

## Shades of Red

By: Minnie Two Shoes

When my grandmother Almira Jackson passed on to the spirit world last year, she was 87 years old. A star-quilt maker of some renown, she was a fluent Native language speaker and lived most of her life on the Fort Peck Reservation in northeast Montana. A staunch traditionalist and a member of the Nakoda people who live in both the United States and Canada, she was used to being called “Assiniboine” in the U.S. and “Stoney” or “Stone Sioux” in Canada. Grandma Almira was also used to being called a “mixed blood” and she didn’t hesitate to say it, too. “I’m three quarters Indian -- a mixed blood and proud -- because I’ve got the best of both worlds,” she said more than once.

Now you have to understand that in Native America there are many shades of red. And the redder you are, the more validity you have as an 'authentic' Native. Few people ask other minority group members 'are you a full blood?' No other minority group has to prove the blood degree of their ethnicity -- only Native Americans. First among the shades of red are the 'full bloods' -- all their ancestors are Native. Then there are those people who, by accidental or by purposely wrong record keeping, are counted as full bloods.

Remember, those immigrant Europeans doing the counting often based their estimates on blood degree on the Native person’s skin color and lifestyle, not their actual lineage. Today those tallies, census records, etc. -- some done hundreds of years ago -- are used by Native governments to determine who is Native and to what degree.

The children of a full blood Native American person and a non-Native person (White, Black, Asian or Hispanic) are called 'half breeds' in America. In Canada, the blend of Cree and French created the 'Metis,' a name which many half breeds now claim.

'Mixed bloods,' such as Grandma Almira, myself and others, are more Native than half breeds, but less Native than full blood because a full blood ancestor married a half-breed ancestor.

Then there’s the 'lineal descendent' which has many definitions depending on which Native nation is involved. For some nations it’s someone one-fourth or less of Native blood (one of four grandparents is Native) for others it’s one-eighth or less of Native blood (one of eight great-grandparents is Native). There are other variations on the theme.

Let’s not forget that traditionally each of the Native nations had their own ways of keeping track of who was a member -- but many of those ways are fast disappearing, too. Among my people, the Nakoda, lineage comes from the mother. That’s because, as Grandma Almira would say with a laugh, “You know for sure who your mother is, you came out of her. Your father is who your mother tells you he is.” She always laughed again. Those old ways, of course, are subverted by the federal government’s insistence that Natives are 'native' and 'sovereign' because of their 'governments' which have treaties and agreements -- yet they encourage Native nations to set blood degree requirements for Native people to become recognized members of their nations.

Our language and culture is the basis of our identity -- blend that with our history of survival through disease, massacres, hunger, pain and shame and you have what makes us Native. No matter what amount of Native 'blood' you inherited, does the Native

community know you? Do you know it? Those are questions that should be asked when determining who is Native.

All the loop-de-loop over 'bloodlines' has led, of course, to many Native people who live their entire lives on an Indian reservation or in a city's Native community who are not official members of any Native nation.

In this light, how equitable the Canadian view of being Native seems -- there are some Natives who have treaties with Canada and some who don't. There are some who are Metis (what's called 'half-breed' in the USA) and others who are not. All that matters naught -- Natives are Native by declaring themselves so in Canada. Of special interest in the area of interracial marriages is those people who are the product of a Native and a Black in the U.S.A. Make no bones about it, of all the "mixes" between Natives and others, none has the burden of these individuals. A White/Native, or Hispanic/Native, is better excepted in many circles of contemporary Native society than a Black/Native.

Let me supply a framework to that odious reality with this: a Native student in a class I was instructing once asked "why do Natives talk such bad English?" To which I responded, "Because the people who taught us English spoke bad English."

Carry that thought forward and you'll realize that the people in charge of educating the 'wild savages' of North America -- White people -- taught them to be racist, just as they've taught racism to all the people of color on this continent.

In the early eighties a new doctor came to Fort Peck's US Public Health's Indian Health Service. He was White and his wife was Black. One day she was walking around, pushing a stroller with her baby as my friend and I drove by. My friend said, "Let's drive around the block to see them again." I asked my friend why she wanted to do that. "You never see them around here, except on TV, like on the news and on MTV."

This illustrates an important point -- many reservation communities are in the remotest parts of the USA and have had little opportunity to have bad experiences with any minority groups, It's pretty much us Natives and a few sodbusters, ranchers and corporate lackeys wanting our natural resources that we see on a an everyday basis; them and the federal bureaucrats.

Where the lives of all people of color meet is on the streets and communities of the urban scene in America. Despite the common denominators of oppression, poverty, ill health, alcohol and drugs, each of the enclaves of Black, Hispanic, Asian and Native peoples sits in their neighborhoods, fearful and hesitant, with little knowledge they're already been divided and conquered.

A true 'traditional' member of a Native culture is not a racist and accepts the four colors of people as relatives who are all in this world together. Traditionally among my people, there's a phrase used often in ceremonies -- mi-tahk-we-ah-see (phonetically). It means all my relations.'

As it was explained to me, 'all my relations' doesn't mean all my aunties, cousins, etc. it means ALL are my relatives. Everything in this reality, this physical plane, this universe we call 'here and now' -- every animal, mineral, vegetable and substance. That includes our spirits, emotions and minds, too. It means our paths as humans from the past to today is inter linked and codependent in a good way.

As we stand in the circle of life -- red, yellow, black and white -- how little we know of each other, how much of what we think we know is based on false images and

stereotypes? How much of our societies' hate and violence and negative self-images and shame is based on those misunderstandings?

Walking in harmony in this world and with its people is a basic tenet of the philosophies of many a so-called 'primitive culture' -- otherwise known as people of color. Our own acknowledgment of that would go along way to better understandings and relationships between all people. Let us ponder the usefulness of multicultural education that is so desperately needed across North America if we are to go forward with truth and kindness in this life.

In the end, we are all just tiny pieces of matter -- bound together by the love and care of our ancestors for Mother Earth. Most importantly, we must pass that love and care on to the coming generations and leave this world a better place than when we came.