

PORTRAIT OF A NATIVE CHIEF

BY MIRANDA REYES

In the Native tradition, lessons come in the form of fables and allegories. These stories are not so many lessons; they're more like passing on wisdom. Wisdom that's timeless, spanning generations, making it eternal. And while this wisdom is passed down from the Elders to the youth, seldom is it immediately understood. Some lessons take a lifetime to learn and old "sayings" — do we ever really know what they mean. Like my grandpa used to say, "Humph."

When I was 19 years old, I had the world by the tail on a downhill run. I managed a print shop, and received a healthy salary, along with free room and board. The reason I received this healthy salary was because my employer felt that I had a lot of natural ability, that I was able to get any job done in a timely manner and that I was good at solving problems. He sometimes told me, "You're wise beyond your years, and can go far in this business." My ego allowed me to believe this was true. No one could tell me anything I didn't already know. Yet I wasn't so dumb as to think that I knew everything. I loved talking to older people because in my mind, they possessed that 'ancient wisdom' that I thought I understood. They too would say things like, "You're an old soul." Again, my ego allowed me to bask in the praise of the words. When something was shared with me that I didn't quite understand, I'd simply follow the way of my grandpa and just say, "Humph".

The print shop where I worked was in a small industrial area of El Segundo, California located near the center of town. At lunch time, I would cut across a parking lot, turn down an alley, and round the corner to come store front to an old hole in the wall burger joint. As is the case with most of these legendary establishments, the fare was worth more than the mere pennies it cost.

One day, as I was heading back towards the shop with burger in hand, I noticed that a garage door in the alley was opened wide. When I glanced in, I saw an old man turning a table leg on a lathe. Perhaps sensing that someone was watching him, he turned towards the open door with a friendly face. I asked, "How you doing, sir?" His response was to be expected, "No need to call me sir. He chuckled. "Do you mind if I sit here and watch you while I eat my lunch?" I asked. Again, an expected response, "Make yourself at home," he said as he turned back to his task. As I sat there in silence watching him, I was amazed at the ease of talent he displayed. I hadn't had much occasion to experience someone using a lathe to do woodwork, but I do remember that in junior high, during wood shop, the teacher had demonstrated the use of a jig to accomplish consistency when producing products such as table and chair legs. This master used no such tool.

Once again, as if he sensed I had a question, he turned away from his work and looked in my direction. I shared the story of my junior high experience of the jig, and even added that I had turned a baseball bat as a class assignment. I asked him, "How is it that you make the legs look the same without using a jig? (There were two other legs nearby that were an identical match). Of course, the question was somewhat rhetorical, since I already knew the answer was experience. He surprised me when he answered, "I just let the wood be what it wants to be." I should have expected that answer. It sounded like

something the Elders would have said. I just smiled and changed the subject.

“Those are some pretty good-looking tools you have there,” I commented, as I motioned towards a set of nearby chisels. I proceeded to tell him about my prior employment at an antique shop in Redondo Beach. Hoping perhaps to impress him with my worldly experience, I continued with, “They look like they’re from the early 1900’s. Perhaps 1920-1930?” He smiled wryly, as he walked towards a set of cabinets at the back of the garage. He reached towards one of the higher shelves and pulled out a beautiful wooden box. When he set it in front of me, he didn’t say a word, but the smile was still on his face. I thought, okay, this must be some sort of test. I’ll play along. I picked up the box and admired the exquisite craftsmanship. It was well constructed and slightly ornate, but not too much. Very understated. I quickly dismissed the possibility that it was something he had crafted. It was a bit too old. He was an old man, but not that old! The box was worn, but not too much considering its age. It was more like it was well loved. It was rectangle in shape, measuring about 12”x6”x3”. It was hinged in the middle along one side like a clamshell; a simple brass spine that ran the full length of the box was all that was visible. I told him what I imagined he already knew that the box was made from rose wood, and the inlay was mahogany, maple and curly maple. His smile changed slightly becoming more like a grin. With his deep blue eyes, and a slight nod of his head, he motioned for me to open the box. I set the box down and undid the two brass clasps that held it closed.

As I opened the box, the first thing that caught my eye was the red crushed velvet lining. A whiff of linseed oil on metal alighted on my nostril hairs. The thought of a gun box entered my mind. I imagine my eyes must have lit up like a kid at Christmas. What I saw before my eyes was a magnificent set of wood chisels, whose craftsmanship was unrivaled by the box that contained them. Their beauty left me speechless. When I looked up; the old man was back at his lathe. I finished my burger in silence.

As I stood up to leave, the old man gave me his attention. As I handed the box towards him, I told him that the chisels were extraordinary, and thanked him for sharing them with me. He held his hand up in a way that motioned me to stop. I gave him a confused look.

He said, “You keep those.” Of course, I protested. I told him that I don’t do woodwork, and aside from the bat, I never used a lathe. I truly had no use for them, no matter how nice they were. That surely, he must know someone that was more deserving than me. He smiled then said, “No, you take them. You never know what an old set of tools might teach you.” My remark? “Humph.” Who knew what the heck that meant!

I headed across the parking lot back towards the shop. I stopped and put the box in the trunk of my car ... and there they stayed. In the summer of 1982 I found myself traveling the back highways and byways of Arizona and Nevada. I had the luxury of owning a 1973 Delta ‘88 with air conditioning, so life was good. I was 22 with nothing important to do. My biggest concern was keeping my 20-gallon gas tank full. My ‘88 got a whopping 13 miles to the gallon, and I was between jobs. So, I was on a constant lookout for opportunities to earn a few fast bucks. In those days I truly had the philosophy “Will work for food.” Like I said, it was a carefree period of my life, and I wasn’t afraid to put in a hard

day's work.

As luck would have it, I came across a small service station in the middle of the desert. The outside looked like something you would run across on Route 66 back in the 1950's. The garage portion had a two-car bay, and the office looked like a souvenir shop. It had a wooden Indian chief standing proudly outside the door. When I pushed open the door a small bell tinkled. A coyote baring his teeth and a few stuffed rattlesnakes immediately greeted me. On the shelf behind the counter were various carvings of wildlife animals. Without looking up from his paper, which looked to be the National Enquirer, the old proprietor said, "What can I do you for?" I swallowed my nervousness, and gave him my spiel, "You see that boat out there?" I said nodding towards old Betsy. "Well, she's a real gas-guzzler. And I was wondering if you had any work around here that I could do to earn a tank full of gas and maybe a few snacks." He looked up for the first time, and with raised eyebrows he leaned in my direction, looked around as if to see if anyone else was listening, and half whispered with a gleam in his eyes and a smile on his face, "As a matter of fact I do." With that, he stood up, came around from behind the counter, and locked the front door. He led me to a side door that took us through the garage bay and out to the backside of the station. There was an old half-rusted Wrecker parked there. We climbed inside and he took off down a rutted dirt road into the desert. As we bumped and bounced down the road, I remember thinking that maybe he wanted me to put a new set of shocks on this old rattletrap. But about a mile out he came to a sudden stop. He looked through the dusted front windshield and squinted towards the sky as if looking for UFOs, or helicopters. When he was satisfied that the coast was clear he climbed out of the truck. I followed. He pointed toward a ditch that had an 8' section of an old telephone pole in it. I looked at a nearby upright pole that was obviously shortened by about 8 feet. "Wonder how that got there?" he asked with a chuckle. "Give me a hand." We wrestled the pole onto the back of the wrecker and headed back to the station.

After unloading the log into the garage bay, which I now realized was a woodworkers' shop, he picked up a nearby small chainsaw (which I figured was the one that was used to liberate the section of the pole from its otherwise upright position) and began randomly cutting into the log. Wood chips went flying in every direction, some landing in my hair. As he continued, I saw the very rough image of a head appearing. That's when I suddenly remembered the old man turning the table leg in his garage back in California! The next thought was, hey, I still have that old set of chisels in my trunk. I practically ran out and got them. When I returned, I handed him the box. His eyes lit up, much like mine had all those years ago. When he opened it, an audible "ooh!" escaped his lips. He delicately pulled out one of chisels, admired it briefly, then with the same gusto that was used with the chainsaw, he preceded to chip away at the pole. He went through three or four different chisels, chip, chip, chipping away. After about ten minutes, I could make out the distinct features of an Indian face with the start of a "War Bonnet" on its head. I was amazed!

I asked him how it was that he could carve out an image from an ordinary telephone pole without making any marks or guidelines. He asked me, perhaps because of the tools I had handed him, "Haven't you ever carved something out of a stick of wood or a branch?"

“Sure, I once carved an eagle’s head out of a piece of driftwood, but it was already shaped that way.” Then remembering the words of the old man in the other garage, and again, trying to sound wise beyond my years, I continued, “I just let the wood be what it wanted to be.” “What I want to know is how you do it out of an ordinary piece of wood?”

“Well,” he said with a mischievous grin, “I just look at the log and whatever doesn’t look like an Indian, I just chip it away.” We held each other’s gaze for a moment. I knew I had been out witted. And then with a more serious look, he added, “It’s just like the good Lord is doing with you. Whatever doesn’t look like his image of you, he just chips it away.”

“Humph.” It wasn’t until I was sitting on Death Row, in 1988, that I would understand the full meaning of what those two old men had shared with me. You never know what the right set of tools will teach you. | MR

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