In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place

Fog shrouds the land. There is just this rock in the half-darkness and the surf, rising and falling with a thunderous roar, reminding me how tenuous my perch is on this tiny island. I almost feel her feet on these cold, wet rocks instead of my own; Skywoman on a speck of land, alone in a cold dark sea, before she made our home. When she fell from Skyworld, Turtle Island was her Plymouth Rock, her Ellis Island. The Mother of the People was first an immigrant.

I'm new here too, on this shore at the western edge of the continent, new to how land appears and disappears in this place with the tides and with the fog. No one knows my name here, and I don't know theirs. Without this exchange of the barest recognition, I feel like I could disappear in the fog along with everything else.

It is said that the Creator gathered together the four sacred elements and breathed life into them to give form to Original Man before setting him upon Turtle Island. The last of all beings to be created, First Man was given the name Nanabozho. The Creator called out the name to the four directions so that the others would know who was coming. Nanabozho, part man, part *manido*—a powerful spirit-being—is the personification of life forces, the Anishinaabe culture hero, and our great teacher of how to be human. In Nanabozho's form as Original Man and in our own, we humans are the newest arrivals on earth, the youngsters, just learning to find our way.

I can imagine how it might have been for him in the beginning,

before anyone knew him and he did not know them. I too was a stranger at first in this dark dripping forest perched at the edge of the sea, but I sought out an elder, my Sitka Spruce grandmother with a lap wide enough for many grandchildren. I introduced myself, told her my name and why I had come. I offered her tobacco from my pouch and asked if I might visit in her community for a time. She asked me to sit down, and there was a place right between her roots. Her canopy towers above the forest and her swaying foliage is constantly murmuring to her neighbors. I know she'll eventually pass the word and my name on the wind.

Nanabozho did not know his parentage or his origins—only that he was set down into a fully peopled world of plants and animals, winds, and water. He was an immigrant too. Before he arrived, the world was all here, in balance and harmony, each one fulfilling their purpose in the Creation. He understood, as some did not, that this was not the "New World," but one that was ancient before he came.

The ground where I sit with Sitka Grandmother is deep with needles, soft with centuries of humus; the trees are so old that my lifetime compared to theirs is just a birdsong long. I suspect that Nanabozho walked like I do, in awe, looking up into the trees so often I stumble.

The Creator gave Nanabozho some tasks in his role as Original Man, his Original Instructions.* Anishinaabe elder Eddie Benton-Banai beautifully retells the story of Nanabozho's first work: to walk through the world that Skywoman had danced into life. His instructions were to walk in such a way "that each step is a greeting to Mother Earth," but he wasn't quite sure yet what that meant. Fortunately, although his were the First Man's prints upon the earth, there were many paths to follow, made by all those whose home this already was.

The time when the Original Instructions were given we might call "a long time ago." For in the popular way of thinking, history draws a time "line," as if time marched in lockstep in only one direction. Some people say that time is a river into which we can step but once, as it flows in a straight path to the sea. But Nanabozho's people know time as a circle. Time is not a river running inexorably to the sea, but the sea

* This traditional teaching has been published in Eddie Benton-Banais's *The Mishomis Book*.

itself—its tides that appear and disappear, the fog that rises to become rain in a different river. All things that were will come again.

In the way of linear time, you might hear Nanabozho's stories as mythic lore of history, a recounting of the long-ago past and how things came to be. But in circular time, these stories are both history and prophecy, stories for a time yet to come. If time is a turning circle, there is a place where history and prophecy converge—the footprints of First Man lie on the path behind us and on the path ahead.

With all the power and all the failings of a human being, Nanabozho did his best with the Original Instructions and tried to become native to his new home. His legacy is that we are still trying. But the instructions have gotten tattered along the way and many have been forgotten.

After all these generations since Columbus, some of the wisest of Native elders still puzzle over the people who came to our shores. They look at the toll on the land and say, "The problem with these new people is that they don't have both feet on the shore. One is still on the boat. They don't seem to know whether they're staying or not." This same observation is heard from some contemporary scholars who see in the social pathologies and relentlessly materialist culture the fruit of homelessness, a rootless past. America has been called the home of second chances. For the sake of the peoples and the land, the urgent work of the Second Man may be to set aside the ways of the colonist and become indigenous to place. But can Americans, as a nation of immigrants, learn to live here as if we were staying? With both feet on the shore?

What happens when we truly become native to a place, when we finally make a home? Where are the stories that lead the way? If time does in fact eddy back on itself, maybe the journey of the First Man will provide footsteps to guide the journey of the Second.

Nanabozho's journey first took him toward the rising sun, to the place where the day begins. As he walked, he worried how he would eat, especially as he was already hungry. How would he find his way? He

considered the Original Instructions and understood that all the knowledge he needed in order to live was present in the land. His role was not to control or change the world as a human, but to learn from the world how to be human.

Wabunong—the East—is the direction of knowledge. We send gratitude to the East for the chance to learn every day, to start anew. In the East, Nanabozho received the lesson that Mother Earth is our wisest teacher. He came to know *sema,* the sacred tobacco, and how to use it to carry his thoughts to the Creator.

As he continued exploring the land, Nanabozho was given a new responsibility: to learn the names of all the beings. He watched them carefully to see how they lived and spoke with them to learn what gifts they carried in order to discern their true names. Right away he began to feel more at home and was not lonely anymore when he could call the others by name and they called out to him when he passed, *"Bozho!"*—still our greeting to one another today.

Today, far from my neighbors in Maple Nation, I see some species I recognize and many I do not, so I walk as Original Man may have done, seeing them for the first time. I try to turn off my science mind and name them with a Nanabozho mind. I've noticed that once some folks attach a scientific label to a being, they stop exploring who it is. But with newly created names I keep looking even closer, to see if I've gotten it right. And so today it is not *Picea sitchensis* but *strong arms covered in moss. Branch like a wing* instead of *Thuja plicata*.

Most people don't know the names of these relatives; in fact, they hardly even see them. Names are the way we humans build relationship, not only with each other but with the living world. I'm trying to imagine what it would be like going through life not knowing the names of the plants and animals around you. Given who I am and what I do, I can't know what that's like, but I think it would be a little scary and disorienting—like being lost in a foreign city where you can't read the street signs. Philosophers call this state of isolation and disconnection "species loneliness"—a deep, unnamed sadness stemming

from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship. As our human dominance of the world has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely when we can no longer call out to our neighbors. It's no wonder that naming was the first job the Creator gave Nanabozho.

He walked the land, handing out names to all he met, an Anishinaabe Linnaeus. I like to think of the two of them walking together. Linnaeus the Swedish botanist and zoologist, in his loden jacket and woolen trousers, with felt hat cocked back on his forehead and a vasculum under his arm, and Nanabozho naked but for his breechcloth and a single feather, with a buckskin bag under his arm. They stroll along discussing the names for things. They're both so enthusiastic, pointing out the beautiful leaf shapes, the incomparable flowers. Linnaeus explains his *Systema Naturae,* a scheme designed to show the ways in which all things are related. Nanabozho nods enthusiastically, "Yes, that is also our way: we say, 'We are all related.'" He explains that there was a time when all beings spoke the same language and could understand one another, so all of Creation knew each other's names. Linnaeus looks wistful about that. "I ended up having to translate everything into Latin," he says of binomial nomenclature. "We lost any other common language long ago." Linnaeus lends Nanabozho his magnifying glass so he can see the tiny floral parts. Nanabozho gives Linnaeus a song so he can see their spirits. And neither of them are lonely.

After his eastern sojourn, Nanabozho's footsteps took him next to the South, *zhawanong,* the land of birth and growth. From the South comes the green that covers the world in spring, carried on the warm winds. There, cedar, *ḳizhig,* the sacred plant of the South, shared her teachings with him. Her branches are medicine that purify and protect life within her embrace. He carried *ḳizhig* with him to remind him that to be indigenous is to protect life on earth.

Following the Original Instructions, Benton-Banai recounts that Nanabozho also had the task to learn how to live from his elder brothers and sisters. When he needed food, he noticed what the animals

were eating and copied them. Heron taught him to gather wild rice. One night by the creek, he saw a little ring-tailed animal carefully washing his food with delicate hands. He thought, "Ahh, I am supposed to put only clean food in my body."

Nanabozho was counseled by many plants too, who shared gifts, and learned to treat them always with the greatest respect. After all, plants were here first on the earth and have had a long time to figure things out. Together, all the beings, both plants and animals, taught him what he needed to know. The Creator had told him it would be this way.

His elder brothers and sisters also inspired Nanabozho to make new things in order to survive. Beaver showed him how to make an ax; Whale gave him the shape for his canoe. He'd been instructed that if he could combine the lessons from nature with the strength of his own good mind, he could discover new things that would be useful for the people to come. In his mind, Grandmother Spider's web became a fishnet. He followed the winter lessons of squirrels to create maple sugar. The lessons Nanabozho learned are the mythic roots of Native science, medicine, architecture, agriculture, and ecological knowledge.

But true to the circle of time, science and technology are starting to catch up with Native science by adopting the Nanabozho approach—looking to nature for models of design, by the architects of biomimicry. By honoring the knowledge in the land, and caring for its keepers, we start to become indigenous to place.

To each of the four directions Nanabozho wandered on long, strong legs. Singing loudly as he went, he didn't hear the bird's chirps of caution and was duly surprised when Grizzly challenged him. After that, when he came near the territories of others, he did not just blunder in as if the whole world belonged to him. He learned to sit quietly at the edge of the woods and wait to be invited. Then, Benton-Banai recounts, Nanabozho would rise and speak these words to the citizens of that place: "I wish not to mar the beauty of the earth or to disturb my brother's purpose. I ask that I be allowed to pass."

He saw flowers blooming through the snow, Ravens who spoke to

Wolves, and insects who lit the prairie nights. His gratitude for their abilities grew and he came to understand that to carry a gift is also to carry a responsibility. The Creator gave Wood Thrush the gift of a beautiful song, with the duty to sing the forest good-night. Late at night he was grateful that the stars were sparkling to guide his way. Breathing under water, flying to the ends of the earth and back, digging earthen dens, making medicines. Every being with a gift, every being with a responsibility. He considered his own empty hands. He had to rely on the world to take care of him.

From my high bluff on the coast I look east and the hills before me are a ragged range of clear-cut forests. To the south I see an estuary dammed and diked so that salmon may no longer pass. On the western horizon, a bottom-dragging trawler scrapes up the ocean floor. And far away to the north, the earth is torn open for oil.

Had the new people learned what Original Man was taught at a council of animals—never damage Creation, and never interfere with the sacred purpose of another being—the eagle would look down on a different world. The salmon would be crowding up the rivers, and passenger pigeons would darken the sky. Wolves, cranes, *Nehalem,* cougars, *Lenape,* old-growth forests would still be here, each fulfilling their sacred purpose. I would be speaking Potawatomi. We would see what Nanabozho saw. It does not bear too much imagining, for in that direction lies heartbreak.

Against the backdrop of that history, an invitation to settler society to become indigenous to place feels like a free ticket to a housebreaking party. It could be read as an open invitation to take what little is left. Can settlers be trusted to follow Nanabozho, to walk so that "each step is a greeting to Mother Earth"? Grief and fear still sit in the shadows, behind the glimmer of hope. Together they try to hold my heart closed.

But I need to remember that the grief is the settlers' as well. They too will never walk in a tallgrass prairie where sunflowers dance with

goldfinches. Their children have also lost the chance to sing at the Maple Dance. They can't drink the water either.

In his journey to the North, Nanabozho found the medicine teachers. They gave him *Wiingaashk* to teach him the ways of compassion, kindness, and healing, even for those who have made bad mistakes, for who has not? To become indigenous is to grow the circle of healing to include all of Creation. Sweetgrass, in a long braid, offers protection to a traveler, and Nanabozho put some in his bag. A path scented with sweetgrass leads to a landscape of forgiveness and healing for all who need it. She doesn't give her gift only to some.

When Nanabozho came to the West, he found many things that frightened him. The earth shook beneath his feet. He saw great fires consume the land. Sage, *mshkodewashk,* the sacred plant of the west, was there to help him, to wash away fear. Benton-Banai reminds us that Firekeeper himself came to Nanabozho. "This is the same fire that warms your lodge," he said. "All powers have two sides, the power to create and the power to destroy. We must recognize them both, but invest our gifts on the side of creation."

Nanabozho learned that in the duality of all things, he had a twin brother who was as committed to making imbalance as Nanabozho was dedicated to balance. That twin had learned the interplay of creation and destruction and rocked it like a boat on a choppy sea to keep people out of balance. He found that the arrogance of power could be used to unleash unlimited growth—an unrestrained, cancerous sort of creation that would lead to destruction. Nanabozho vowed to walk with humility in order to try to balance his twin's arrogance. That too is the task of those who would walk in his footsteps.

I go to sit with my Sitka Spruce grandmother to think. I am not from here, just a stranger who comes with gratitude and respect and questions of how it is we come to belong to a place. And yet she makes me welcome, just as we are told the big trees of the west kindly looked after Nanabozho.

Even as I sit in her still shadow, my thoughts are all tangled. Like my elders before me, I want to envision a way that an immigrant society could become indigenous to place, but I'm stumbling on the words. Immigrants cannot by definition be indigenous. *Indigenous* is a birthright word. No amount of time or caring changes history or substitutes for soul-deep fusion with the land. Following Nanabozho's footsteps doesn't guarantee transformation of Second Man to First. But if people do not feel "indigenous," can they nevertheless enter into the deep reciprocity that renews the world? Is this something that can be learned? Where are the teachers? I'm remembering the words of elder Henry Lickers. "You know, they came here thinking they'd get rich by working on the land. So they dug their mines and cut down the trees. But the land is the one with the power—while they were working on the land, the land was working on them. Teaching them."

I sit a long time and eventually the sound of the wind in Grandmother Sitka's branches washes words away and I lose myself in just listening—to the crisp voice of laurels, the chatter of alders, the whispers of lichens. I have to be reminded—just like Nanabozho—that the plants are our oldest teachers.

I get up from my needle-soft nook between Grandmother's roots and walk back to the trail, where I am stopped in my tracks. Bedazzled by my new neighbors—giant firs, sword fern, and salal—I had passed by an old friend without recognition. I'm embarrassed to not have greeted him before. From the east coast to the edge of the west, he had walked here. Our people have a name for this round-leafed plant: White Man's Footstep.

Just a low circle of leaves, pressed close to the ground with no stem to speak of, it arrived with the first settlers and followed them everywhere they went. It trotted along paths through the woods, along wagon roads and railroads, like a faithful dog so as to be near them. Linnaeus called it *Plantago major,* the common plantain. Its Latin epithet *Plantago* refers to the sole of a foot.

At first the Native people were distrustful of a plant that came with so much trouble trailing behind. But Nanabozho's people knew that

all things have a purpose and that we must not interfere with its fulfillment. When it became clear that White Man's Footstep would be staying on Turtle Island, they began to learn about its gifts. In spring it makes a good pot of greens, before summer heat turns the leaves tough. The people became glad for its constant presence when they learned that the leaves, when they are rolled or chewed to a poultice, make a fine first aid for cuts, burns, and especially insect bites. Every part of the plant is useful. Those tiny seeds are good medicine for digestion. The leaves can halt bleeding right away and heal wounds without infection.

This wise and generous plant, faithfully following the people, became an honored member of the plant community. It's a foreigner, an immigrant, but after five hundred years of living as a good neighbor, people forget that kind of thing.

Our immigrant plant teachers offer a lot of different models for how *not* to make themselves welcome on a new continent. Garlic mustard poisons the soil so that native species will die. Tamarisk uses up all the water. Foreign invaders like loosestrife, kudzu, and cheat grass have the colonizing habit of taking over others' homes and growing without regard to limits. But Plantain is not like that. Its strategy was to be useful, to fit into small places, to coexist with others around the dooryard, to heal wounds. Plantain is so prevalent, so well integrated, that we think of it as native. It has earned the name bestowed by botanists for plants that have become our own. Plantain is not indigenous but "naturalized." This is the same term we use for the foreign-born when they become citizens in our country. They pledge to uphold the laws of the state. They might well uphold Nanabozho's Original Instructions, too.

Maybe the task assigned to Second Man is to unlearn the model of kudzu and follow the teachings of White Man's Footstep, to strive to become naturalized to place, to throw off the mind-set of the immigrant. Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know

that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities. To become naturalized is to live as if your children's future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do.

As time circles around on itself again, maybe White Man's Footstep *is* following in Nanabozho's. Perhaps Plantain will line the homeward path. We could follow. White Man's Footstep, generous and healing, grows with its leaves so close to the ground that each step is a greeting to Mother Earth.