

Walking the Sweetgrass Road: Winter Retreats...Who will win?

By Kim Wheatley Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother

Winter is a time where the Earth wears her most beautiful white dress as she rests from the hard work she undertakes supporting creation throughout all of the other seasons.

Like the Earth, many animals slow down and hibernate with her, resting until the first calls of the Thunder Beings nudge them awake. This is always the sure sign that spring has returned!

For many people the cold weather makes them retreat indoors to cozy fires, comfort food and maybe Netflix bingeing while some glory in the winter activities of skiing, tobogganing and ice skating. Some may even explore skidooing, ice fishing and snow shoeing.

Some of these activities were once common for Indigenous families, too, across Turtle Island (North America).

It was also an important time for Indigenous people to share their ancient stories filled with detailed reflections on all aspects of life. We call these Aadsookaanan (sacred stories/legends). These are never just stories, but rather complex insights on our ways of life, Creation and relationships. The season of winter is known as Bboong to the Anishinaabeg and is also the name of a great spirit who has a brother named Ziigwan (Spring). These brothers love to wrestle and it's said at this time of year they are really going at it and the winner of this wrestling match will be the season we are immersed in.

It's always exciting to sit in the company of a knowledge keeper or story teller and listen to some of our favourites. We have incredible stories of super heroes and plant beings, creation stories and animal kin teachings. No matter where you go in Indigenous country there are endless legends to be told.

Many themes are explored including lessons and teachings of caution, the purpose of plant and animal kin, star constellations, water teachings and the list goes on. No matter the topic they are endlessly interesting to me.

Our morals and values come from the 7 Sacred Teachings commonly known as the 7 Grandfather Teachings. These stories teach us about Love, Bravery, Respect, Humility, Kindness, Honesty and Wisdom. Universal ways of being good humans is a story good for all!

The legends of Nanaboozhoo are told predominantly in the season of winter to respect this Spiritual being or demi-god of the Anishinaabe People.

This famous being's name is often shortened to Nanabush and often thought of as a trickster.

In some regions he is referred to as Whiskey Jack and many other names. It is said that this being was part human and part spirit and was able to do things we just could not imagine. This being was one of four brothers born of a human Mother named Winona and Spiritual Father known as West Wind.

It is said that Nanaboozhoo travelled all over Turtle Island (North America) leaving many remarkable landmarks and lessons that people and animals alike benefit from even today.

Some of these legends include spreading many diverse medicine seeds across special places like Manitoulin Island, giving all the birds distinct colours, creating shells for turtles, helping porcupines protect themselves with the gift of quills, bringing the sacred pipe to the Anishinaabeg People, tricking animals to become food, stealing the sun from the sky realms, creating helpers to protect the medicines, rebuilding the earth after the great flood, and so many more.

I love our ancient stories so much and always get curious about the lessons imbedded and the teachings that get passed on. As an oral culture, we did have forms of writing that recorded the existence of this being along with many others. Some might equate Nanaboozhoo with the Greek Demi-gods in that he and his brothers had super human abilities but, like the Greek Gods, certainly weren't infallible.

It's hard not to look at these stories as lifelong learning opportunities to expand my understanding of relationships to the natural and human world equally. The orality of Indigenous culture has been dismissed in many ways as quaint but few look at the depth and breadth of teachings housed in our Aadsokaanan which are deep life lessons to frame one's free will around.

As a longtime cultural and ceremonial practitioner, I have often traveled the road of learning through these stories. Not only have I grown richer in my wisdom, but also live a life of balance and harmony, connected to the truths so artfully placed in these ancient spaces.

Travelling to sacred spaces that depict Nanaboozhoo such as the Peterborough Petroglyphs and seeing the prominence of his image not only there but in pictographs across the country fills my heart with hope and pride that those that come after me will benefit too from the wintertime practice of sharing the legends and stories of the great Anishinaabe nations.

These stories never become rote or dated?the lessons are always applicable no matter how much time has passed.

Endless thanks to the Elders, Storytellers, Knowledge Keepers, Nokomisag (Grandmothers) and Mishomisag (Grandfathers) who continue to keep this practice alive!