

THE TEACHINGS OF THE SEVEN GRANDFATHERS

Anishinabe people believe that we are related to all things, including rocks & stones, so we often refer to them as grandfather or grandmother. They were created thousands of years ago, and thus they bring us ancient wisdom. But once they appeared in human form to bring us these teachings.

LOVE -- Sàgihidiwin

Of these seven teachings, LOVE is the only one that we are born with. We also take it with us when we pass on, because those who loved us while we were on our earth walk continue to love us after we go. We can protect our love by being cautious about whom we give it to, but once we see beyond the risk of being hurt, we can love all things.

One of our words for Love is “zaa-gee-di-win,” meaning ‘bittersweet.’ From this we learn that Love does not always mean a warm, fuzzy feeling; sometimes, it’s downright painful. Another of our words for love has to do with loving ourselves: each of us has a special place reserved for us by the Creator from before we were born. It is up to us to internalize the teachings in order to find that place and our reason for being here. The Creator has also given every one of us certain gifts – it is our duty to make good use of them. When we know that we do not stand alone, then we can become what we were meant to be.

LOVE is our greatest gift from the Creator. Make this teaching work in your life. See how you Love yourself, your spouse, your family, your community, and Mother Earth. Always start with yourself – if there is no Love there, it will be difficult for you to have it anywhere else.

COURAGE -- Songidyewin

As we move into adolescence, the south section of the medicine wheel, if we have had a good experience with the first teaching, which was Love, we then begin to learn about the second one: Courage.

In a perfect world, this would mean that we are self-confident enough to start taking the normal risks associated with growing up: doing things without our parents, going off to bigger schools, learning how to drive, starting to date, planning how to accomplish our dreams. With each accomplishment, we gain more confidence, and we are able to set another goal that will stretch our abilities farther still. All these things make each of us an individual, separate from our parents, and closer to what we were meant to be, so that we can take our rightful place in society, as set out by the Creator.

In the old days, this was the phase of our life when we did our first vision quest, something that is done to obtain guidance about our individual roles in this Earthwalk. We can also get clues about our purpose here from learning both our Spirit Names and Clans.

But few of us live in a perfect world. Instead many of us have had a bad time in childhood, learning more about Fear than Love, and thus coming through it with very poor self-esteem. Sadly, with our spirituality nearly lost, we have little to help us get back on track during adolescence, and as a result, our teenagers take the wrong kind of risks, most of them life-threatening. Many of the addictions that our people suffer with as adults, get started in adolescence as a means to escape from the challenges that they face. It is very difficult to go against the extreme peer pressure present in adolescence. It is much easier to just do what everyone else is doing than it is to risk the embarrassment of failure, but in the long run, the cowardly way out may kill us. At the very least, it creates many other problems that may keep you from achieving your goals. Accept the challenge of adolescence – become brave for the right things.

So how can we get back a positive self-esteem? A good way to start is with the medicine of the south, which is cedar. We use cedar to cleanse our bodies, the focus of the Southern direction of the Medicine Wheel. Make tea with cedar and drink it to cleanse the toxins from inside your body. Add it to your bath water. Put some cedar leaves in your shoes to protect you and keep you grounded [calm] during your busy day. Use it in your daily smudge and hang boughs at the entrances to your home.

Truth/Honesty/Humility/Respect

These four values are often learned by us as Adults, which is a good thing; because they are the hardest ones to fully understand. The Adult stage of Life is found in the West direction of the Medicine Wheel, which deals with the Emotional aspect of our well-being and our Self-Awareness.

Truth - Tabasenindizowin

The Anishinabemowin word for Truth is “de-bwe-win” with ‘de’ referring to the heart and ‘bwe’ describing a motion of intake and output. (The ‘win’ at the end makes the whole word into a noun.) The heart has eyes with which it ‘sees’ the truth in any given situation. How often have we felt that there was something wrong with a particular circumstance without knowing just what it was? That’s the heart’s view that insists there is something ‘funny’ about it, something that just doesn’t sit right. Some people refer to this as their ‘intuition.’

Now there are Absolute Truths, which we might call facts, such as the law of gravity, or $e=mc^2$, etc. But there are other types of truth, too, such as personal truths, family truths, and cultural truths. These refer to what has made us who we are today – our place in the family, the way we were raised, how we were treated by the members of our family and community, what triumphs and tragedies we survived, and what we gave back. Mind you, all of these are ‘absolute’ in a way because we cannot change what has happened in our past, we can only try to learn something from it that will help us in the future.

THE TEACHINGS OF THE SEVEN GRANDFATHERS

Honesty -- Kwayakwadizi

In today's society, people seem to think that Truth and Honesty are the same thing, but closer scrutiny shows that they are not. The Anishinabemowin word for Honesty is "gwek-waa'-diz-win." In this noun, 'gwek' means 'straightness,' 'waa' means 'light,' and 'diz,' that 'bellybutton' word, means 'ownership.' Even today, both the words 'straightness' and 'light' have connotations of 'goodness' and 'trustworthiness.' Here, these qualities are internalized. If you are an Honest person, you'll like who you see in the mirror, and you'll be able to look at others with straight eyes as well, because you won't have anything to hide. This quality will show itself in what you do and how you do it, things that everyone notices.

All too often, people try to deny their personal truths by ignoring the lessons that their past has taught them. Consulting with an Elder to gain an objective view of our situations and plan a new strategy is a good way to nourish our self-awareness.

Humility -- Tabasenindizowin

Once Truth and Honesty have been internalized, then it is possible for the adult to grasp Humility. Perhaps the best way to understand it is to look at its negative value: Pride. That, we were taught in school, was 'baaaad,' so bad in fact, that it is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. It follows then, that it was a sin to give in to our Egos, to boast about how good a job we did, or how much good fortune we had. It even went so far as to become a superstition: bragging was a sure sign that tragedy would follow. It should not be surprising then that we learned this one well. Now, generations later, this has translated into a tendency to see only the negative side of things. If we cannot comment on the greatness of the half-full cup then all we will see is the bleekness of the half-empty one.

But Humility is not about demanding a low self-esteem. On the contrary, it is about making yourself the same level as everyone else. In some cases, that means bringing yourself up to that point; in others, it may mean coming down a peg or two. But it was about equality, like the circle – every person is a sacred part of Creation, just like the trees and the stars. Your story is not greater or lesser than anyone else's, but your's is not the only story, nor is your point of view the only *correct* one. All are equal.

Respect -- Manàdjiyan

Once the Adult understands that all things are created equal, then Respect can be developed. The Anishinabemowin word for Respect is "m-naa-de-ndmoo-win," which means that your heart has a good, straight, upfront feeling from the spirit of that person or thing.

But we often confuse 'respect' with 'admire,' making the mistake of putting a person who we respect 'up on a pedestal.' Then, if we learn something that we don't like about them, the pedestal shatters, and we feel foolish to have ever admired them in the first place. But if we truly learned the other teachings from the Seven Grandfathers, we would realize that that person is not higher than us – they are equal. They are imperfect, just like us and the rest of humanity.

Still, there was something about that person that was noteworthy – probably qualities that we could develop in ourselves, qualities that would increase our self-respect. If we have mastered Honesty, we can, humbly, be proud of ourselves, something that is worthy of respect. Once we have respect for ourselves, it is much easier to have respect for others and their various points of view.

After traveling through the life stages of the Medicine Wheel and internalizing these first six teachings from our ancestors, we find ourselves in the North, the stage of the Elder, which deals with the Spiritual aspect of our lives. This is the time when we can begin to truly understand the meaning of Wisdom.

Wisdom -- Nibwakawin

In this stage of life, we are more comfortable in defining our selves and our lives – we know what we want, and we go after it. We no longer require external approval because we have become 'whole,' which is another way of saying that we have finally found what it was that the Creator sent us here to do or be.

This concept is reflected in the Anishinabemowin word for Wisdom, which is "ni-bwaa-kaa-win." This translates to: 'the light ahead of knowledge.' So, it is not simply knowledge. It is more about the 'insight' gained from the facts, or the 'context' understood from the information, that helps us to gain an understanding of the significance of any given piece of data. It is the clue that helps us start putting the puzzle pieces together. Wisdom is knowledge put into action.

Wisdom is something that is created by us, not unlike a feeling, or a taste, but in order to begin developing it, we need to learn how to retrieve relevant information from our own memory banks to help us with life's ongoing lessons. Each decision that we make has consequences that affect our future. Each triumph and trauma is like a Rite of Passage for us into wholeness. Only by recognizing the links between this particular lesson and that one, (and that one, and that one) do we realize the issue once again, this time, hopefully, before we have to endure the lesson for one more time.

Now, even though these teachings have been associated with a particular stage of life here, it does not mean that we cannot learn their lessons at other times in our lives. Nor does it mean that we must learn one before we can learn another. In fact, it is more likely that we learn bits and pieces about each of them all the time. It is our job to decipher the lessons and internalize the meaning, which is not an easy task.