

The Spirit in the Stick

I count him braver who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is over self.

Aristotle

Having finally deduced the timing of the cycle, at the next full moon Robbie was expecting Red Hawk's visit.

"Hi, Red Hawk. I was hoping to see you tonight."

"Really? Why tonight?"

"Well, I think I figured out when you've been visiting me. Is it during the full moon of each month?"

"Yes, it is. I'm glad you were able to calculate the timing. What would you like to learn tonight?"

"Well, you seem to have shown me about all of the custodians, and you mentioned that your grandfather gave you the stick. Was he the only other custodian? Were there others? Where did he get it?"

"Well, I guess this is as good a time as any to share with you the story of my grandfather. He didn't share this story with me until he was about to die."

"You've noticed that this stick of yours is really an Iroquois stick. And you also know quite well by now that my grandfather was a Cherokee."

Robbie nodded that he understood.

"Well, the story wasn't quite that simple. For generations before the birth of my grandfather, the Cherokee and Iroquois intermittently raided each other's villages, killing, robbing, and kidnapping. No one is quite sure how long this went on or which side could claim more success. It's certain, though, that these skirmishes went on for many generations and with great loss and misery to both sides. Since both of our tribes share many similarities in language, it is probable that ages ago we were from the same people. For some reason, perhaps just natural migration of small factions, the tribes gradually became two distinct groups and found themselves fighting just as any other rival tribes might."

Robbie listened intently.

"When my grandfather was just an infant, his father was murdered in one of those raids, and he was abducted by the Iroquois. When he was brought back to the Iroquois homeland, he was given to a man whose wife and son had been killed not two years before in a similar raid initiated by the Cherokee. The man's name was Rising Sun, and

he had been a powerful and highly respected warrior in his clan. In the attack he was badly injured and left for dead. When he finally regained consciousness and realized he had allowed his wife and son to be killed, he fell into a severe depression.

“When the Iroquois raiding party returned with the young boy, Running Water, who became my grandfather, Rising Sun took him in as his own son. Over some period of time Rising Sun broke free of his melancholy and, though never completely recovering from his loss, began to consider the captured boy his Iroquois son. All the while the boy’s adopted grandfather treated the boy in like fashion, loving and teaching him like his own grandson.

“Running Water never knew of his true birth. When he was very young, he recalled that he questioned his father two or three times concerning the loss of his mother. In each case, Rising Sun responded truthfully enough, at least in regard to his wife: ‘She was killed in a raid by the Cave People.’ Then, Running Water told me, his father would weep silently for several minutes, unable to discuss the situation any further. At his young age Running Water did not know the shame that Rising Sun carried with him, not to mention the actual loss of the two most important people in his life. After questioning a few times and receiving the same

dreary reply, Running Water stopped asking the question, to spare his father more pain and tears."

Robbie continued to absorb every word.

"It was not until Running Water was about fourteen years of age that a mean-spirited relative mentioned to him the true origin of his birth. Running Water felt a wave of nausea pass through his body, and he vomited violently and writhed on the ground. He felt as though his whole life, his whole identity, had been stripped from him.

"This can't be true! My father has loved me my whole life. How could I be of another tribe?" Running Water screamed to himself.

"When he gathered enough strength to get back to his feet, he returned to his home and asked his father if this story was true. His father admitted that it was and shared what information he could with Running Water.

"It is true, my son. You are one of the Cave People. What I have been telling you all these years about my wife, though I regret she is not your mother, has been true. She was killed along with our only son when the marauders from the south attacked us twelve years ago.

"A short time later a skirmish party from our tribe arranged a retaliatory attack. I was unable

to participate because I was still recovering from my severe wounds. When the party returned, they presented you to me to replace my son. From the beginning I treated you like my own blood. Ever since, you have been everything that a father could ask for in a son. For keeping your true birth from you for my own selfish reasons I will be forever scorned by the Great Spirit.'"

Red Hawk continued, "My grandfather, though feeling like his heart had been shattered, understood some of his father's motives and was beginning to try to find a way to forgive him. As a boy of fourteen, Running Water was well aware of the skirmishes that had occurred between the Iroquois and the Cherokee, several other peripheral tribes, and the encroaching white settlers. His greatest confusion was the nature of his father's love. Over the years he had loved Running Water so completely that he suddenly began to marvel that Rising Sun was capable of such true affection in the wake of such a loss. My grandfather also thought long and hard about the role of his own people in this matter. Neither side seemed completely in the right.

"After a few weeks of soul-searching, Running Water knew deep in his heart that he must return to his people and asked Rising Sun if he might consider letting him go. Rising Sun told him,

'I have already deprived you of your childhood, my son. I will suffer the wrath of the Great Spirit for having done so. How can I keep you here one minute longer? You must return to your people. With tomorrow's sun you will embark on your journey. Let us prepare.'

"Rising Sun had no doubt that all he had taught his adopted son would serve him well in his trek. He was a strong, resourceful young man. And so, the next morning, the boy left his village with a single bag over his shoulder. His father bade the boy good-bye. Rising Sun wept for days, having suffered the curse of losing a second son."

Robbie continued to listen silently.

"A few days later, Running Water wandered into a village of his people. He identified himself and asked for his family. The woman he said this to jumped for joy and immediately called for Beautiful Way.

"Beautiful Way came running in response to the scream. 'This is Running Water. He has returned from the dead!' said the woman. Running Water's mother fell to her knees and stared at him from head to toe. She slowly stood and stared deeply into his eyes, confirming the boy as her long-dead son. She wailed in joy, fell again, and hugged his knees.

“When his mother held him Running Water felt an incredible wave of love—and confusion. It took Running Water some time to integrate into his tribe. Later he married a woman of the Bear Clan.”

Robbie hadn’t suspected any of this history, for Red Hawk had not hinted at such an incredible and improbable childhood for Running Water.

“So,” Red Hawk continued, “Now to the stick.”

Robbie had completely forgotten about his original question.

Red Hawk took Robbie to see for himself. An old Iroquois chief was sitting on a tree stump, plying a hickory branch.

“Who’s that?” Robbie whispered.

“That’s my grandfather’s adopted grandfather, Mountain Snow. He’s carving the stick that you have right now.”

Robbie stared in awe. A tingling feeling much stronger even than the one he had felt when Captain Lewis initially handed him the stick shot through his body, causing him to become light-headed.

The Indian boy pointed a few yards to the right, and Robbie saw the stick hanging from a

stand constructed of five large branches, two on each end tied to form a large "V" on the bottom and a small "V" at the top, supporting the other, longer, stick laid perpendicularly between them. The stick was draped over one side with another branch slipped through its webbing to hold its position on the rack.

Robbie asked if they could go and look at the stick on the rack and Red Hawk immediately led him there.

"This is the one which has been passed down through my sister's descendants. That one," Red Hawk turned his eyes to his great-great-grandfather's hands, "is the one I presented to Lieutenant Casey and has been passed down to you."

Red Hawk and Robbie stood and watched the old man as he worked tirelessly and meticulously on making the pair of sticks perfect. Nothing less would do for his eight-year-old grandson. The old man spent several hours carving a scene of a woman with arms extended on one shaft and a baby with arms reaching back to his mother on the other.

"My grandfather received these sticks a few weeks after this, on his eighth birthday. He asked his grandfather about the carvings. Mountain Snow

simply said that the picture was of his daughter reaching for her son during the raid in which she was killed."

Robbie was shaken to realize the gruesome meaning of the unknown carving on his stick.

"When I received the sticks, they meant a great deal to me. For any young man in our tribe, these sticks symbolized the first steps toward manhood. My grandfather presented these sticks to me on my eighth birthday as well. As soon as I touched the sticks I could immediately feel the power and spirit of the warrior in my great-great-grandfather and my grandfather. When I was a boy stickball was a critical part of my life in each of my tribes. It was a way for us to be accepted as men into our tribe. When we were still too young to go into battle with our older brothers and fathers, it substituted as a means to show our strength, skill, and courage, the same traits that would make us successful in defense of our tribe. When we became older, we still played with incredible passion, mostly to invite the favor of our gods, to strengthen our boys, to earn respect for our clans in contests with others, and to continue to parade our physical courage."

"Did your grandfather say anything to you when he gave you the sticks?"

“We talked for a while when he presented the sticks to me. He carved the picture of the hawk—for my name—on the shaft while we talked. He explained that the game would teach me valuable lessons in preparation for manhood. He said above all things that I must be prepared to defend the tribe, that I must develop the skills, strength, and courage to do so. He then said, and I remember this exactly, ‘You must first master yourself...before you can lead others.’ In fact, he carved that saying onto my sticks, half on one, half on the other. I remember him telling me that when his grandfather gave him the sticks that he was a bit surprised to be given two. Most boys were given only one. Looking back later he said that his grandfather probably gave him two because he was a member of two tribes and because the Cherokee played with two sticks. His grandfather obviously didn’t tell him those reasons at the time, but he certainly was mindful of the situation and crafted them accordingly. But beyond what he said to me that day, he passed his spirit to me through the stick. I learned more every day. I could always feel my grandfather’s spirit in the stick.”

Robbie remembered the writing around the head of the stick. “So that is what it says on the top of my—I mean your—stick?”

“Yes, and it is your stick. It was written by my grandfather in our native Cherokee language. A few years earlier a man of our tribe named Sequoia had devised our writing system, the first such system among Native Americans. My grandfather immediately sought to learn the writing and teach it to me. The stick that you have has the first part of the saying. It says ‘You must first master yourself.’ The other part of the saying, ‘before you can lead others,’ is completed on the other stick, and my sister has passed that down to her descendants.”

Robbie could hardly believe all of this and was suddenly intrigued by the notion that the other stick might be in the hands of someone else who might be benefiting from it as he was.

Red Hawk told Robbie that he would come visit him again and bade farewell.

“Red Hawk showed me an unbelievable story. There’s another stick!” Robbie proudly proclaimed to his parents in the morning.

“Really? How is that?” asked his mother.

“There were originally two—which Red Hawk got as a set. You know the writing on mine? It’s only part of a saying that is finished on the other stick! It says, ‘You must first master yourself’ Red Hawk said that the other

one was passed down through his sister. It says, 'before you can lead others.'"

"That's a great saying. It would be pretty amazing if we could find out about the other one," said his dad.

Robbie headed off to school with yet another new wave of energy.

John and Mary Jones looked at each other in disbelief once again. "This whole thing is really incredible, Mary. I'm still having a hard time believing that all of this is possible and that we're involved in it. How did it happen to us?"