

GATHERING NINE

The Forgotten Children

Zoey Wood-Salomon

I hear many stories about the residential school system and what many of my people went through. It tears at my heart when I hear these stories, and many times I am reduced to tears. There is another group of people who were sent away to school during the 1960's and made to live in boarding homes in the cities. I am one of those people; I call us the 'forgotten children'.

I was sent away when I was thirteen years old. I know many people in the residential schools were sent away when they were mere babies, so at thirteen I feel that I was old enough to have been okay. Our next generation is affected by what happened years ago, long before they were born. There are so many stories from so many children. This is my story.



The Reserve and Our Language

Until age thirteen I grew up in Kaboni on the Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve on Manitoulin Island. Usually a reserve has only one Catholic church, but our reserve is very big, and we had four. My grandma and my mother taught me how to pray, I was baptized, and I had my first communion. When I was sent away to North Bay, I quickly forgot my prayers and the church.

While living on the reserve we lived out in the bush in a one-bedroom home. My mom raised us and my dad supported us, although he had to move away to get a job. We had no electricity or running water. My older brother came home one day from school and asked my mom: "Why can't we just touch the wall and make the lights go on?" She told this to my dad so eventually he built a two-bedroom home with electricity. He also bought a black and white television and a whole new world opened up for us. Hockey Night in Canada was a big night in our home!

We spoke only English at home because when my dad was thirteen years old and he went to look for work, no one would hire him because he could not speak English, only his Native tongue. It was then he promised himself that when he had his own children, he would only speak to them in English but when my parents spoke to each other it was in Ojibwe. My older brother picked up his language at school during recess from the other Native children. I can understand my language and say the words perfectly in my mind, but something happens when I speak - they don't sound like they should. I am learning my language today from my mom, but she says I speak English-Ojibwe.



Child Welfare and the 60's Scoop

In 1968, when the Pontiac High School in Wikwemikong was closed, many children were sent away. My two older brothers, my older sister, and I were sent away to live and go to school in North Bay, Ontario (my youngest sister was ten and she stayed home). We were separated to live in different boarding homes. This was another form of residential schooling. I lived in nine different boarding homes with seven just in the first year. It was the loneliest time of my life and I cried every day. That loneliness still lives in the depths of my being and impacts me. It has molded me into the person I am.

The first home I lived in did not work out. There was no lock on my bedroom door and in that house I was vulnerable. There was a chest box in my room so at night I shoved it against the door. One morning the lady of the house said to me: "My husband bought you a pack of cigarettes. They are on the table." As young as I was, I knew it was a bribe and yes, I had already started smoking at that young age. I did not accept the cigarettes and kept using the chest box against my bedroom door, so they were mad at me and I was moved to another place around the corner. The people in the first house stopped me one day on the street and told me they knew where I was living and they were watching me. I was terrified living in that neighbourhood.

The second place I lived was with a family of eight children all under the age of ten. All they needed was a housekeeper and a babysitter. Eventually I was moved into another home where there were other Native children, which was good because we looked out for one another and on weekends all the Native students hung

out together. There was one restaurant that would not allow Native students, but another restaurant welcomed us as long as we spent some money, so we would buy French fries and pop.

There was a lot of drugs and alcohol around. The older Native students wouldn't give us younger ones any, but we always found ways to get some for ourselves. There were many deaths and suicides among my Native brothers and sisters. Most of the boarding places only took you in for the money they would get for giving you shelter and food. There was a lot of abuse, sexual or otherwise. Some needed babysitters while others needed maids. I needed a mother who I could talk to. Things were happening to my body that I did not understand. Since I couldn't talk to the people I boarded with, I made an appointment with the doctor. From then on, whenever I had questions that is who I would talk to.

Eventually, when I was in grade ten, I found a home that *I* could call home. By that time my spirit had been crippled, damaged, and wounded. I lived there for a year and a half and came to love these people. When I had my first born, I went back and introduced them to each other.



Returning to my Community

Manitoulin Secondary School was built in M'Chigeeng on Manitoulin Island when I was going into grade eleven, but I did not want to go home anymore. By then I had lost my connection with everyone and everything I had known. I did, however, make a decision to move back for grade twelve. After being gone for three years it felt strange to be back home again.

I was glad to be home to share at least one year with my younger sister before she walked into the Spirit World. She was killed by a drunk driver. This was a tragic event and I allowed so much bitterness, anger, and hatred to live in my heart and soul.

An Unwanted Guest

I knew

he was there

sitting, listening, watching

I could feel him, hear him

almost touch him

I didn't want him there

I wanted him to go

"Who are you?"

I wanted to shout

"What do you want?"

"Leave me alone!"

I cried

but I was afraid

and he just sat there

quiet

an unwanted guest

in the

shadows of my mind.

I carried this around inside of me for many years. Eventually I was able to accept forgiveness into my life. Today I know the prayers of my grandparents helped me through this. The forgiveness in my heart was planted there when I was a child. This brings us to my Grandmothers: Honesty, Bravery, and Love.

Grandmother Honesty: Honesty is to be honest with ourselves, and to let go of all that hinders our growth. Grandmother Honesty is the butterfly that teaches us life is a continuous metamorphosis. If we are honest with ourselves, removing our own caterpillar guise, we too can become free, as free as the butterfly.



Dominion Acres

photo by E. J. Thippawong

Grandmother Bravery:

Bravery is to face the obstacles in our path
and to be able to forgive not only others but ourselves.

The hummingbird teaches us of bravery.

She will go up against a bear if the bear is threatening her babies.

The hummingbird will attack the bear with her long needle like beak until the bear retreats.

Grandmother Love:

Who better to teach us about love than a child
with their hand reaching out to us.

They accept us with their unconditional love.



Finding my Own Identity

Even though I had returned home I could not find my way back to the very core, to who I was. I was only home for a year before I graduated and left for the city where I tried to blend into the dominant society, but I never found a place where I felt good about myself. I was lost both spiritually and emotionally. It wasn't until I was in my twenties that I started to pray again. I just started speaking to my Creator in my home and my work. My Creator in His great love for me saw this and He opened a way for me to get back in touch with who I am and where I come from as an Anishinabe Kwe. Today, He is leading me gently back to my culture, my heritage, and my people. He is doing this through my art. My art and faith have become integral parts of my self-discovery.

One of my report cards from elementary school read: "Zoey has no idea what she is doing in art." I probably didn't know what I was doing but I remembered that report card for the longest time. Today, when I share art with children I always tell them to have fun and to let it take them wherever it wants to.

I have always loved art but I was afraid to show my work to anyone because of the negative comments I received as a child. With encouragement from many people, especially my mom, I eventually started painting on a daily basis. My husband organized my first show with two other Native artists in 1982. It was very successful, and it felt very good.

It was at these early shows that I was forced to open my mouth and speak for myself. I asked my Creator to help me to speak to people. I would get so tongue tied and shy, but I did not want to be this way. It is through my art that the Creator has given me my voice; I have been invited to schools, clubs, museums, and churches to speak before many people.

Grandmother Truth:

The eagle has become, for the Anishinabek, a symbol of truth and strength.

Therefore, holding an eagle feather in our hand
gives us a huge responsibility for our voice.

I have shed many tears on my road back to finding myself. When I first met my husband, I did not know how to hug. I had never hugged my dad. When my mom was visiting, I desperately wanted to tell her that I loved her. It took me a long time to say it because I kept choking inside. Finally, I was able to tell her: “Mom, I love you.” She answered back: “Me too.” Since then, every day I have told her this.

Some days are still difficult, but I keep talking to my Creator in my own way. It is hard not to be accepted by your own people for what you believe but I could not forget the prayers of my grandmother and what she taught me. In a painting I did about a sweat there is a grandmother and a child present. We have to heal and love the child within us so that we are able to live our life to the fullest. An Elder told me that sometimes it takes a life time to heal.

Grandmother Humility:

As we enter our space to be in union with our Creator and Mother Earth,
we open our inner doorway to our own sacredness
that is even beyond our understanding.



Intergenerational Trauma

Growing up, I used to think of my pain and what I went through. I never once thought about the pain my mother went through when four of her children were taken away from her during the 60's Scoop. I asked my mother recently about this. She said: “We wanted you all to have a good education.” I have so much respect for my mother and what she went through. She must have been very lonesome for us and very anxious. She cried for us like I did for her.

Grandmother Respect:

The fire teaches us respect.
We can cook our food and it lights up our night.
But fire can also destroy if proper care is not given.

When I lost my younger sister, my world went into a long dark hole. I almost lost myself but I am very thankful and grateful that I did not stay there. The date and time of my sister's death stayed with me; every month I hated that time. I was pregnant with my first daughter when my sister was killed. My daughter was born on the same day of the month and exactly the same time of night as my sister's death. I was confused and questioned: "Why? Why was my little girl born the exact time my sister died?" I went to see my grandmother and asked her the question. My grandma told me that my daughter was born at that same time so that I would begin healing and not be afraid. I would no longer say: "My sister has been gone for six months." Instead I would say: "My baby girl is one month old today." I stared at my grandma in awe. She had so much wisdom to impart.

Grandmother Wisdom:

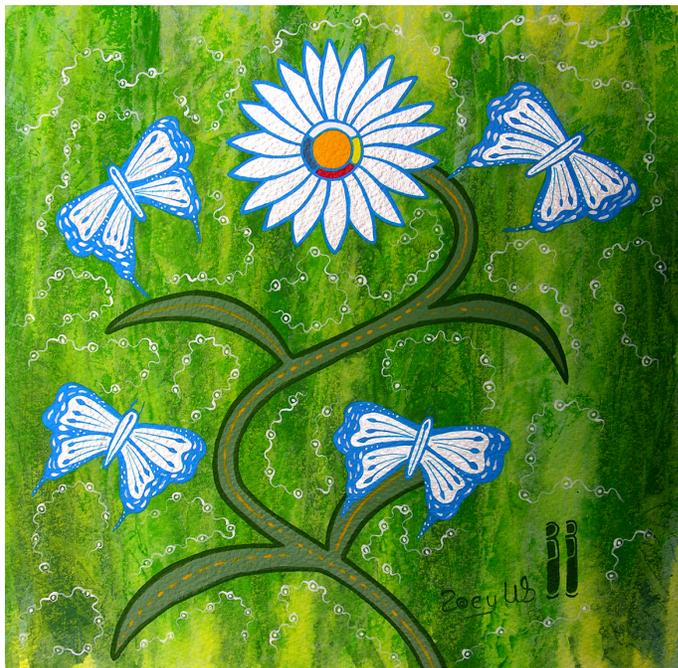
The turtle teaches us wisdom. We seek wisdom from our Elders but yet sometimes wisdom comes through a child if we remain open to hear the voice of our youth.



Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW)

I was asked to do a painting about our Native Sisters who are missing or have been murdered. I did not want to do it as so many images flooded my imagination. I did not want to look at it. It was scary. It was horrible. I just put it out of my mind. Then something happened:

the Spirit in my life opened my mind.
I saw beautiful Native women.
They were radiant.
They were confident as they moved.
They held their heads high.
Their long black hair was blowing
in the wind.
They were reaching for the sky
with their dreams.
No one told them they couldn't.



Daisy and the White Butterfly for Missing Sisters
Oil on canvas, Zoey Wood-Salomon

They were ballerinas, writers, models, waitresses, actresses – but they were also our sisters, our aunts, our nieces, our moms, our granddaughters, our girlfriends – all who had gone missing. I did that painting to honour and to remember our fallen sisters. We will remember that they walked this earth in beauty and in strength. They will never be forgotten.

*When I woke up this morning
I offered up a prayer to my Creator
and I laid my tobacco down*

*It was sunrise as I started my walk
I followed a small beaten path
into a very deep and dark forest
but I was not afraid
I knew you were with me
You promised
The air in the forest
smelled so fresh and clean this morning
just like after a rain
Sweetgrass, Sage, and Cedar
filled the air
Exhausted
I stopped and rested
among the tall dark trees*



Dominion Bay

photo by E. J. Thippawong

*Sunlight was filtering in
as I picked up my drum and sang for you
Old Anishinabek songs spilled out into the air
as I sang to the mountains, to the birds
to the flowers, and to the trees
Songs of thanksgiving
for the wind, and for the rivers
I sang for my little brothers and sisters
as they scurried around me
that morning in the bush
Songs for my ancestors
and generations yet unborn*

*Elation filled my spirit
as one by one
each grandmother came
and sat by my side
First there was love, then honesty
followed by trust, humility and bravery
Finally, respect and wisdom
It was in this exhilarating moment
yet a moment so private, so peaceful
so filled with love that I first met
me
an Anishinabe Kwe*