

ANISHINABE

Lindsay Cote

My name in English is Lindsay Cote. I am fifty-nine years old. My people know me by my Indian name, Waaba Benesii Ninii, White Thunderbird man. I have been a storyteller for the better part of forty years, gathering traditional information from not only my close friends and teachers, but also from many respected Elders, most of who are now in the spirit world. I have also spent over thirty-five years learning and practising our people's ceremonial ways, which is where much of my traditional storytelling comes from. In more recent years, my wife and I spend much of our spare time at our wilderness camp, where we study our people's medicinal plants, and where we share our medicines with those who need it. "Anungnini's Gift" is not only a teaching but a tale of a passage that we all must go through on our way to finding who we are and who we will eventually become. Enjoy life and living, my brothers and sisters, miigwech, thank you.

ANUNGNINII'S GIFT

Anungninii's eyes opened to see the bright red, yellowish colours of morning's first light as he looked out the door of his lodge. He had spent four days and four nights in this strange place and was quite frustrated because the experience was nothing like they had said. During a Vision Quest, you were supposed to go to the Grandfather's lodge and there you were to be given a gift. Or as he had been told.

"All I got was cold and hungry," the young man said to himself, rolling back into his blanket.

He thought to himself, *How am I going to tell the others that I came up on this hill and didn't receive anything. They are going to laugh at me.*

This thought alone made Anungninii want to cry. He did not know how to feel. Yes, he was angry, but he was more hurt because he had been promised something and it had not been fulfilled. The young man did what he was supposed to do. He put out his tobacco when he was required and prayed as hard as he could.

The young man knew that soon his teacher would come get him and bring him back to the village to break his fast. *What am I going to say to my Elder*, the young man thought. *I could lie and tell him I had a great vision and make things up as I go.*

However, Anungninii knew that his teacher would know right away that he was not telling the truth. The young man could only stare at the opening of his small lodge and let his mind drift to a simpler time in his life. When things seemed to be less complicated. When only fun and games mattered, and the quest for greater things and the search for life's meaning were far from his mind.

"You think deeply for one so young," said a voice coming from the entrance of Anungninii's lodge.

It was then that the young man realized there was someone sitting at the entrance of his temporary home. "Wh...Who are you and where did you come from?" said the young man.

Anungninii was now staring at what looked sort of like a middle-aged man, with long black hair tied in a ponytail. He wore clothing similar to Anungninii's, blue jeans and a slightly worn grey sweater. Nothing out of the ordinary.

"That is not a matter of concern right now," said the stranger quietly. "What matters is that your journey to the stars is over, at least for now, and you have fulfilled your promise."

"But I never received my gift," responded Anungninii. "I was supposed to come here to bring a gift back to the

people. I was supposed to have a vision or have a great dream or something,” he said, feeling dejected again.

“I see,” said the stranger, crossing his legs and shuffling farther into the small lodge. He continued, “So you feel cheated and that the spirits of your grandfathers did not live up to the expectation of what you may have been told by your people?”

“Wouldn’t you feel like this?! I was here starving and freezing for four days and not once did I see or feel anything,” said Anungninii in a frustrated tone of voice.

The stranger scratched his chin for a moment and said, “What if I told you that the spirits don’t have to do anything for you or anyone else and are under no obligation to do so?”

Anungninii looked at the stranger with a shocked look on his face and sat up. “They are supposed to. That’s what they do. Don’t they have to serve us or something?”

“Serve?” said the stranger. “They serve no one but the Great Spirit. That’s the way it is and that is the way it has been for all time.”

“I thought...”

“You thought wrong,” said the stranger. “Your mind has been filled with misinterpreted information. Either by way of self-direction or other.”

The lodge went quiet for a while, with only the sound of the nearby songbirds singing their morning songs. It was then that the stranger began to speak again. “There was a time when your people came here with an open mind. With no expectations of what would take

place,” said the stranger calmly, adding, “They came only with the purpose of sacrificing themselves for the love of the Great Spirit.”

“They didn’t ask for gifts?” said the young man.

“It was not their way. They came only to be grateful for all that the Creator had granted them.”

“What about the receiving of Sacred Names and the giving of Ceremonies and all that?” added Anungnini, more confused than ever.

“Those gifts, as you call them, are not just gifts. They are a person’s life’s work and with that work comes great responsibility,” said the stranger.

The young man shuffled to one side and slowly crawled out of his lodge, dragging his blanket behind him. Anungnini set it out on the moss and laid on top of it, facing the strange man peeking out of his lodge.

“If gifts are not that important, then why am I here?”

“That is a question only you can answer,” said the stranger.

Finding his own place on the moss, he added, “Do you feel that you are ready for any kind of responsibility with regard to caring for the well-being of your people, or did you come here to receive a conversation piece that you could show off to your friends and those you are trying to impress? You know, so that you can boost your ego up a notch or two?”

The young man did not say anything for a short time because he knew that the stranger had touched on something he wasn’t aware of. Anungnini now understood

why the spirits did not come. They knew he was there for the wrong reasons. They knew that his thinking was not in the right place.

Anungninii started to cry and turned his back to the stranger. Through his tears the young man spoke. "You are right, stranger. I wanted a gift that was greater than that of all my friends. I guess you could say I wanted to be gifted with Great Medicine."

"Like I said, with great gifts come great sacrifices and greater responsibility," responded the stranger.

"But... But, now, what do I go home with?" sobbed the young man.

"With what all others leave here with," responded the stranger in a calm voice.

"And what might that be?"

"Life!" said the stranger. "All anyone is allowed to leave here with is life."

"But what about our Pipe Carriers and the Sacred ones who carry those beautiful bundles and run all our Ceremonies?" asked the young man, getting more confused by the moment.

The stranger rose from where he was and started to walk among the trees. He said, "What is it that you see around you?"

Anungninii looked around and quickly answered, "Trees and rocks."

"Yes, trees and rocks. But they are much more than that. They all have a spirit, and they all serve a purpose. Everything on this earth as you call it serves a purpose."

“And that being?”

“To carry out the Creator’s will, of course,” said the stranger, turning to the young man with a grin.

He made his way back to where the young man was lying and plopped himself down beside him, quickly saying, “Which brings us back to the original question... Why are you here?”

Anungninii could not answer the question, because he felt shamed, he felt that there was no longer any options. “I don’t know,” was all he could say.

“That is right,” said the stranger, adding, “and that, my young friend, is the best answer you could have given me under the present circumstances.”

The stranger pointed his index finger directly to the middle of the young man’s body, saying, “Your humble and simple response to my question brings you back to where you are supposed to be.”

Anungninii did not understand but nervously asked his question anyhow. “And where would that be?”

“Back in balance,” said the stranger, adding, “In addition to that, you are now here without reason. Which is a wonderful thing to happen to you, considering all things.”

The young man sat up and began pacing around the outside of his lodge, wondering what to do or ask next. All he could come up with was, “Now what am I supposed to do?”

“You know what to do,” said the stranger, staring up at Anungninii.

“Give thanks to the Great Spirit!” said the young man.

“Yes, and it is through this way of thought and being that all the gifts, as you call it, will come. It won’t come in the way that you think it will. But it will come nonetheless.”

The young man started to get a little excited but tried not to show it and quickly went and sat beside the stranger. “When? I mean, will it come before I leave?”

“Only the Great Spirit has that answer. It could arrive now, tomorrow, next year or even when you are an old man. When your hair has turned white as the snow.”

Anungninii was lost in thought and could only sit there thinking of what the stranger had said. The stranger leaned over to where the young man was sitting and gently put his hand on his shoulder. “Or what you so eagerly seek may already live within you.”

The stranger got up from where he was and extended his hand to the young man. Anungninii reached up, allowing the stranger to help him to his feet. They stood together for what seemed like a long time and Anungninii broke the silence. “Now what?”

The stranger turned to the young man and responded, “Well, for starters, they will come for you soon and you best get your things packed up and be ready to go when they arrive.”

“Good idea,” said the young man. Anungninii quickly scurried into his small lodge to pack. It did not take him long to gather all his things together. After he was done, he poked his head out of his lodge and asked,

“Are you coming down the hill with us? That would be awesome. My teacher would be happy to meet you.”

“I already know him!” said a voice that seemed to come from all around him.

The young man was bewildered; he could no longer see the stranger anywhere.

As he was looking around for the stranger, his teacher came walking out of the tree line, not too far from Anungnini’s lodge. “You all right, Anungnini? Were the spirits good to you?”

The young man, still looking here and there, could only answer, “I’m not sure.”

Anungnini’s teacher stepped in front of the young man and looked at the young man’s face for a moment and smiled. “Come, there is a feast prepared for you.”

Anungnini began to speak. “But I need to tell you what just happened...”

“Shhhh... What happened here is for you and you only.”

Anungnini’s teacher smiled and ended this tale by saying, “All I can say is that you were given a great gift.”