

Three Grandmothers

By Anna Von Reitz



My Father's Mother died when he was a young man of eighteen, so I never knew her; my maternal Grandmother died when I was seven. In the brief span of those early years I spent a lot of time with her and with my much-older Sister, Emma, so her loss was very palpable for me and I had a lot of good memories.

I wasn't allowed to go to the funeral, but my Sister, Emma, was a loyal confidante and told all.

The funeral was unexpectedly large as many people from the local community came as well as relatives from out of town, but two attendees caused a small stir. Two Winnebago women who were elders in their community came to pay their respects and take part in the funeral dinner held after the services.

In those days and times it was unusual for the Winnebago to take part in our funeral rites or for "White Men" to attend their similar ceremonies, but these two, Agnes Clymer and her Cousin Minnie came, just the same.

They came even though they knew that their appearance in black and purple dresses and silver jewelry would stand out in the crowd. They didn't come for the crowd. They came for my Grandmother and my Sister and me.

It was a Woman Thing.

I can picture them to this day, giving each other a knowing look, as much as to say, "Well, these children have no Grandmother now, so we will be their Grandmothers."

And they were.

They took it upon themselves to comfort my Sister and guide her on her path in life, and me, they adopted and treated me as one of their own grandchildren, subject to the same loving discipline and the same introspective expectations.

That first autumn we harvested the apples together as we always had, but there was someone missing. We all felt the gap, but then, Agnes and Minnie made the extra effort to find something funny to laugh about, some fond remembrance of my Grandmother that made us all smile.

This is the Native Way. You don't sit around grieving for yourself and your loss and your sudden loneliness. You greet death with a smile and remember the good times. If you have to go weep and scream, you do it by yourself, away from other people.

It is also the Native Way to teach young people about their ancestors, so my Grandmother was never far away as I grew up. Both Agnes and Minnie had known her from their youth and had plenty of insights and stories to tell me about her and the many challenges she faced, how she faced them, and how she overcame them.

There was usually a sly joke somewhere in the mix. Something to make me grin and shake my head. And through it all a thread of love that these two women, old friends of my Grandmother's, kept alive for me as they added their own threads of love to it. I came to know my Grandmother through their eyes.

She was not there to teach me how to weave young willow branches into a fence or basket, so they did it. She was not there to teach me how to harvest cottonwood sap and make it into a sweet-smelling salve, so they taught me.

Each season brought its skills and remembrances, sewing dresses, making cheese, embroidery, beadwork, leather tanning, bread making, harvesting blueberries and cranberries and wild rice.

Because I had no brothers, it was also the Native way to teach a lone child like me, even though I was a girl, how to hunt and fish for myself and my family. So Agnes' husband gave me my first bow and arrows and fish spear, and together with my Uncle Julius, we spent many summer and autumn days fishing and hunting, cleaning and preparing meat and preserving it for the winter.

This was a private world we entered, all of us, away from the European world, and any time I wanted or needed to leave the bustle of cities and commerce behind, I had only to step inside the green fringe of trees, breathe in the scent of the forest, and become one with it again.

Of all the many, many gifts these adoptive Grandmothers (and Grandfathers) gave to me as their own gifts from their own lives and skills and cultures, this ability to lose myself in Nature has remained and been my source of sustenance and joy.

It is part of the reason I came to Alaska and stayed here. Alaska is a vast and largely untrammled land, fresh and clean as God made it, abundant in birds and fish and animal life. I no longer hunt or fish but I know the Great Hoop of life and know I am part of it and that is a comfort that nobody can ever take from me.

I forage for mushrooms and pick berries in their seasons and watch the ever-changing pageant of the seasons as avidly as I ever have.

This doesn't mean that I don't suffer my pangs of homesickness for the land and soil I grew up on, a gentler piece of Earth where the Woodlands of Wisconsin and the Sand Counties of the Mississippi meet the Great Plains.

I miss the long, slow springtime and the violets and Mayflowers and Trilliums of my native land, the scent of gardens of peonies and German Bearded Iris, hedges of lilac and roses planted by my Elders.

When Pow-Wow Season comes around, I always sense the beat of distant drums, and in my mind, I smell the "Indian Hot Dogs" -- smoked sausages wrapped in Fry Bread Dough, then deep fat fried until they are golden brown.

When cherry season comes, my mind takes the journey North to the Lake Cabin and Egg Harbor, in Door County, the "thumb" on Wisconsin's mitten-shape, where I am sure my Sister's spirit still roams and where we spent our summer days together.

Then, as the season turns, I am seated on the Old Dock, with Lake Arbutus flat and calm as a mirror, with a full Harvest Moon rising. Autumn is coming to my Homeland, and soon, great flocks of migratory birds, Canada Geese, Loons, Swans, and Herons will be visiting.

All three of my Grandmothers are long gone; I have become a Great-Grandmother myself. The years have sped away like shadows, each one graced in its own way, all their memories neatly placed, like shingles on a roof that covers my soul and gives meaning to life, all, always, gently affirming that life goes on and that I am part of it, and will still be part of it, forever.

There is no greater gift nor greater comfort than this knowing that every ending is a beginning, that every scrap of love we give and all that we receive, never dies, that the color of our skin doesn't matter --- it's the color of our heart that separates or unifies us.

There are Evil Men in this world; they give rise to Evil Thoughts, and their Evil Thoughts give rise to Evil Acts. There are also cowards, who fear living as much as they fear dying.

There are many who have been kept so busy working and worrying and satisfying basic needs that they have had no time and presence of mind to consider who they are in any greater scheme of things, nor any greater goal than having enough money.

I count myself extremely lucky that my Grandmother formed firm friendships with my Winnebago Grandmothers, and so, was able to pass on the gifts of love and insight and belonging that came to me through all of them.

I have been blessed and intend always to be a blessing in my turn.

Let us all pause a moment in this beautiful and sacred springtime, smell the fresh air, feel the miracle of the returning sun, hear the trickle of water everywhere. Sense the strength and order and permanence of life, and know that we are part of the Universe and the Universe is part of us.

Knowing this is the basis for being secure in who we are and knowing that we are never alone. We are not isolated, not alienated, and not strangers. We are not limited by our physical body and its lifespan. We can make our own choices.

Today and every day, I seek the solace of Nature, the beauty of Life, and the mystery of All That Is. I bear Witness to it. I declare our freedom. I embrace the truth. I humbly accept the role of caretaker, just as my Winnebago Grandmothers did, when they glanced at each other and decided to love a little girl who came from a different culture and a different race.

If my Grandmother had lived many more years, Agnes and Minnie would have still been part of my life, but I would have had my own Grandmother taking care of me and teaching me and they wouldn't have felt the responsibility of bringing me up and preparing me for life.

Strange as it is, I was blessed precisely because I was bereaved, and because I was alone, without siblings close to my own age, and without a Grandmother to teach and guide me. It was my need that called forth their kindness and their determination to fill the empty space in my life.

Somewhere in time and space, there are three women, no longer burdened by age, no longer wrinkled, no longer worried about anything. They are no doubt laughing as I strongly recall each one of them, and send my love like a gentle tidal wave to embrace them and say, "Thank you!".

Let everyone reading this today pause a moment and look around in your own life for those who have mentored and helped and sheltered and cared for you, alive or dead, near or far. Remember them.

Let everyone reading this today pause a moment, too, and see the young people who are everywhere in need, looking for guidance and moral support and truthful advice in the midst of the storm.

Let your hearts go out to them. Let your hands be outstretched. Share a joke or a dream or a wry comment they will remember and smile about fifty years from now. Let the thoughts you inspire be good thoughts. Let the lessons you teach be the foundations of a good life.

Someday the child that you befriend will become the man or woman who looks back and loves you and realizes the value of all that you shared and all that you taught them.

Be blessed and be a blessing to others, so that in all things the energy of love flows freely, unobstructed by things like money or skin color or social status or prejudice or politics or religion.

Get beyond all that. Set yourself free.

Be like Agnes and Minnie, feeling the sadness and seeing the need, silently nodding, silently accepting. In all the Universe, you are the one(s) who are placed exactly where you are, to face your own special challenges and opportunities -- and only you can accept these callings. Only you can make the difference and make the decision to love.

Granna

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