

Post-Traumatic Joy: The Summer of Stonewall 50

© Rebekah Tanner, October 5, 2019

I was born dying. Realistically we all are; however, I was literally born dying. I came into the world at 33 weeks gestation and weighed 4 pounds 2 ounces. In 1958 that was serious. Since then, I have lived 734 months. Of that, I have spent 664 months actively engaged in some type of learning. Earning my public-school education, two associates and a bachelors degree, two graduate degrees and an advanced certification. And money. Not to mention the earned experiences of myriad difficulties that likely qualify me for a PhD from the School of Hard Knocks.

It is now time to reap the rewards of my earnings. Newly retired, I am at liberty to do only and exactly what I wish. I anticipate retirement will be a joyous period. I want to use my leisure to articulate ideas I believe are of some value. I don't recall when I first heard the voice inside of my head saying: "I have something worth saying, and I'm going to say it." All of these years later, I still believe I have something worth saying and I frankly do not much care if anyone else thinks it is worth hearing. I care even less if some folks might be offended. I wish nobody harm, but I have had a few experiences of a world of hurt in my life. I'll admit, my ability to trust others is dubious at times. That's why I live as a semi-hermit with my spouse, and she is just about the only person whose feelings matter much to me, anymore.

In our relationship there are several "pockets." There is the intimacy, the intelligent conversation, the fun adventures, some travel, and wild experiments – but the aspect of this relationship that fills the largest number of my hours is in being my spouse's primary care giver. There is also the self-healing I have done and continue to do which has brought me to this season of post-traumatic joy. My spouse still struggles with allowing herself to experience pure joy, due to the nature of her disability. What I can do in my role of care giver is to create an environment where she can have as much independence as feels good to her while offering her as much help as is needed.

As this medical condition began to be a years-long reality with no end in sight, I got some additional education to help myself be a better care giver.

That is how I wound up with more than my already substantial higher education, and an Advanced Certificate in Interdisciplinary Trauma Studies.

Trauma: It is one of the ghosts that has long haunted me. It arrived in my life before I did. There had been traumas on both sides of my family for at least several previous generations. For myself and my siblings it was woven into our experiences so completely that in my youth, it was almost impossible to recognize. It is only in looking back that I see the rarity of joy in our lives. Moments of delightful experience are illuminated by their sharp contrast to the more familiar gloom.

In my mind's eye I can see myself going up the stairs toward my bedroom and coming to that place where, through the slats of the guard rail, I have a clear view into my oldest brother's room. He is seated at his desk under the icy white light of his spring-armed lamp that is held onto the edge of his desk by a peculiar screw-on clamp that I find fascinating. Above his desk are shelves filled with books. His stereo hi-fi console is playing soft music. I say: "What are you doing, Jorge?" He makes an unusual invitation for me to come sit with him. My siblings and I know not to disturb him when he is studying, but something in his expression is untypically soft. He slides whatever it is he's working on aside, and lifts me into his lap. About a week earlier it had been Halloween. At the party that was thrown in our neighbor's basement, amid all the talk of crystal balls and frightening ghosts, the topic of our deceased father had arisen. Jorge might be thinking about our Dad because he says to me: "Would you like to hear a story that Dad taught me?" He reaches over and lifts the needle-arm from the record player as he begins:

In the time before time, this world was not as we know it today. Everywhere there was water, and all the animals who lived here, could live in a water-world. The place where the humans lived was above, in a sky world, much like we understand our world now. There were trees and food plants, families living in longhouses, and the sun shone in a bright sky. In those days, people lived far longer than we do now, maybe forever. There was no illness or pain. People did not necessarily need speech to communicate; they spoke from mind to mind.

In the sky-world, there was a young woman named Aataentsic who was especially intelligent, and very curious.

"Like you?" I ask. He smiles and continues without pausing. I relax as I lean my back onto his broad chest.

She lived with her mother and her mother's relations. She was good at her chores, and was always trying to figure out ways to do things better, or make them easier to accomplish. In those days the fields which were cleared for the growing of corn were quite some distance from the longhouses, and the walk was long and hot under the bright sun. In order to make her work in the corn fields easier, one day the young woman pulled up the corn by its roots, and carried it to the longhouse. When she arrived, everyone was angry at her, because in the the place where Aataentsic had pulled up the corn there was a great, big hole in the bottom of sky-world. Being a curious young woman, she went to look. All she saw was darkness. She bent further, but still could see nothing. Finally, bending even further over the hole, she tumbled and fell through the hole. Down she fell. Down and down, tumbling and spiraling, down, down, down through the hole in the bottom of sky-world, through the dark. Spiraling.

As she neared the water-world, here below, some birds looked up and saw her. They were Loons, and in order to break her fall, they came together and made a bridge of their wings, and caught her. But she weighed more than they could carry for a long time, so they called to Turtle and asked if a place for Sky World Woman could be made upon her back. Turtle agreed, but knew that Sky World Woman would need earth to live on. Turtle called a council of all the animals and said the woman needed some mud to be brought up from the bottom of the water which could then be spread onto Turtle's back, to make a home for this odd being that had suddenly arrived from out of the heavens.

First Deer tried, swift Deer, but she could not hold her breathe long enough, and drowned. Next Lynx tried, strong Lynx, and it was the same. Others tried, but they could not reach bottom, until finally, Frog, tiny Frog said she would try. Many laughed, but Frog was sure she could do it. She took a big, big breath and made a long, long leap, and down, down, to the bottom of the deep water she went, and grabbed a bit of mud in her hands. Then she rose up – she lost her breathe before she surfaced, and also died. The other animals found the bit of earth she had gathered, and spread it on Turtle's back where

it grew and grew and Sky World Woman was comfortable on her new earth home.

In time, Aataentsic gave birth to a daughter, conceived by the winds that had engulfed her as she fell. When the girl grew, she in turn gave birth to twin sons. One son was impatient and instead of coming through the birth canal, he broke through his mother's side, and she died. By that time Sky World Woman was growing old but the responsibility of raising the boys fell to her. All the adventures and things that the twins did to create the familiar way we know the earth today are a story for another time. As for Sky World Woman, in time, she died. The place where she was laid to rest became fruitful, and from her body parts grew all the most important plants: the corn, beans and squash called "The Three Sisters," the healing lavender, the sacred tobacco, and the brilliant sunflower, like the ever-shining sun of sky-world. In all the time she had lived on Turtle's back Sky World Woman had never outgrown her curiosity, and she wanted to know what was going on in her old home. She returned to the sky, as our Grandmother Moon. Now we sometimes see her as she turns to look toward her earth children and at other times the night sky is dark as she turns to see what is taking place in the sky-world.

I remember other stories Jorge told me during the years we lived in that house, which we moved out of when I was in the second grade. After that, he always seemed so busy going to his job, or to see his friends. Then he left for college. He wasn't happy there and came home after the first semester. He had changed. It seemed he had even less time to spend entertaining me. Had I known that he was going to die before that year ended, I might have insisted, but I was just a child, and although our father had died, it never occurred to me that Jorge would.

Thinking about my deeply missed brother and the stories he told me, I now find myself reflecting, not so much on what I have earned in life, as what I have spent; time, in particular.

Once I had gotten beyond the crisis of the incubator, it was only a brief time until I lost my father. I was raised in the single-parent household of my Mother and four siblings. A lot of responsibility for my care fell to Jorge. I now recognize how unfair that was to him and how it likely contributed to his

early death. With his passing, the impact of both my father's and his deaths hit me hard. I became an even more solitary child than I had already been. I spent a good many years very confused and deeply engaged with my mourning. As I came into adulthood, I became very curious about my father. Without my brother to assist, I had to figure out ways to satisfy that curiosity by myself. I have spent literally thousands of hours studying my genealogy, trying to figure out who I belonged to, and this further led me into the study of the histories and experiences of those who had come before me. I sought out knowledgeable individuals and read widely to discover all I could about the lifestyles, mythologies, art making, and other ways of being of all my ancestors, but of my father's, in particular. Over time, this accumulated information became a way for me to define my own identity. It also made me more openhearted in understanding my one living parent. I have never understood why she married, against her family's wishes, a man whose background was so different from her own. I did, however, discover that the story of Sky World Woman, and other of Jorge's stories, came from my Dad's Wyandotte* culture.

I am horrified by the current nationalistic, xenophobic, misogynistic course this nation I so deeply love is currently engaged in. We all know what racism is. People of good conscious understand that to be raised in the United States, at any era of its past or present, is to have been indoctrinated and to have absorbed some amount of racism. We all know what overt racism is. Being fair skinned and of mixed ethnic background, I want to turn to something I am better informed about. What, lacking a better descriptor, I'll call covert racism.

* A note on the noun "Wyandotte." This is the most common spelling used in the United States for the descendants of a Native American Confederacy of Ontario, Canada. Due to warfare, they were dispersed in 1649 A. D. It is derived from their name for themselves which is "Wendat," the form still used by those who remained in Canada and who now live in Quebec Province. Historically, members of the Wendat Confederacy were also called "Huron," an insulting French moniker. Herein, Wyandotte will be preferred, except when referring to either the pre-1649 or current Canadian Wendat.

That sounds like an oxymoron. What I am thinking about might be called xenophobia, or "ethnicism." That hating of folks who are different on the basis them being what seems to be a "strange" or "mixed-up" heritage. Hate directed at folks who might possibly even be able to "pass as White" but for some reason or other are subject to prejudice; to being thought of as somehow less human, based solely on circumstances of birth that they had no part in choosing.

I get it that there are folks who'd think that sexism or homophobia are bigger problems than covert racism. I might even agree. Nevertheless, in my experience, those are usually overt. We know them when we smell them. In any case, these issues can't really be pulled apart and boxed up separately. They overlap and intersect, and all have a great deal to also do with that other monster in our society: poverty.

So, I was thinking to myself and asked this question: Is a Bosnian Muslim "White"? What about the grandchild of a survivor of the Armenian Genocide of 1914 – 1923? They may be fair skinned. They may even, in 21st century United States, experience some social privileges due to their fair skin. But aren't they really People of Color? If so, aren't then, Jewish Americans of Eastern European descent? I have always thought so. I have siblings who do not agree with me. Those same siblings would also deny that we were ever impoverished and went hungry, because that kind of personal honesty is painful. To their minds, it is better left in the past. I say trauma is best examined, remapped and re-framed, so that its power is diminished and its sting overcome.

The truth is, my Mother, who was Jewish, was darker skinned than any of her children, even though we have a father who was himself mixed-race in a way that would cause many to recognize him as a Person of Color – or in the earlier era in which he was born, as "Mixed-Blood / Half-Breed" – or any number of other terms that have covert racism embedded within them.

I have been keeping myself busy during this exceptionally rainy and cool early summer by tying together the last bits of work on my 40-years-long project of personal genealogy. I have wanted to create an as-complete-as possible Direct Ancestor Tree. Some of my branches are short, extending only 4 generations, others are longer. One is so well recorded that it can be traced to its founding families in Europe, more than 25 generations ago.

President Trump declared May 5, 2019 a "National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls" as I was completing the work on my genealogy. Because I am the daughter of a "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relation," I felt it was both high time and long overdue for official recognition of this crisis. Then, Mother's Day was a week later and I found myself celebrating some of my strong women ancestors, for example Anne DeBroase Townsend (1474 – 1551). She was a property owner in her own name at Stinton Hall in Norfolk, England, and was my 12th great grandmother. One of her direct descendants was my paternal grandmother, who was a rural healer, midwife and undertaker during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in central Illinois.

As I communicated with some friends about these women, one of them inquired when it was that my family had "traveled stateside." All four of my grandparents had died by the time I was a year old which made collecting oral history a challenge. On my Mom's side, arrival in North America was fairly recent. Her parents and maternal grandmother were early 20th century immigrants from the Pale of Jewish Settlement in the Ukraine. I have little expectation that I will ever learn much about her distant ancestors because of the historic antisemitism in Eastern Europe that resulted in loss of life and the destruction of property and documents. On my father's side it's a whole different story. There are some significant gaps but what I have learned is delightfully exciting. The line of my family which is most completely documented is that of my father's matrilineal grandfather. His immigrant ancestors were early Anglo-Scots settlers on the Eastern Shore at Accomack, Virginia in the mid-17th century. Over several generations the family moved north through the Chesapeake Peninsula from Virginia to Maryland and then to the region near Lewes, Delaware where they owned Ennis Mill. Around the time of the American Revolution they were attending St. George's Chapel, a congregation with Euro-American, African American and Native American members. My Ennis great grandfather left Delaware and relocated to Ohio by 1859. He was widowed soon afterward, and married my great grandmother, Susan Cook, who is said to have been Wyandotte. She was born just about the time that Native Peoples were "Removed" by President Andrew Jackson to west of the Mississippi River. I have been told by a number of my informants that her family refused to leave Ohio. A citation concerning Mary Cook and her six children

and a son-in-law in the PhD dissertation of Michael Cox may possibly substantiate that information.

The summer I was 14 years old my Mother and I took a several days long drive through parts of New York and Pennsylvania, the historic landscapes of the Mohawk and Lenni Lenape. During the course of that journey she explained that my father was Wyandotte. She even spelled it out for me, so I could go look it up. In the context of the conversations we had during that vacation my Mother also told me that legacy was mine through my father's matriarchal line of descent. A few years later, as I was preparing to leave for college, my Mom bought me a world atlas, a dictionary, a thesaurus, Sisson's Synonyms, and the American Indian Almanac. These were the core titles in my newly established collection of reference books. It was obviously important to her that I understood that my father had been proud of his Native American heritage. I guess she didn't know the extent to which my older siblings had already taught me about my father.

In the course of time, my mid-western born and raised father was stationed at the Brooklyn Navy Yards, as he was headed to serve on the USS Bonn Homme Richard (Pacific Front – WWII). That is where he met my Mother on April 29, 1944, the day the ship was christened.

Toward the end, the relationship between my Mom and Dad was difficult, broken... then he vanished. It was hard for her to talk about him. She was angry. In attempting to shield me and my siblings from her anger, she was often silent. I can wish that she'd made different choices but she did what she thought best. The last evidence of my father's life was the public library card he acquired on October 28, 1960 in Des Moines, Iowa. Two brief notices in the Mason City Globe Gazette of Tuesday and Wednesdays December 20 & 21, 1960 report on his death, his body having been found at a "freeway construction area."

My spouse teases me – What will I occupy my free time with, now that my genealogy is done? I tell her that surely, I'll figure out something. In any case, I am at a point where I have resigned myself to the absence of certain genealogical data. There was a time when being able to prove my father's Native heritage seemed critically important. I am way beyond that now. I neither want nor need the potential benefits of "tribal membership." In fact, I'm pretty proud to be able to say I have achieved as much as I have

without special scholarships, health care, or other financial advantages that might have resulted from that type of affiliation. And, I am just as happy to not have had the government all that involved in my personal business.

I have not been able to either prove or disprove that Susan Cook, my maternal great-great grandmother on my Dad's side was, in fact, Wyandotte. Births were not officially recorded in Ohio until decades after her birth. The absence of either church or census records is, to me, confirmation that she was exactly who my Dad told my Mom that she was – an Ohio Wyandotte stay-behind.

I have Wendat and Wyandotte friends who accept me as "one of them." There are others who, I suspect, consider me a phony. That's OK. I am uninterested in attending any ceremony / celebration / other social gathering that has "rules" about who can participate and who can't. I've been there before and I didn't enjoy it when I was rejected. I won't knowingly put myself in that position ever again. As I see it, many of the folks who need to draw those kinds of inclusion / exclusion lines are making up the rules of inclusion as they go along in order to meet a need of their own. It has nothing to do with me. Who truly knows what "traditional" was, anyway? In the case of the Wendat and their dispersal, too much has been lost along the way for anyone to claim possession of that knowledge. Based on what I have learned, and the many wonderful, authentic folks I now know, I simply do not believe that the Ancestors were the way some folks claim they were: stodgy and rule-bound, acting high and mighty sacred all the time. I believe they were intelligent and curious; like our First Mother the SkyWorld Woman, Aataentsic, and like my brother, Jorge.

Early European chroniclers recorded that the Wendat they interacted with were industrious, shrewd at bargaining in trade negotiations, and were creative, exquisite orators who were sometimes bawdy. They also noted that the Wendat had a form of governance that was essentially a representative democracy that allowed for a great deal of personal liberty. Many Wendat converted to Christianity under the tutelage of the Jesuits in the earliest decades of the colonial experience, so what was "traditional" prior to the 17th century was already undergoing transformation before the clashes with the Haudenosaunee during the 1630s and 1640s. Teasing out what life was precisely like in pre-colonial Wendat communities is near, if not entirely

impossible. It was not documented, and much was lost as whole communities perished.

There are a small group of Wyandottes who call themselves "seated faith keepers." Now, I have no idea who it was that seated them or on what throne that seat is taken. They often use the guise of their dealings being too sacred to discuss publicly to avoid disclosure of what they actually do. I, of course, am not privy to the ins and outs of how a person gets selected for this lifelong role.

If it had been a traditionally appointed title by pre-colonial Wendat it would likely have occurred within the context of families, clans, and representative participants at the Confederacy Council. Those mechanisms are no longer in place. I recently asked one of these faith keepers by what authority they single themselves out for some special kind of sacred leadership. I was told that I (along with some others who are in disagreement about the validity of certain archaic practices) are causing "rampant divisiveness and if people do not share these teaching in community in the right 'spaces and times' the traditions and protocols around them will be gone forever." What I know is that as a Confederacy, the Wendat were scattered from the Ontario "Homelands" in 1649 A. D. The shreds of documentation that do remain, even when taken as a whole, do not fully articulate a codified faith tradition. Nowhere in anything that I have read in over 45 years of research mentions "faith keepers," unless the reference is to the Haudenosaunee, who were once our enemies and at whose hands our Ancestors suffered genocide. As I see it, anyone who thinks they can revitalize the old ways of our Wendat Ancestors with authenticity and also lord their recipe for belief on any other Wendat descendants is just plain doing wrong. These few individuals call themselves "seated faith keepers."

As for me: **I am standing up and keeping faith.**

That said, I live my life as I understand Joy and Gratitude demand of me. I am as gracious as I know how to be, considering the harsh truth that I doubt my obituary will have listed among my many awards the one for "She Got Along Fabulously with Others." I generously offer what learning I've acquired, and I work and pray for a just society where all are treated with dignity. In essence, I have arrived here by my own agency and I am responsible for my own sovereignty. I no longer carry any sense of needing

to prove anything to anybody, most importantly, to myself. It has taken me 61 trips around the Sun to become the Real Human Being that the Creator intended for me to be. That is a very satisfying place to have arrived at. Now, I am ready to get on with the living (probably) of the last 1/3 of my life. I am now liberated to express my gratitude for the bounty I have been given, rather than spending any more time longing for and mourning what is not mine to know or have, including my own father.

On one of this late spring's few lovely days my spouse went down to our garage, which we have converted into an "art studio and reading lounge." I am a ceramic artist. In the studio I have been working on crafting that just so perfectly beautiful classic Wendat cook-pot shape. On that particular day I found myself engaged in the kind of reflection that making ceramics allows me, as my hands move to their own purpose, shaping the base, rolling the coils, slip, score, join the clay to itself, then repeat. I recognized that as honest and verbal as I can be at times, I probably have not shared with many people how very difficult the past 15 years have been for my spouse and I. Being something of a trooper, I just do the doing that needs to get done with as much faith and joy as I can manage to bring to my life and work. In the process, I have often held back on speaking about the difficulties we went through at the onset of her disability. I'm not going to get into a long delineation of what we experienced, just enough to say that to have been a Lesbian couple going through the onset of a major, chronic disability in the days before the Affordable Care Act with little family, and most of them homophobic and unsupportive, made us feel we were pariahs. The job wouldn't help. Few of our friends had either the means or the inclination to help. The Social Services System is dehumanizing and humiliating. We have had a fully legal Vermont Civil Union since 2001. However, because we lived in New York, where same sex marriage was not yet recognized at the onset of this illness in 2007, we had to bring literally stacks of documentation to prove our interrelated finances. Any straight couple probably wouldn't even have been asked for their wedding license. And everything takes so long. I never did so much sit around and wait... hurry up and wait some more... in my whole life as I did during those early days of our shared misery.

I accept the consequences of having lived by the motto: "Love many, trust few and always paddle your own canoe," but maybe it could have been a little less lonely if I had found my voice.

When I was young and first came out to my Mother, telling her I was a Lesbian, she was conflicted. She was worried for me and my future and said that she just wanted me to be "happy." I remember thinking that if I was living my life as my most authentic self, how could I not be happy? I now know that being Queer meant something different for her than it did for me. She wasn't worried about how I would make choices and live my life. She was worried about how it is for oppressed people in the wider society. My Mom probably could have predicted what my spouse and I experienced when the need for extensive medical attention arose. Unfortunately, my Mom had already passed in 1996, so she was not one of the people we could turn to in our distress. On most days, I am able to accept that she is gone and I can manage the missing of her pretty well, but on this particular day, was not the case. Recognizing just how not known I now am, even by my closest friends, causes me to be very lonely and nostalgic for the depth of understanding I shared with my Mother.

Yes, progress has been made. Yes, there is now the Affordable Care Act. Yes, same-sex marriage is legal in all 50 states. As this June of 2019 approached; I grew increasingly excited that this year celebrates 50 years since the riots at the Stonewall Inn that kicked off the Gay Rights Movement. This year, for the first time ever, World Pride was planned to coincide with Stonewall 50 in New York City, my hometown, the place where I found my way in the world as a "Baby Dyke."

During high school I had fallen deeply in love with another female student. We laughed together, sometimes held hands, once we took a nap next to each other, but that was the extent of our physical contact. I had no real idea how two women would share intimacy, but I did love her. I'd break out in a sweat behind my neck whenever I saw her, and day dream about her, feeling my heart would bust out of my chest when I heard her name. While in my college, I tried hard to think that these feeling had only been about her. I dated some, however, it did not take long for me to "come out" after leaving college. The girl I had loved in high school took her own life and I snapped into the realization that our sort of love ought not be a thing that kills a person. It just so happened that there was an academic conference

taking place the week I got that news called "Lesbianism and Feminism" and I spent a few days cutting classes and attending it. Being there, in rooms filled with smart young women who were working out the language that fit their personal and political identities, I immediately recognized that I had found my place among them.

I have spent a significant portion of my life at work on my identity formation, maybe as much as 20 – 25 percent of my waking hours. I am now able to look myself in my mirror and greet myself as a person secure in my own self-sovereignty. I will continue to work on projects I value and do education about topics I feel too many folks continue to be ignorant or insensitive about. As a result of having spent nearly a year planning for, and then attending, the recent World Pride / Stonewall 50th Anniversary events I have (re)discovered my voice. I now understand in ways I never did previously, that SILENCE =DEATH for folks like me who are all too often the recipients of covert hatreds. I have absolutely no desire to make the slightest effort to attempt to fit in to society if that means splitting off from or hiding the primal energy source which is love.

No matter what I am engaging in at any given moment, I will infuse it with my self-sovereignty to love who and how I was born to love.

My spouse and I had a number of wonderful experiences during Gay Pride Week in New York City this summer, including attending the Opening Ceremonies at the Barclays Center with Whoopie Goldberg, Cindi Lauper, Chaka Khan and other performers. We also attended the "Love and Resistance" exhibition at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building of the New York Public Library, the "Main Building," of the New York Public Library, the one with the sculptures of the two lions out front on Fifth Avenue, near 42nd Street. On the day we were there the Library Shop was disappointingly closed for inventory, so I made an online order for both of the books published in conjunction with the exhibit: The Stonewall Reader edited by Jason Baumann with a foreword by Edmund White and Love and Resistance: Out of the Closet Into the Stonewall Era with photographs by Diana Davies and Kay Tobin Lahusen and again, edited by Jason Baumann. Having now read both, they are in my personal library, along with the New York Public Library's 1998 publication, Becoming Visible: An Illustrated History of Lesbian and Gay Life in Twentieth Century America by Molly McGarry and Fred Wasserman, based on the 1994 exhibition curated by Fred Wasserman,

Molly McGarry and Mimi Bowling, which was also displayed at the "Main Building."

In New York City we made time for some things that were not Pride Week events, including having dinner one evening with my foster-daughter, her husband and their two preadolescent children. As we walked back from the restaurant to our hotel we passed through the neighborhood where I began my 16 years long career as a Children's Librarian for the New York Public Library. It was wonderful to share some of my personal history with her and her family. During this trip I was reminded, in having so many library-related experiences, of how it used to be. For example: as a woman in my mid-30's, having worked – at that point – for over a decade for the New York Public Library, as I proudly walked south down Fifth Avenue, past the "Main Library" during the Gay Pride March of 1994, which was the 25th anniversary of Stonewall. Passing in front of the "Main Building" with its great banner of a Pink Triangle that announced the exhibition inside, I stopped and turned to face this edifice that represents the entire organization and shouted: "Becoming Visible, huh? It has not been easy for me to do that here. Perhaps that will begin to change, now!" Yet, even in that moment of defiant shout-out to my employer, I silently prayed that none of my supervising colleagues was anywhere around.

No more.

It is another 25 years later. Yes, some things are better, easier. Some laws have been changed. I can carry on my legally married relationship in public and private without immediate fear of violence or of losing my job (if I were not already retired). But the haters still hate us.

For one week in June 2019 I experienced utter exhilaration without a shred of fear. New York City had prepared herself for the largest gathering of LGBTQIA+ persons ever to have taken place, anywhere, at any time in known history. She dressed herself from head to toe in rainbows! She was courteous, generous, openhearted and kind. We came, five million (yes, 5,000,000) strong and we knew that we were welcomed. The City, she had a kind of sassy herself – proud to be that place where 50 years earlier, as the drag queen Penny Arcade has written: "The Stonewall Uprising started when a cop grabbed a drag queen's face and turned it to the light to see if it was a

man or a woman, and if you know anything about Drag Queens you know you never, never, touch a Drag Queen's face! Never!"

Following our magnificent adventures in New York City my spouse and I also attended Pride Day on August 23, 2019 at the Great New York State Fair in our home city of Syracuse, NY. This commemorative day has been a feature of The Fair for the past five years, and New York is still the only state to have such a day as part of their state fair schedule. This year, it felt different. there was an ease, a great sense of community, and the telling of our stories in spoken word, art, song, even in clothing, that were potent and beautiful. It was as if the tenderheartedness we experience while in New York City had found its way upstate.

You know, it is sad, though. Even with all this joy, we heard on the news that on the evening following Pride Day at the Fair, a gay male couple had been harassed and the young man who did so was later arrested for perpetrating a hate crime against them.

We also had a sad experience at the Fair. We wanted to connect with and be an ally to one of the local groups, but unfortunately came to understand that we would not be welcomed. Their literature states that they are "committed to creating a point of cohesion for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, queer, intersexed, gender non-conforming, and questioning people of color communities of Syracuse, NY." In their literature they define "People of Color" as: "All people who identify as Indigenous, Black, Brown, Latinx, Asian and Pacific Islander. All of us who do not identify as yt" (emphasis mine).

So, there I was, (yes, cisgendered) of mixed-ethnicity, fair-skinned, a Queer woman who identifies as an Indigenous North American, and yet, there was no welcome for me, or my spouse. When these things happen, I storm about for a few hours and ultimately arrive at release by saying to myself: "Their loss," and I move on. This time, I found myself doing some serious meditation on what it means to me to be Indigenous in hopes of finding an answer as to why our generosity of spirit was rejected.

The French speaking Wendat in Canada say of themselves that they are "autochtones." The Word Reference web site says the English language synonyms for "indigenous" are: "autochthonous, aboriginal, natural" and

defines autochthonous as: "inhabiting a place or region from earliest known times; aboriginal." The philosopher Dr. Anne Waters has an interesting footnote to her essay: "That Alchemical Bering Strait Theory" where she writes: "A person who is descended from the original peoples of the Americas is Indigenous. "Indigenous" in the sense I use of "always having been there" is to be distinguished from "Aboriginal": the first to inhabit a region."

So, what does that mean - "always having been there"? How is that different from "inhabiting a place or region from earliest known times" or "first to inhabit a region"?

My Wyandotte ancestors have handed down to us the story of our cosmology: We are the descendants of Sky World Woman who came to the Earth through a hole in the sky. In time, she made her home upon the back of a Turtle, but only after it was covered with soil brought from below the waters by the self-sacrificing Frog. In this way, we have "always been" in North America (at least for as long as there has been a North America) and have "inhabited" North America "from earliest known times," as well as having been the "first to inhabit" their ancient territories north of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River.

What about before all that? It suddenly occurred to me that my Ancestors might have actually considered themselves indigenous to some place beyond the Milky Way, somewhere in (or beyond) the Virgo Supercluster.

As I thought about the Milky Way, I wanted to look at some photographs of our galaxy and it did not take me long to recognize the similarity between its spiraling arms and the traditional

Wyandotte triple helix bead work design I have crafted literally hundreds of times in my life. I always assumed that pattern was a mnemonic device for the story of Sky World Woman, attributing it to the view she had as she spiraled out of the hole in the sky toward the Earth. I am now revising my thinking. It appears to me to be a simplified view of the Milky Way as Aataentsic passed through it, to arrive here on planet Earth.

Maman Gaia, this is place that all of us – regardless of skin tone or DNA or culture or any other thing that identifies us (and sometimes separates and sometimes unifies us), are at a minimum, aboriginal inhabitants of –

perhaps even indigenous to. What I realized is beyond what Luan Fauteck Makes Marks has written, saying: "The Land inheres as sacred—beyond human perception and conception, beyond our capacities for belief and imagination—in and of itself." is that it is more than our inhabiting of sacred places that makes us Indigenous. It is our ways of being and the people we choose to do that way with – the issue is: Indigenous to whom, at least and as much as Indigenous to where. I know that I am Wyandotte, an Indigenous North American, because my own Mother told me that I am, and that is more than sufficient for me.

"Their loss" I say to myself, regarding those at the State Fair who, like others before them, do not want me as their ally. I believe I have something worth saying and more than enough skills to match. Once again, I find that the actions and attitudes of so many misguided others cause me to decide that my life ways as an art-making, care giving, Indigenous Queer semi-hermit suits me just fine.

I feel so sure of all this that "joy" becomes an understatement.

© Rebekah Tanner, October 2019