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Childhood in an Indian Village



WILFRED PELLETIER

GOING BACK as far as I can remember as a child in an Indian community, I had no sense of knowing about the other people around me except that we were all somehow equal; the class structure in the community was horizontal. There was only one class. Nobody was interested in getting on top of anybody else.

*no one
kept
score*

You could see it in our games. Nobody organized them. There weren't any competitive sports. But we were involved in lots of activity (I was not like I am now; I was in pretty good shape at that time) and we were organized, but not in the sense that there were ways of finding out who had won and who had lost. We played ball like everyone else, but no one kept score. In fact, you would stay up at bat until you hit the ball. If somebody happened to walk by on the street, an old guy, we'd tease him and bug him to come over and try to hit the ball, and he would come over and he'd swing away. If they threw us out on first, we'd stay on first anyway. We ran to second, and they would throw us out there, and sometimes we'd get thrown out all the way around.



Francis Kagize

We had a number of other games we used to play. There was one where we used to try and hit each other between two lines with a ball. It didn't really make any difference if you got hit or whether you stayed in the centre and tried to hit the other guy or not. But it was very, very difficult to hit these guys. I remember standing between these two lines, and all of a sudden the guys would take off, and you could be two or three feet from them, and you would have to throw the ball at them, and you just couldn't hit those guys. They were really terrific.

*doing was
playing*

It was later on in life that I began to realize that what we were really doing was playing. Very much like animals play. When you observe the bear, the adult, the male and female are always playing with the cubs. The otters do the same thing. None of the kind of play we had was really structured and organized. That came after the recreation directors from the outside world came in and told us that we had a problem in the community, that we were not organized, and they were going to introduce some.

They introduced them all right, and the tremendous competitiveness that went with them. It's not as bad on Manitoulin Island, where I'm from, as it is a lot of other places where competitiveness is rolling in. I'm glad I can remember that as a kid I was able to become involved with a community with others and nobody was competing. Even if we did formally compete in the games we did, no one was a winner though someone may have won. It was only the moment. If you beat someone by pulling a bow and arrow and shooting the arrow further, it only meant that you shot the arrow further at that moment. That's all it lasted. It didn't mean you were better in any way whatsoever. It just meant that at that particular time the arrow went further; maybe it was just the way you let the bow go. These kinds of things are very important to me and that is why I am talking about them and, probably, exploring while I'm talking, now. When I get the opportunity to listen to myself the odd time I try to

explore those kinds of things that I can remember as a child.

One of the very important things was the relationship we had with our families. We didn't always live at home. We lived wherever we happened to be at that particular time when it got dark. If you were two or three miles away from home, then that is where you slept. People would feed you even if they didn't know who you were. We'd spend an evening, perhaps, with an old couple, and they would tell us stories. Most of these stories were legends, and they were told to us mostly in the winter-time. In the summer people would generally take us out and we would do a number of things which in some way would allow us to learn about life and what it was all about: that is, by talking about some particular person and demonstrating what that person did. At no time, in all the years I spent there, do I ever remember anyone teaching us anything.

*no one
taught us
anything*

I have been to numerous communities across Canada and I still do not find where Indians teach. All young children were allowed to grow, to develop, to learn. They didn't teach you that this was mommy, daddy, desk, ash-tray, house, etc. We learned about these things by listening to the words adults spoke, what they said when they were talking, and built our own kind of relationship with the article. If you observe your children now you will see a child turn a chair over, cover it with a blanket and use it for a house. He can relate many ways to a chair. As we get older we have only one relationship and that is to stick our rear ends on that chair. It's for no other purpose, and, in fact, we tell our kids that that is what it is, and it belongs in a corner and don't move it out of there.

These things I remember very well. We were brought up to have a different relationship to a house and to all the things that surrounded us. That is, the values that adults placed on things in the community did not necessarily carry over into their child and lead him to place the same values on them. Children discovered

Photo: John Phillips



the values of these things on their own, and developed their own particular relationship to them.

This is very closely related to the religion of the community, which centred entirely on man. One of the practiced ethics of the community was non-interference. No one interfered with us, and this way of living still exists today. If you go to an Indian home the kids don't come up and bug you while you are talking to someone else. They might come and stand by you quietly, just as an adult might. If you observe Indians someplace, they will stand quietly, and only when they are acknowledged, will they speak. If they get into a group session, they will act the same way. They will sit and listen to people talk, and when they get the opportunity they will speak, but they won't cut you off or interfere. There are some who do this now, but not very many. Most of them will just wait. The whole background in the educational system was that of observing and feeling. This is how they learned.

*a whole way
of life*

It was a very different kind of learning situation that we were in as children. In fact, all of the things we did related to our way of life. Everything had to fit into the whole; we didn't learn things in parts. As an example: if we watched someone running an outboard motor, we would learn everything that was involved in working that motor. If someone taught someone here to do that, after he was finished he might add a safety program on top of it. This would be an additional thing. The way Indians learned it, they built in a safety program while they were learning through their observations and because their very lives depended on their doing it right.

And just as we didn't separate our learning from our way of life, we didn't separate our work from it either. The older women, for example, who used to work all day at whatever – tanning hides, etc., didn't really think of it as work. It was a way of life. That's the real difference between the kind of society we have now

where we equate these kinds of things with work and yet will go out and play sports and enjoy it and the kind of society I'm talking about. Here we go and work and use maybe half or a quarter of the energy we spend playing sports, but we call it work and we feel differently about it altogether. These are the kinds of differences that exist. Indian people who had a way of life and who felt it was their way of life didn't call it work. It was part of the way they provided for their families; and they "worked" very hard.

One of the reasons, of course, why they didn't call it "work" was that they didn't have any foremen. As I mentioned before, there wasn't any kind of a vertical structure in the community. In these communities what existed was a sharing of power. In spite of what everybody says, we really didn't have chiefs, that is, people who were bosses. We had medicine men, who were wise men. The rest were leaders in particular ways. They weren't leaders as we look at them today. It was a different kind of leadership in that the person who was leader had special abilities, say in fishing or hunting. He took the leadership that day, and then discarded the leadership when he was finished with the job. He had power only for the time he wanted to do something. That power came in all forms of all the things he did in the community, so that he used power only for the things he wanted to do, and then he immediately shed it so that someone else could pick it up and it could change hands several times in the community in a day or a week or whatever.

Only in times of war and disaster was a vertical structure used. The war chief would designate various jobs to various people and use that vertical structure. This was only in times of danger. Otherwise, it was horizontal. My grandfather one time told me this, although it didn't sink in until just a few years ago, that to have power is destructive. You'll be destructive if you have power because if people don't join you, then you will destroy them. I forgot this and dug around for power and began to lose friends. I was making decisions for

*sharing and
shedding of
power*

people even with the background I have. Now I have such a problem fighting this thing off, because people are always putting me in a position where I have power. They say I am director of the Institute of Indian Studies. This is not true. I'm just at Rochdale College. Where I am everyone makes up their own minds in terms of what they want to do, and they do those things, and if I can be of assistance, then I assist. I've got my own thing that I hope to do. One of the things that I'm interested in is the kind of lives that the young Indian people now at Rochdale live – what is happening to them in the city.

*a child is
given
what he
wants*

The city has special problems for them as it had for me. For many of them were raised in Indian homes, where the attitude is that no child ever should be rejected. In an Indian home, if a child's face is dirty or his diaper is wet, he is picked up by anyone. The mother or father or whoever comes into the house. He is never rejected. And they don't stick children in cribs, where they can only look in one direction – up. The child generally sits or stands (often tied in), so he can relate to the world in all directions. And children are fed whenever they are hungry. They are never allowed to be in want. Whatever is wanted is given to them. If a child wants to play with something, it is always placed in his hand. No one would think of putting a rattle slightly out of reach, so he would try to grab it and be aggressive. No one would think of feeding the baby only at set times. What follows this approach in terms of attitudes and way of life is immense. The child's nature is very strongly influenced in the first four or five years. The children become very non-competitive. They have no need to compete.

The whole situation changes, however, when they go out into the world, where the attitudes and values are totally different. A world, further, in which their values are not acceptable. Where for many of us as children we were not even permitted to speak our own language. Of course, we still tried to speak our own language, but we were punished for it. Four or five

years ago they were still stripping the kids of their clothes up around Kenora and beating them for speaking their own language. It is probably still happening in many other institutions today. I was punished several times for speaking Indian not only on the school grounds but off the school grounds and on the street, and I lived across from the school. Almost in front of my own door my first language was forbidden me, and yet when I went into the house my parents spoke Indian.

Our language is so important to us as a people. Our language and our language structure related to our whole way of life. How beautiful that picture language is where they only tell you the beginning and the end, and you fill in everything, and they allow you to feel how you want to feel. Here we manipulate and twist things around and get you to hate a guy. The Indian doesn't do that. He'll just say that some guy got into an accident, and he won't give you any details. From there on you just explore as far as you want to. You'll say: "What happened?", and he'll tell you a little more. "Did he go through the windshield?" "Yep!" He only answers questions. All of the in-between you fill in for yourself as you see it. We are losing that feeling when we lose our language at school. We are taught English, not Indian, as our first language. And that changes our relationship with our parents. All of a sudden we begin saying to our parents "you're stupid." We have begun to equate literacy with learning, and this is the first step down. It is we who are going down and not our parents, and because of that separation we are going down lower and lower on the rung because it is we who are rejecting our parents; they are not rejecting us. The parents know that, but they are unable to do anything about it. And we take on the values, and the history of somebody else.

*fill in
for
yourself*

And part of the reason our parents say so little is that that's their way. They don't teach like white people; they let their children make their own decisions. The closest they ever got to formal teaching was to tell us



Francis Kogize

stories. Let me give you an example. We had been out picking blueberries one time, and while sitting around this guy told us this story. The idea was that he wanted to get us to wash up – to wash our feet because we had been tramping through this brush all day long. He talked about a warrior who really had a beautiful body. He was very well built, and he used to grease himself and take care of his body. One day this warrior was out, and he ran into a group of other people whom he had never seen before. They started to chase him. He had no problem because he was in such good shape. He was fooling around and playing with them because he was such a good runner. He ran over hills and over rocks, teasing them. Then he ran into another group. The first group gave up the chase. But now he had to run away from this other group, and he was fooling around doing the same thing with them. All of a sudden he ran into a third group. He ran real hard and all of a sudden he fell. He tried to get up and he couldn't. He spoke to his feet and said "What's wrong with you? I'm going to get killed if you don't get up and get going." They said: "That's alright. You can comb your hair and grease your body and look after your legs and arms but you never did anything for us. You never washed us or cleaned us or greased us or nothing." He promised to take better care of the feet if they would get up and run, and so they did.

*it belongs
to me*

This is one of the stories we were told, and we went up and washed our feet right away and then went to bed. Maybe this happens among other ethnic groups, I don't know, but this is the kind of learning we had. I will never forget the kinds of things we learned, because to me it all belongs to me. It isn't something that someone says is so; it's mine. I'd want to go hunting, and the guys would know I couldn't get across the stream because it was flooded, but they wouldn't say anything. They'd let me go, and I'd tell them I'd see them later where the rocks are, and they'd say O.K. knowing all this time I couldn't get through. But they wouldn't tell me that. They'd let me experience it. And I'm grateful to these people for allowing me to have this

kind of exploration/learning situation. Secondly, of course, the fact is that maybe I could have gotten across where they couldn't, discovered something different, a method that was new. I think this kind of learning situation is one of the really important things that Indians have today and which could contribute to the society we have today. That is, a learning situation for people, instead of teaching or information giving.

All these things—the various ways Indian life differed from that in our present society—I didn't learn until after I left the reserve community later on in life. Then I could understand how very differently structured the two communities are. While it didn't have a vertical structure, our community was very highly structured. So highly structured that there wasn't anything that could happen that somebody could almost immediately, in some way, solve, whatever problem arose. Without any given signals or the appearance of any communication whatsoever (there were no telephones) the most complex social action used to happen. If somebody died in that community, nobody ever said we should dig a grave. The grave was dug, the box was made, everything was set up . . . the one who baked pies baked pies. Everyone did something in that community, and if you tried to find out who organized it, you couldn't.

*horizontal
organization*

It's exactly the same way today. You cannot find out who organizes these things. In 1964 Prime Minister Pearson came up to the reserve. We had a cocktail party in the hall, and at the same time there was a big buffet organized for him. This was organized by a woman from Toronto. She went up there and set this whole thing up. He had been coming there every year. This was his riding. Every year they turned out a beautiful meal for him, and he never knew who to thank because it was just all of a sudden there; it was done. The people just got together. There was no foreman or boss. There was no vertical structure, and it just happened. You should have been there in '64. It was chaotic. There were no knives, no deserts, nobody had cut up the

heads of lettuce that were all over, because this woman came there and gave orders, and the people wouldn't do anything until she told them what to do. She got so busy that she couldn't tell everybody what to do, and she had four or five turkeys all over the town in different people's ovens, and that's where they sat. They had to go and tell the women to bring the turkeys down because they wouldn't do it on their own. There was someone in charge. Had there not been anyone in charge it would have gone off fine. It was a real mess. This is the difference. Here you organize, and you know those kinds of structures, and they mean something to you. You instinctively behave in certain ways to those things.

But it's more than that too. As I see it, organization comes out of a need for immediate order—say in war. When it develops this way so that people say let's organize, and they get together and create a vertical structure, and place somebody up at the top and then it becomes a power group, and from there on it filters on down until after a while you have somebody running that organization, two or three people or maybe eventually just one, and all the rest of the people get suppressed, pushed down, and held down by that very thing they formally sought. You give power to someone and suppress others.

I don't know if a different kind of structural organization can exist today. I know some people are trying to make a different one—some people in Rochdale College and I suspect in many places where people are getting together and trying to live communally. I remember as a child a different kind of organization existing, and I have come to call it now "community consciousness." That community can exist and function and solve all its problems without any kinds of signals, like a school of fish. All of a sudden you see them move; they shift altogether. That is exactly the way most Indian communities function. And yet we have the Department of Indian Affairs coming and telling us we have no organization. The

*like a school
of fish*

*breaking
the
pattern*

local priest or minister will come and tell us we have to be organized. The Recreation Department will come along and say there's no organization in this community. And when they come it's like shooting a goose in a flock of geese. When you hit him you disrupt the pattern. So every time somebody comes into the community they disrupt the pattern. Every time you remove a resource person from the community you disrupt the pattern. You break it up, and they have to reorganize. But in a lot of communities this is very hard to do, and some of them have been too hurt to make it. Indian resource people begin to drop out of sight and white organizers take over, making it even more difficult for Indian people to function. I know that in one community where there are 740 people (about two-thirds of them children) there are 18 organizations. There are 3 churches that all have 2 or 3 organizations, and there is also a community development officer who has a number of organizations behind him, and they are in such conflict that the community cannot function. It's just sitting there, with people at each other's throats. The people who come in can't understand that if a guy is sitting under a tree and doing nothing but observing the stars or the clouds in the daytime or the birds flying, he is running through a recreational pattern and at the same time he is learning. These are all parts of a whole. Most Indian people deal with wholeness. It is much different than the way we deal with things where we segment them and deal with them only in parts.

It is also very difficult to know what to do now – now that the organizers have come in. The dependency is so great and government and outside resources have created this dependency. They have removed most of the human resource and certainly all the economic base from most Indian communities and there is very little left. Yet the Indian relationship to that dependency is much different from ours in this society. Indians may receive welfare, but most of them feel it is a right. They don't look down on people who are on welfare. Drawing welfare doesn't change the nature of

*child-like
and
mature*

the person. In the same way, if they walk into a room that is messy they don't say the woman is sloppy. They say the room is sloppy. A lot of them don't paint their houses. That is because they don't have the same relationship to that house that we in this society do. Clothes don't make the man. Relationships are built on something that is not materialistic. The same thing applies to money. If you observe your children when they have money, they want to get rid of it right away. How long do children stay mad at one another? A moment. All of these behaviour patterns that you observe in children are very much related to adult Indians. Your history books say that when the white men first came here they noted that the Indians were very child-like. That is very true in many ways. But if you look at it, how beautiful to be child-like and yet be mature. Here we say that you mustn't show feelings. I don't agree with that. If a man can cry, then he has feelings. Indians cry all the time. We get together and sing songs, and we cry in these songs. But this society is very machine-like, and so we begin to act like machines and then we become machines.

Because of this approach Indians don't really want to fight for their rights. They really don't want to get into the society at all. In this way they are probably different from the black people on this continent who are a much larger group, and have no choice but to fight for their rights. When they get these rights, what they are doing in essence is moving into society. When they do get in, they might make the changes they want in terms of their cultural background or how they look at things, or whatever, and these changes may give them the freedom to practice or do those things they want to do.

But the Indians have fundamentally rejected society as it now is. The Indians are expert at making all programs that the Indian Affairs Branch has ever come up with a failure by withdrawing. The Indians embrace everything that comes into a community. If you want to build a church, that's fine. We'll help you build that church, etc. Then once they see that they can't relate to that church in any way, they withdraw and the thing falls apart. If you want to build a road, they'll

help you build one, with the result that some reserves have roads running all over the place, but nobody uses them. The Branch has a history of complete failure. The Indians have always rejected it. We have a society here where we must win. For everything you do you must end up fighting – fighting for your rights, good against evil, war against poverty, the fight for peace. The whole base of the western culture has an enemy concept. What would happen if you remove the enemy? How then do you defeat somebody who is on your side? I suspect that if you remove the enemy the culture might collapse. The Indian can't fight on your terms. For a start he doesn't even have the numbers, much less the inclination. So he withdraws. And he pays a certain price. He suffers poverty in many ways.

But maybe the future is with the Indian. Marshall McLuhan says that the only people living in the 21st century are the Indians, the Eskimos, some French people and the Japanese. All the rest, because they deal with history, live in the 19th century because they deal with the past and not the present. The pan-Indian movement, with the Native American Church, recognizes this and there are various Indian cultures that are moving closer and closer together. It's a spontaneous thing that just happened. It's just growing and there isn't anyone who is heading it up. It's a movement. And it's made me much more hopeful.

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Francis Kagige is from the same village as Wilfred Pelletier. He has lived there all his life and makes only occasional trips to the outside world. Most of his paintings and drawings come out of the stories and legends he heard as a child and from observation of the animal life in the woods of his reserve.

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