept his hair neatly combed and face clean-shaven. He rarely looked disheveled. Clothes tucked in, socks pulled up, sleeves neatly rolled up, and hands and nails scrubbed clean. The standards he set for himself surely had something to do with the image of a man that he wanted his sons to see. It did not go unnoticed.
I was always glad when he came home because our family seemed to regroup around him. He kept the older boys in line and made sure that we all continued to help Mom around the house. But, he also brought the chocolate bars. After greeting Dad at the door, I would grab his suitcase from his hand and rustle through it as fast as I could. He always hid them, and part of our greeting ritual involved me frantically searching for them. Once I found mine as well as the ones three for my brothers, I would help him take off his boots while asking him question about where he had been. This special time with my Dad would sustain me until the next time he would come home from a long trip. I know that it sustained him too.
Dwayne: Curtains

My Dad was raised by his Grandma. Madelaine Ward was seventy years old when he was placed into her strong, well-worn, yet gentle and welcoming hands. When I was young, I remember hearing that my Dad was raised separately from his brothers and sisters because his mother did not want him because she thought that he looked too Indian. Later, I learned that he was left to live with his Grandma because, as a baby, he cried constantly when he was not with her. This decision, whatever the reason, has had a profound impact on my life.

My Dad grew up in a tiny cabin in a small and isolated community beside Hastings Lake. While his parents and brothers and sisters lived in the city and seemed to have a comfortable life, at fourteen years old he was stuck on the farm and resented the burden of hard labour and heavy responsibility. But there was no other option for him or his Grandma. Through these hardships they bonded, and with the love of his Grandma my Dad grew into a young man who benefited from the many life lessons and values she taught him. Then, she died and he was alone in the world, and he was only sixteen years old. With a bag over his shoulder, he walked out of the cabin at Hastings Lake, hesitated, and then closed the door and walked to the train station. He boarded the train to Edmonton to join his family and to start a new life in the city. He soon discovered that he could not live with his parents and his family. If my Dad was not going to become the stereotypical Indian, he realized he must have the courage to leave and to start a life of his own. Then, he met my Mom.
One night, when my Mom was pregnant with my oldest brother, my parents decided to go out for dinner with friends to a restaurant on the south side of Edmonton. It was the winter of 1960 and my Mom was one month away from giving birth to her first son. There was a good amount of snow on the ground and the temperature was quite cold that evening. It was so cold that my Dad was concerned that his car would not start again if he shut off the engine. He decided to drop my Mom off at the front entrance to the restaurant first, and then he would find a place to park and figure out a way to keep the car running before heading inside to join the others. When my Dad parked the car, he opened the door, got out and kneeled down right beside the car and began to experiment with the gas pedal by placing a piece of wood against it. Finally, when he was satisfied that the pressure of the pedal would keep the car running, he decided that it was safe for him to leave the car and make his way into the restaurant. It was at this time that my Dad felt a presence behind him. Without warning, six men converged on him and proceeded to punch and kick him without mercy until they were satisfied that they had taught him, the so-called “dirty Indian,” a lesson. They tried to make him crawl like someone who is begging for mercy, a supplicant. He wouldn’t.

This experience and others like it, as well as my Dad’s experiences with his own family, caused him to draw a curtain across his past life that he hoped would hide the bitterness and pain of these memories from his four sons. He did not want us to be exposed to any of it. My brothers and I were not told any of these stories until we were grown men. As children, we did not see our relatives, my Dad’s family, more than once or twice a year even though we lived in the same city as them. I can remember traveling across town, usually around Christmas, to visit with our cousins, aunts, and my Dad’s
parents. The adults were usually drunk by the time we arrived and my brothers and I submitted to long hugs, wet kisses and tearful greetings from our relatives, some of whom we barely knew. The visit would almost always end with an argument between my Dad and his mother or one of his siblings. This was usually started when someone would accuse my Dad of thinking that he was better than the rest of his relatives because he hardly ever brought his family to visit with them. Sometimes, my brothers and I would complain about having to visit our relatives, but we never spoke about our feelings nor did we try to figure out why things were as uncomfortable as they were.

The affect these attitudes and experiences had on me is that I grew up knowing that I was part Aboriginal, but I did not understand how I should feel about that or what it could mean. My Dad never really encouraged those kinds of questions and we, as a family, rarely spoke about these kinds of issues. My Dad seems to have had the fear that his sons would suffer the same types of mistreatment as he because of the way that they looked. So, the curtain, the forgetting of the past, the denial of any Indian characteristics, even the way he dressed and performed at his job were all attempts to normalize himself and his family so that we could all fade into society and avoid being singled out or discriminated against for any reason. Of course, the irony of this is that Aboriginal people are now very popular all over the world and their way of life, their values, and especially their spirituality have become legitimate and vibrant topics of conversation in many different social circles around the world. Suddenly, it is hip to be an Indian. How should we expect an aging man to react to this situation after he has spent his whole adult life denying his Indian-ness? He doesn’t get it.
Dwayne: **Belly Buttes**

The Belly Buttes hovered on the horizon as an ever-present illusion that day. Something that I just could not see quite clearly enough to feel satisfied. While I was driving to the site of the Sundance on the Blood Reserve that summer day, I was looking hard at the vision of teepees that I saw just beneath the buttes of the Belly River in southwestern Alberta. Looking hard because I was nervous. I had never been to a Sundance and I had been invited to attend this sacred and ancient gathering by members of the Blood Tribe, whom I had come to know as a teacher at Kainai High School on the Reserve. I had accepted their invitation because I wanted to show them that I really was a Native person and could and would appreciate the whole process. In reality, I knew nothing about Native spirituality and ceremonies, but I wanted to pretend that I did because I wanted to be viewed and accepted as “Indian” by my friends. As I approached the site I decided to observe the Sundance ceremonies from afar to try and understand their significance. Naively, I thought that I would “get it,” in anthropological terms, if I remained detached and simply observed the setting, the people, the proceedings and the reactions of the participants. I now know that the Sun - Napi Naato’si to the Blackfoot people - did not send the sacred ceremonies down to earth for my enjoyment, entertainment or analysis. Their purpose is much more significant and vital.

Still, I made my way to the Sundance and approached the teepees cautiously. I did not know where my friends were camped. Nor did I did not know how to behave. I cautiously approached a few teepees and quickly peeked inside in hopes of seeing someone I recognized. No one. My wife and I must have wandered aimlessly around the
circle of teepees for about an hour, hanging around and still hoping to see a familiar face. No luck. Finally, feeling embarrassed and completely out of place, we left. I never told any of my friends that I had been there. I now know that I was drawn to that place because I was searching for something that could help me deal with feeling “like one who looks in the mirror and sees a blur over part of his own face” (Growing Up Native American, Bruchac, p.244). I wanted to identify myself with something because I felt like my identity had been lost to time and the elements, like a flag tattered by strong winds. But identity is more resilient than that. It continues to recreate itself in ways that cannot be predicted.