

Facing Tradition

Meeting New People and Seeing Myself

By Morgan Smith

On a cold, windy fall morning, we drove into the parking lot of a park along the Mississippi River. There was a group already standing on the shore—drums in hand and the sacred items used in the water ceremony laid out on a blanket. The women in this circle are the Keepers of the Water, and in their native tradition, they participate in these water ceremonies to give thanks to the Creator and ask for a blessing for those in need and a blessing to protect the water. Water is sacred.

In this circle, this sacred space, a handful gathers to participate, give thanks and pray. The ceremony is beautiful, and I understood that the Spirit was among us as we spoke our prayer intentions out loud. There are so many in need, and the focus of a lot of the people's prayers was the native peoples and their suffering from addiction and homelessness that has ravaged the population. I also had a sense that we were part

of something so much bigger and more beautiful—standing there on the sandy shore, with the big river gracefully rushing by us and the trees turning their final reds and browns of the season.

We sang ceremonial songs in the native language, and those who had drums pounded them in a steady beat that reminded me of a strong heart. Drums are sacred and in using them, we are participating in an age-old spiritual tradition. Following many beautiful ritual acts, there was a point in the ceremony where the water from the river, in a copper container (copper purifies the water), became living water—became sacred. An woman elder, with this specific task, released the water back into the river—and with it all of our prayers.

The thing that struck me the most was after the ceremony: we ended by giving each other hugs. These weren't ordinary hugs. They were given in what seemed like a choreographed, circular

dance, and they were really genuine and full of love. I felt a connection with these people on the beach, whom I have never met before, and I was moved by the connection that was given to us in this act of faith to the Creator.

After the ceremony, I went to Mass at a Native American Catholic Church with some of the women. When I entered the chapel I was amazed by the traditional art and sacred items—and overcome by the smell of burning sage, used like incense and for spiritual cleansing. The way that the native traditions are infused with Roman traditions is strikingly beautiful. And once again, the Prayers for the Faithful were of the same order of the ones at the water ceremony.

After Mass, I was able to spend time with some of the parishioners, and I was so moved by the wisdom and peaceful nature of the two men elders that I spoke with. I asked them why they are Catholic. One man answered that

he was always Catholic—his parents were Catholic. He fell away from the faith in school, but when he met his wife, a devout Catholic herself, she inspired him to





take it more seriously. He demonstrated by tenderly reaching up to touch and show me the feather that memorializes her in a sacred space in the chapel, next to the big crucifix. After she passed away, he said he was angry and didn't come to church—but he said this with a quiet tenderness and eyes shining with a mixture of hurt and hope. He then found this parish and has been coming ever since. Another man, had grown up on a reservation, but his parents had to leave to go to the city to find work. He was raised by his grandparents and went to church all throughout his youth. From his relationships with neighbors and family, he was taught about sharing what he has and giving from the heart.

What I think is most beautiful about this day was that I witnessed the preservation of two traditions: Native American and Catholic. One enhanced the other and vice versa. I also saw how the environment, being river, trees, water or chapel sanctuary is sacred and intricately related to the Creator, the Spirit and to our lives. Keeping traditions matters. Keeping sacred things sacred matters.

The people I met throughout the day are living this out. I noticed that the handing down of tradition is the most important thing for the elders of this com-

munity, and I can see by the prayers of the faithful that these things go hand in hand: without tradition things fall apart, and in restoring tradition there is a new hope in an “old” way.



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This loss of tradition, that affects the quality of life for so many people, is something that I see in “mainstream” American culture as well. It is also something that has affected me very deeply. I wasn't totally aware of this fact until I had the experiences of meeting the people I have met in putting together this issue of the magazine.

The first time it occurred to me

was in meeting and interviewing Joe LaGarde, a White Earth Nation elder and the Executive Director of the Niibi Center, an organization dedicated to the preservation of water (Niibi), wild rice (manoomin) and Anishinabe culture, language and tradition.

In American Culture, when we think about and use words like “conservation,” “environmental protection” or “sustainability,” we don't necessarily think of culture or tradition—and we especially do not think of a deep connection to the Creator. These words have become politicized, idealized, generalized and even misused. That being said, there are people in America who believe that these terms are more than ideology and more than a political “side.” They instinctively make the connection between conservation of the environment with conservation of tradition—and one step further—conservation of tradition with conservation of the welfare of the people.

When I met Mr. LaGarde, I was immediately struck by his presence—a man full of quiet wisdom who loves to laugh. He has spent a lifetime of tireless work rebuilding what has been lost and taken from his people. He explained: “We need to change people's thinking—all people—especially the youth.” This is what defines his work.



Land, water and wild rice are sacred to the Anishinabe people, and they want to protect them. They have remained steadfast in their commitment to their role as protectors, despite great hardship and trauma resulting from centuries of Western colonization. Mr. LaGarde has made it his life's work to repair the trauma caused to his land and his people: "We have to start protecting the land and water. We have to stop using everything up for money. We use everything up, move on and just walk away."

The hardships have stripped the people of their rights to protect their own land, and they have even stripped them of their own cultural and traditional identities. Mr. LaGarde said with passion, "Because of this cultural and spiritual genocide, we are losing our traditional rituals. We need to get back our traditional voice."

Mr. LaGarde has been working

have sacks and sacks of rice—a lot to eat. We walked for miles gathering medicine plants that we used for everything. We were free to go and dig this up and dig that up." This was a time when there was less pollution. Before farm field run-off and other things caused a shortage of water and depletion of wild rice harvest.

Wild rice is intricately linked to the spirituality and tradition of the Anishinabe people. It seems to go hand in hand: the depletion of wild rice and the depletion of tradition. I also see this happening in the mainstream American culture. We have lost touch with our land and food. As we become more and more detached from the source of our food, we lose touch more and more with our tradition and religion. Food is sacred, and the water needed to grow it is sacred.

"Nature has rights. Everyone has rights. Everything has a spirit.

for a majority of his life to help educate the youth in his community. One of his first projects was starting a school in his home that immersed youth in their native language and traditions. He spoke about this with fondness and hope.

Keeping this tone of fondness, he told me what life was like as a child:

"We used to

We need to treat plants and animals with respect." Mr. LaGarde has seen what an imbalance of this can cause. The land of his people has been taken by treaties, polluted by pipelines and farm run-off and the plants have been affected by genetic modification. This is an invasion of a foreign culture, and the negative affects of this reach the youth in a profound way. Mr. LaGarde said, "Electronics have changed everything. There is no more listening to teaching, but rather, listening to entertainment." And because of that, one of the most important links to the culture and spirituality—the language—is being forgotten.

I can see this phenomenon in the youth everywhere: transfixed by their phones—taking "selfies"—sucked into a world of electronic lights and instant gratification, changing the way even the simplest of words are spelled. They live in a world where reality is of their own making and at the touch of their fingertips. The world outside is foreign.

On the up side, there is a growing desire for tradition. I have experienced it myself in my own conversion story: I was attracted to what is sacred, beautiful and whole. I was always disturbed to know that my family's last name was changed at customs when my great grandparents came over from Poland: it was "unpronounceable." My grandparents were children when they came to Northern Wisconsin. They were part of the first wave of Polish immigrants, "za chlebem" ("for bread") immigrants, who came to America because they were extremely poor and suffered politi-

cally.

Once here, and with their new name, they refused to speak Polish in front of their children—they intended to fully assimilate into “American Culture.” My grandparents famously said: “We are American now, we speak English.” This affected me, three generations later. I always felt that I was severely lacking an identity. We lost our religious identity as well. I had no idea that we had Catholic roots until I announced to my family that I was becoming Catholic. This lack of knowing who I was deeply affected my behavior—I always felt “disconnected,” and this sentiment led me into trouble.

All that said, this happened to my family by choice—my grandparents chose this for the most part. The Native American people have experienced this to a much higher and much more devastating degree—and by force. Imagine, if I feel the way I do in my own experience, what do the native people of my generation feel? What is their experience of identity?

Mr. LaGarde also mentioned that the invasion of unnatural, processed foods have taken their toll on his community. There is a big problem with diabetes and heart disease on the reservation. This is causing alarm among the people and a movement toward whole and traditional foods: “People are starting to garden, and there is a farm stand down the road. People are starting to buy fresh vegetables there,” Mr. LaGarde said with a smile.

Educating the youth in his community about the sacredness of the water, land and wild rice has

become Joe LaGarde’s life’s work. His dreams came to fruition in the creation of the Niibi Center. His goals and the goals of the elders became the Center’s goals: to facilitate and preserve water-oriented traditional teachings and practices; to gather stories and history pertinent to water; to support transmission of traditional practices like netting and ricing; and to revitalize and teach the traditional language. The hope is that the center will be a place for ceremonies, feasts, storytelling, music, arts, lessons in ecology and gardening, permaculture and organic agriculture, as well as a gathering place for community members. I wonder if Mr. LaGarde, standing in his home-based school years ago, could have imagined that a place like this would exist.

This experience has changed me in unforeseen ways. I have met some really beautiful people, who, by living their own culture and tradition fully, have taught me about my own. I grieve for my lost connection to my roots, and this experience has helped me gain back the desire to reconnect. I will look at the river, the land and environmental preservation differently—with a deeper meaning and connected by the sound of sacred drums. And, the next time I participate in the Mass, I will have a deeper awareness of the meaning behind every gesture.

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