

Lessons from Nanabozo still remembered



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Aaniin, Anishnaabek!

Last year at this time, we were in the sugar bush, doing what our people have done for many centuries, tapping trees, boiling sap, sharing stories and being together as Anishnaabe people. Being in the sugar bush is a time for rejoicing, for many reasons! But so far this year — nothing. This winter has been one of the hardest in recent years. Temperatures in the north woods have been subzero for a long, long time, and we need warm days and freezing nights to get the sap to move. I know that many of our people now live in areas where there are no sugar bushes. I recall that I was in my 20s before I had my first experience gathering sap, and it was a life changing event. It can be difficult sometimes, to feel connected to our culture, to find ways to learn, to connect with nature and the ways of our people. And so I try to include information in my monthly articles that share some of what I know (especially for those who have asked).

The following is a short story that I used in my classroom

when I was teaching. It can be found online at <http://www.native-languages.org/ojibwestory.htm>. Note that in some communities, Nanabozo is known as Manabozho.

“A very long time ago, when the world was new, Gitchee Manitou made things so that life was very easy for the people. There was plenty of game and the weather was always good and the maple trees were filled with thick sweet syrup. Whenever anyone wanted to get maple syrup from the trees, all they had to do was break off a twig and collect it as it dripped out.

One day, Manabozho went walking around. “I think I’ll go see how my friends, the Anishinabe, are doing,” he said. So, he went to a village of Indian people. But, there was no one around. So, Manabozho looked for the people. They were not fishing in the streams or the lake. They were not working in the fields hoeing their crops. They were not gathering berries. Finally, he found them. They were in the grove of maple trees near the village. They were just lying on their backs with their mouths open, letting maple syrup drip into their mouths.

“This will NOT do!” Manabozho said. “My people are all going to be fat and lazy if they keep on living this way.”

So, Manabozho went down to the river. He took with him a big basket he had made of birch bark. With this basket, he brought back many buckets of water. He went to the top of the maple trees and poured water in, so that it thinned out the syrup. Now, thick maple syrup no longer dripped out of the broken twigs. Now what came out was thin and watery and just

barely sweet to the taste.

“This is how it will be from now on,” Manabozho said. “No longer will syrup drip from the maple trees. Now there will only be this watery sap. When people want to make maple syrup they will have to gather many buckets full of the sap in a birch bark basket like mine. They will have to gather wood and make fires so they can heat stones to drop into the baskets. They will have to boil the water with the heated stones for a long time to make even a little maple syrup. Then my people will no longer grow fat and lazy. Then they will appreciate this maple syrup Gitchee Manitou made available to them. Not only that, this sap will drip only from the trees at a certain time of the year. Then it will not keep people from hunting and fishing and gathering and hoeing in the fields. This is how it is going to be,” Manabozho said.

And, that is how it is to this day.”

This is a great teaching, and is timeless. It speaks about values, work ethic and the price that may have to be paid for taking things for granted. I loved the discussions I had with the children. With their youthful wisdom, they would tell me why it was not a good thing to be lazy. Why it’s important to work hard. What can happen to us when life is “too easy.” The kids understood.

It is easy to draw parallels to adult life, and it’s not too great of a reach to think about what is occurring in the life of the tribe. Please understand, I am not calling anyone “lazy.” I am not blaming anyone for anything. But I was thinking back to a time when our casino enterprises were wildly successful. I’ve

heard people speak about those good days, when life was easier and money more abundant. Life improved dramatically for many. It was easy to believe that it would always be that way. We built it, and they came! But things change, as they always do.

We have a lot of competition now. There are many casinos all over Michigan. The U.S. economy has taken a hard hit with the recession, and the people of Michigan have suffered especially hard. Tribes have taken a hard hit with sequestration, and it seems as though the last two years have seen tribes constantly trying to find ways to keep our people safe and our futures secure. I am proud to say that our tribe has learned the lesson from Nanabozo. We have not been just lying under the branches dripping with syrup, getting fat and lazy.

Enterprises and governmental divisions have worked very hard coping with the changes. Many difficult decisions have been made and I am so appreciative of the dedicated staff who worked diligently to provide answers to questions and solutions to problems. I am especially thankful for the self-sacrifice of so many, who went beyond what was requested, and helped guide the board of directors through this difficult time. The minutes of board meetings and resolutions that pass or fail do not accurately show the work that was needed to get to that point. The list of individuals is long and I do not want to miss anyone. Therefore, to all who have worked to help me (and the board of directors) understand, who answered questions, prepared numerous budgets, spent sleepless nights and long days trying to find solutions, I say

“chi-miigwetch.” I do not take your efforts for granted, and I know without a doubt, we could not do our work at the board level without you! I am also appreciative of the many tribal members who share their thoughts and ideas with the board of directors in a proactive, problem solving manner.

Despite the difficulties of the past two years, there are reasons to hope. There are signs that the economy is getting better. There are indications that the changes that have been implemented within the tribe are working, but slowly. I am encouraged that the need for a five-year tribal strategic plan has been brought up. We know that the tribe will have substantial debt paid off in a few short years, and it would be great to have a plan in place that explains where we are going so that we do not repeat mistakes of the past. Politics continue to be problematic, and with this being an election year, we can expect that politics will become even more volatile and center stage. But I hope that we do not lose focus. We still have much work to do to perpetuate our way of life and ensure the welfare and prosperity of our people. Working together, we can accomplish great things.

Anishnaabe gagige
(Anishnaabe for always),

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PS: March 28, 2014, is the DEADLINE to register to vote in the upcoming election. DON’T DELAY! Call (906) 635-6050!