

And then I went to school

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I lived with my grandmother when I was five through nine years of age. It was the early fifties when electricity had not yet entered our Pueblo homes. The village day school and health clinic were first to have it, and to the unsuspecting Cochiti, this was the approach of a new era in their uncomplicated lives.

Transportation was simple. Two good horses and a sturdy wagon met the daily needs of a villager. Only five, maybe six individuals possessed an automobile in the Pueblo of 400. A flatbed truck fixed with side rails and a canvas top made the usual Saturday morning trip to Santa Fe. It was always loaded beyond capacity with people and their wares headed to town for a few staples. The straining old truck with its escort of a dozen barking dogs made a noisy exit, northbound from the village.

During those years, grandmother and I lived beside the plaza in a one-room house. Inside, we had a traditional fireplace, a makeshift cabinet for our few tin cups and bowls, and a wooden crate carried our two buckets of all-purpose water. At the inner most part of the room were two rolls of bedding we used as comfortable sitting couches. Consisting of thick quilts, sheepskin, and assorted blankets, these bed rolls were undone each night. A wooden pole the length of one side of the room was suspended about ten inches from the vigas. A modest collection of colorful shawls, blankets and sashes draped over the pole making this part of the room most interesting. In one corner sat a bulky metal trunk for our ceremonial wear and a few valuables. A dresser which was traded for her well-known pottery held the few articles of clothing we owned and the "goody bag." Grandmother always had an old flour sack filled with brown candy, store bought cookies, and Fig Newtons. These were saturated with a sharp odor of mothballs. Nevertheless, they made a fine snack with coffee before we turned in for the night.

Tucked securely beneath my blankets, I listened to one of her stories or about how it was when she was a little girl. These accounts appeared so old fashioned compared to the way we lived. Sometimes, she softly sang a song from a ceremony. In this way, I went off to sleep each night.

Earlier in the evening we would make our way to a relative's house if someone had not already come to visit us. There, I'd play with the children while the adults caught up on all the latest news. Ten cent comic books were finding their way into the Pueblo homes. Exchanging "old" comics for "new" ones was a serious matter that involved adults as well. Adults favored mystery and romance stories. For us children, these were the first links to the world beyond the Pueblo. We enjoyed looking at them and role-playing our favorite hero rounding up the villains. Grandmother once made me a cape to leap tall buildings with. It seems everyone preferred being a cowboy rather than an Indian since cowboys were always victorious. Sometimes stories were related to both children and adults at these get-togethers. They were highlighted by refreshments of coffee and sweet bread or fruit pies baked in the outdoor oven. Winter months would most likely include roasted piñon nuts and dried deer meat for all to share. These evening gatherings and sense of closeness diminished as radios and televisions increased over the following years.

It was never to be the same again.

The winter months are among my fondest memories. A warm fire crackled and danced brightly in the fireplace, and the aroma of delicious stew filled our one room house. The thick adobe walls wrapped around the two of us protectingly during the long freezing nights. To me the house was just right. Grandmother's affection completed the warmth and security I will always remember.

Being the only child at grandmother's, I had lots of attention and plenty of reasons to feel good about myself. As a pre-schooler, I already had the chores of chopping firewood and hauling in fresh water each day. After "heavy work," I would run to her and flex what I was convinced were my gigantic biceps. Grandmother would state that at the rate I was going I would soon attain the status of a man like the adult males in the village. Her shower of praises made me feel like the Mr. Indian Universe of all time. At age five, I suppose I was as close to that concept of myself as anyone.

In spite of her many years, grandmother was highly active in the village ceremonial setting. She was a member of an important women's society and attended every traditional function taking me along to many of them. I'd wear one of my colorful shirts she handmade for just such occasions. Grandmother taught me appropriate behavior at these events. Through modeling she showed me to pray properly. Bare footed, I greeted the sun each morning with a handful of cornmeal. At night I'd look to the stars in wonderment and let a prayer slip through my lips. On meeting someone, grandmother would say, "Smile and greet. Grunt if you must, but don't pretend they're not there." On food and material things, she would say, "There is enough for everyone to share; it all comes from above, my child." I learned to appreciate cooperation in nature and with my fellow men early in life. I felt very much part of the world and our way of life. I knew I had a place in it, and I felt good about me.

And then I went to school. At 6, like the rest of the Cochiti six year-olds that year, I had to begin my schooling. It was a new and bewildering experience. One I will not forget. The strangest surroundings, new ideas about time and expectations, and the foreign tongue were at times overwhelming to us beginners. It took some effort to return the second day and many times thereafter.

To begin with, unlike my grandmother, the teacher did not have pretty brown skin and a colorful dress. She wasn't plump and friendly. Her clothes were one color and drab. Her pale and skinny form made me worried that she was very ill. In the village, being more pale than usual was a sure sign of an oncoming fever or some such disorder. I thought that explained why she didn't have time just for me and the disappointed looks and orders she seemed always to direct my way. I didn't think she was so smart since she couldn't understand my language. Surely that was why we had to leave our "Indian at home". But then, I didn't feel so bright either. All I could say in her language were, "Yes teacher", "My name is Joseph Henry," and, "When is lunch?" The teacher's odor took some getting used to also. In fact, many times it made me sick right before lunch. Later I learned from the girls this smell was something she wore called perfume.

The classroom, too, had its odd characteristics. It was terribly huge and smelled of medicine like the village clinic I feared so much. The walls and ceiling were artificial and uncaring. They were too far from me and I felt naked. Those fluorescent light tubes made an eerie drone and blinked suspiciously over me. This was quite a contrast to the fire and sunlight my eyes were accustomed to. I thought maybe the lighting did not seem right because it was man made and it wasn't natural. Our confinement in rows of desks was another unnatural demand made on our active little bodies. We had to sit on these hard things for what seemed like forever before relief (recess came midway through the morning and afternoon). Running carefree in the village and fields was but a sweet memory of days gone by. We all went home for lunch since we lived a short walk from the school. It took coaxing, and sometimes bribing, to get me to return and complete the remainder of the school day.

School was a painful experience during those early years. The English

language and the new set of values caused me much anxiety and embarrassment. I couldn't comprehend everything that was happening, but I could understand very well when I messed up or wasn't doing so well. Negative messages were communicated too effectively and I became more and more unsure of myself. How I wished I could understand other things in school just as well.

The conflict was not only in school performance but in many other areas of my life as well. For example, many of us students had a problem with head lice due to the "unsanitary conditions in our homes." Consequently, we received a harsh shampooing which was rough on both the scalp and the ego. Cleanliness was crucial, and a washing of this sort indicated to the class that one came from a home setting which was not healthy. I recall one such treatment and afterwards being humiliated before my peers with a statement that I had "She'na" (lice) so tough that I must have been born with them. Needless to say, my Super Indian self image was no longer in tact.

My language, too, was questioned right from the beginning of my school career. "Leave your Indian at home!" was like a school trademark. Speaking it accidentally or otherwise was punishable by a dirty look or a whack with a ruler. This reprimand was for speaking the language of my people which meant so much to me. It was the language of my grandmother, and I spoke it well. With it, I sang beautiful songs and prayed from my heart. At that young and tender age, it was most difficult for me to comprehend why I had to part with my language. And yet at home I was encouraged to attend school so that I might have a better life in the future. I knew I had a good village life already but this awareness dwindled each day I was in school.

As the weeks turned to months, I learned English more and more. It may appear that comprehension would be easier. It got easier to understand alright. I

understood that everything I had, and was a part of, was not nearly as good as the white man's. School was determined to undo me in everything from my sheepskin bedding to the dances and ceremonies which I had learned to have faith in and cherish. One day I dozed off in class after a sacred all-night ceremony. I was startled awake by a sharp jerk on my ear, and informed coldly, "That ought to teach you to attend 'those things' again." Later, all alone I cried. I couldn't understand why or what I was caught up in. I was receiving two very different messages; both were intended for my welfare.

Values in life style were dictated in various ways. The Dick and Jane reading series in the primary grades presented me pictures of a home with a pitched roof, straight walls, and sidewalks. I could not identify with these from my Pueblo world. However, it was clear I didn't have these things, and what I did have did not measure up. At night, long after grandmother went to sleep, I would lay awake staring at our crooked adobe walls casting uneven shadows from the light of the fireplace. The walls were no longer just right for me. My life was no longer just right. I was ashamed of being who I was, and I wanted to change right then and there. Somehow it became very important to have straight walls, clean hair and teeth, and a spotted dog to chase after. I even became critical of, and hateful toward, my bony, fleabag of a dog. I loved the familiar and cozy environment at my grandmother's house, but now I imagined it could be a heck of a lot better if only I had a whiteman's house with a bed, a nice couch, and a clock. In school books, all the child characters ever did was run at leisure after the dog or kite. They were always happy. As for me, all I seemed to do at home was go for buckets of water and cut up sticks for a lousy fire. "Didn't the teacher say drinking coffee would stunt my growth?" "Why couldn't I have nice tall glasses of milk so I could have strong bones and white teeth like those kids in the books?" "Did my

grandmother really care about my well being?”

I had to leave my beloved village of Cochiti for my education beyond grade 6. I left to attend a BIA boarding school thirty miles from home. Shined shoes and pressed shirt and pants were the order of the day. I managed to adjust to this just as I had to most of the things the school shoved at me or took away from me. Adjusting to leaving home and the village was tough enough. It seemed the older I got, the further I got from the ways I was so much a part of. Since my parents did not own an automobile, I saw them only once a month when they came up in the community truck. They never failed to come supplied with “eats” for me. I enjoyed the outdoor oven bread, dried meat, and tamales they usually brought. It took a while to get accustomed to the diet of the school. Being in town with strange tribes under one roof was frightening and often very lonely. I longed for my grandmother and my younger brothers and sisters. I longed for my house. I longed to take part in a Buffalo Dance. I longed to be free.

I came home for the four-day Thanksgiving break. At first, home did not feel right anymore. It was much too small and stuffy. The lack of running water and bathroom facilities were too inconvenient. Everything got dusty so quickly, and hardly anyone spoke English. It occurred to me then that I was beginning to take on the whiteman’s ways, the ways that belittled my own. However, it didn’t take long to “get back with it.” Once I reestablished my relationships with family, relatives and friends, I knew I was where I came from. I knew where I belonged.

Leaving for the boarding school the following Sunday evening was one of the saddest events in my entire life. Although I had enjoyed myself immensely the last few days, I realized then that life would never be the same again. I could not turn back the time just as I could not do away with school and the ways of the whiteman. They were here to stay and would creep more and more

into my life. The effort to make sense of both worlds together was painful, and I had no choice but to do so. The schools, television, automobiles, and many other outside ways and values had chipped away at the simple cooperative life I began to grow in. The people of Cochiti were changing. The winter evening gatherings, the exchanging of stories, and even the performing of certain ceremonies were already only a memory that someone commented about now and then. Still the two worlds were very different and the demands of others were ever present. The whiteman’s was flashy, less personal, but very comfortable. The Cochiti were both attracted and pushed toward these new ways which they had little to say about. There was no choice left but to compete with the white man on his terms for survival. To do that I knew I had to give up part of my life.

Determined not to cry, I left my home that dreadfully lonely night. As I made my way back to school, my right hand clutched tightly the mound of cornmeal grandmother placed there and my left hand brushed away a tear.

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