

“Do you know my name?”

I was standing at the edge of the public park in Point Arena, CA. The two friends I had come with were walking ahead of me, immersed in their own conversation. I had gotten my two dogs out of the truck to take a little walk before my companions and I went to the local movie theatre. A group of about six young people around 16-18 years old were walking past me when the young man who was trailing the group suddenly left his companions and veered over to me. He approached to an uncomfortably close distance, quite in my personal space. I guessed him to be of Native American descent. Now he was standing right in front of me, white teeth gleaming from his sneering red face.

“Do you know my name?”

I had been invited to an art opening by a Native Samish/Blackfoot friend who had put together a show of Native American prisoners from around the country. Despite my chosen last name I am of entirely European American descent. However, I was fairly well-known for my support of Native Rights issues, having been active in putting together events and benefits for causes and using my Public Affairs slot on local radio station KZYX to bring indigenous voices to the larger community. I had written a few songs dealing with Native Rights issues and my friend invited me to do a short performance as part of the exhibition.

My friends and I were fresh from the gallery. The artwork was tragic, inspiring, and beautiful, revealing aspects of the human condition that we might rather not know about yet are better people if we do. The response to the show was tremendous. I had done my set, the crowd was winding down, and now we were getting ready to shift to the movies.

“Do you know my name?”

Now I was standing there with this young man literally in my face. His friends looked a bit uncomfortable. They had moved ahead, pretending that nothing was happening. My associates were well ahead of me, unaware of my situation.

“No”, I answered, “I don’t know your name. Should I?”

“It’s Jine” he said

“John?” I asked.

“No! Jiiiiinnne!” he said as he stretched out the word for dramatic effect. His teeth flashed even more as he twisted his face into a menacing grimace.

“What’s Jine?” I asked.

“Jine is 500 years of oppression!” he answered through clenched teeth. He said it with emphasis on the word “opprrresshun!”

I was immediately aware of the irony of the scene. I thought it quite unlikely that he would have approached me if I were not a white man. Just as I did not know his name, neither did he know anything about me or the function I had just performed at the gallery or the personal history of my work that had positioned me for such an honor. He just saw a white man standing on his Native territory and that was all.

Although uncomfortable and unsure what level of danger I might be in, the truth was that I also admired him for his audacity. He was, in his own unique way, staking his claim. He was saying that he mattered. Like the days of old when a young man coming of age might have rode his horse into camp shrieking and howling in some seemingly pointless and foolish manner, he was saying “I may not know much of what this is all about yet, but I am here. I matter. Deal with it!”

My first thought was that I wanted to give him something. I did not know what that meant or what it was that I could possibly give him, but that is what my inner voice was saying. I also thought that if he was walking around with that level of unchecked anger, certain that the historical and indeed current wounds that he carried by nature of his race gave him license to act out toward anyone at any time, he was a good candidate to end up in the back of a police car, if he had not been there already.

I also knew that I did not want to end up in the newspapers in some infamous way. If he was jacked up on meth or carrying a weapon and really just wanted to hurt someone I was willing to back down. He was so close to me that I could not really get a good look at him. I did not want to give much ground as I figured he would simply feel emboldened but I needed to get a better look at him so that I could assess whether or not I was in physical danger.

I decided to momentarily give a little ground. With one foot I took a half-step back and leaned back on that leg. This little move kept my front foot as close to him as before thus disinviting him to move forward, but by leaning

back ever so slightly I was able to scan his body with my eyes. It was just a few seconds, but I was able to assess him. I did not think that he was under the influence of any type of substance and I doubted that he had a weapon or that he meant to actually physically harm me. Once I felt reasonably assured of my own safety, I closed the gap to the one that he had previously established. Close. And I kept up the conversation.

He was still talking about “oppresshun!”, using the word with such intensity that I think he would have liked to drive it from himself and into me like a stake. I knew that the certainty with which he already saw the world was a tragic and sad thing, and one that could ultimately prove more harmful to him than he could possibly know. I decided that the best tactic in my bag of tricks was to agree with him. It would not be that hard for me since I actually did concur.

“Yes” I said, “Oppression is a bitch”.

For just a moment he was caught off guard. I was not supposed to agree with him; I was part of his problem, in fact I symbolized the cause of it. His eyes registered a brief uncertainty but he quickly regained his composure and his agenda.

“Yeah, ever since Columbus landed, COLUMBUS!!! (he started leaning closer to me and sneering again) it has been a shit deal! Genocide and murder, and it still goes on!!”

“Yes” I agreed, “it still goes on”.

I felt the heaviness in my heart. I knew he was right. But the heaviness I felt went beyond his race. It was specific to him. He was carrying the poison. It would be a formidable task for him, in his lifetime, to turn that poison into something positive, something life-affirming, rather than allow it to kill him. What a karmic task to carry that burden and still be expected to somehow function in this world!

And even though I felt all of this compassion for him and his situation, I also felt my own claim. I had a right to be there, on that playground, on this portion of Mother Earth. My right, my claim, was undeniably different and perhaps, by one measure, arguably weaker than his, but I knew that I would

not really be of service to him if I relinquished that ground simply on the basis of his all-too-verifiable claims of injustice.

I continued with my tactic of agreeing with him and hoped that at some point I might find an opening. “Yes”, I said, “Columbus was no hero”. Again he was caught off-guard, but quickly regained his composure and started talking about oppression (“opppresshunnn!!”) again.

“Oppression is really a bitch”, I stated “but it all depends on what you do with it”.

This time he could not help but bite a little bit. “What do you mean”, he asked in a disdainful tone of voice.

“It is real” I said, “but you have to decide if you are going to let it kill you or if you are going to learn from it”.

This encounter was no longer going how he had planned. I knew he was curious. He started to smile a bit, but it was a smile dripping with contempt.

“What would YOU know about it?”

“I do not know how it is to be you. I do not personally know the kind of oppression that you have to bear. I do know that you have a heavy burden but it can also teach you something about being a human being if you have the strength to walk that path”.

At this point he could not believe his ears. He gave me a look that made me certain that he thought I was insane. I decided to try and make a little small talk just to deescalate the situation a bit. I asked him where he was from.

“Kashia”, he said, but he said it with the elongated phrasing so it came out “Kasshhaayya”. Of course his teeth gleamed and his mouth twisted.

Kashia is a nearby Pomo Rancheria.

“I know some people from there” I informed him.

Well, judging by his reaction one might have thought I told him the moon was made of cheese.

“You do not!” he said incredulously.

Actually, I did. I lived near that Rancheria in Sonoma County about 10 years prior. The local Pomo had been upset with State Parks activities in the Russian Gulch area. Parks had been insufficiently respectful of some of the archaeological resources. There were a couple of meetings and I had attended just to be supportive. During that time I met some wonderful elders. I was particularly impressed with one of the women. I had asked her if she would be willing to meet with me sometime as I was curious what the Pomo names were for some of the geological features of the area and she said she would. Alas, my life pulled me away from that area and the meeting did not come to pass but I had written down her name and number in my address book. Sufficient time had passed that I had a new address book, but I knew if I could remember her name it would help me immensely with my new friend. This woman had been central in keeping many of the old Pomo traditions alive. I kept talking with him while in my mind I was frantically turning the pages of that old address book, praying that I would find her name.

We talked more about oppression and how I believed that every human being carried a tremendous burden trying to find their own path in life and their own unique reason for being here on earth. Fortunately I know enough history that I could hang in there with him and to his credit he offered some of his own young insight. I offered to him that the oppression he faces, while being a completely unfair and almost impossible burden, could also be the challenge that yielded to him the greatest of treasures. He actually asked me what I meant and I said to him that if, even with all he was facing, if he found his way to peace and understanding that it would be a unique gift to himself and all the races and that in fact he could become a teacher to others. All the while I am searching, pouring through the pages of that old address book, hoping and praying that I would find the name which at this point felt like the key that was going to make or break our time together.

As we spoke he was still mostly disdainful but he had softened. Although he was entirely skeptical about what was happening, he started to offer his own insight about his situation and life in general and it was really a pleasure for me to listen to this young man who only minutes before behaved toward me in a threatening manner.

And then I saw it. In my mind's eye the page fell open and I saw her name.

“Oh!” I said, “I just remembered the name of the elder from Kashia. Violet Chappelle”.

The look on his face was absolutely priceless. He audibly gasped and exclaimed, “Hhuuhh! That’s my Auntie!”

His entire body relaxed. His facial expression softened. His anger evaporated as his last defenses immediately and completely dissolved. The sudden transformation was a beautiful thing to witness.

He asked me how I knew his Auntie and I informed him of the circumstances. He asked me about my life in that area and how I came to know a little bit about the Rancheria. He talked about his life at Kashia, about the small school there and the people and his family. I listened with an open and whole heart. It was a truly incredible moment: here was this young man who, just a short time earlier, was attempting to intimidate me to the extent that I was unsure of my physical safety. Now he was talking to me like the best of new friends and I think he would have done anything for me if I had asked.

After some further conversation we eventually said goodbye to each other. He joined his friends and I was left standing on the playground astounded at the wonder of it all. I took a few deep breaths and rejoined my own companions.

I have reflected often about that incident. Even many years later it still resonates within me. I often wonder how “Jine” is doing, if he was able to find his way to his gifts or if he self-destructed at the hands of his anger and appropriate sense of injustice. I know that his bravado and temerity were a gift to me when I reflect on my work with young men.

This was undoubtedly an extreme example, but that young man was looking for what all young men are searching for: recognition on his own terms and the knowledge that he has a place in this world. So often as our young men act out we find all kinds of excuses to push them away and I think that is a great loss for all of us. We treat their adolescence and their quest for their own authentic manhood as something to be patiently avoided, actively crushed, or pharmacologically treated. On the surface my friend “Jine” was acting outside the bounds of propriety, but at a deeper level he was right on time.

There are countless ancient stories from cultures throughout the world about Initiation. I think of these ancient tales as maps that help show us the way to adulthood. Sometimes these maps have to be repeatedly visited as we wind our way through life, but therein lies wisdom to be gleaned in the ongoing search. Inevitably, these stories speak to the value of being challenged. If a boy is to truly become a responsible, creative, and self-connected man the shell of his innocence must be broken. Part of that process is that he must be challenged, he must be tested, in order to gain the new ground of maturity. Like my friend "Jine", he is seeking to destroy something that needs to die so that something new can live. In our cultural confusion we mistakenly label that quest, that inborn need to walk that path, as oppositional and defiant. For those willing to live on the shallow surface of life that explanation will suffice, but it masks the true purpose and meaning of the process. Further, not only does it seek to silence the longings and wisdom of youth, but it also seeks to silence the same in ourselves and our society.

Nobody likes being uncomfortable. The initial interaction with my young friend is not something that I would have chosen but I do believe that youth need to put us in that position. They are looking for us to reveal our wisdom so that they can be assured that there is some to be found.

