

Coming into Wisdom: Community, Family, Land, & Love

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

I'm Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg, or Ojibway, from Alderville First Nation. My territory is the north shore of Lake Ontario in Ontario, and I began today with one of our political practices that we carry when we're visiting another's territory. We start by telling our clan where we live, where we are from, our home, and then finally our name. The next words out of our mouths are an acknowledgement of the territory of the people we are visiting and they have deep meaning. They are a commitment to the Dene that I will not cause harm while I am here, that I will conduct myself in a way that is consistent with your laws and practices, that I will not ruin your lands or your waters or hurt your families, and that I am committed to maintaining reciprocal, peaceful relations with your community and your nation. For me these words are about an affirmation of your governance and your nationhood, and a commitment and a responsibility to reciprocity and peace.

Today I would like to share a few stories from my homeland about why the land is important to me and why I do the work that I do.

The first story is a Mississauga Nishnaabeg story that on one hand is about the origin of maple sugar, maple syrup, and on the other hand it's about something else altogether. And this story is really important to me at this particular time of year because this is the time we're in the sugar bush. We tapped our maple trees the earliest we've ever tapped them at the end of February. Yesterday it was minus 16 when I left. The weather is fluctuating up and down; we hardly have any sap this year because of global warming. I learned the story about 15 years ago from my Elder Doug Williams – I've been working with him for almost two decades now – who's from Curve Lake First Nation, and my version of the story is called "Kwezens makes a lovely discovery". Like everything, I thought making maple syrup was really hard work until I spent some time with the Dene and they showed me how to make birch syrup. And that's a lot of work.

Kwezens is out walking in the bush one day.

It is Zügwan.

The lake is opening up.

The goon was finally melting

She's feeling that first warmth of spring on her cheeks.

"Ngitchi nendam," she is thinking, "I'm happy."

Then that Kwezens who is out walking

collecting firewood for her Doodoom

decides to sit under Ninaatigoog,

maybe just stretch out,

maybe just have a little rest,

maybe gather firewood a little later.

"Owah, Ngitchi nendam nongom.

I'm feeling happy today," says that Kwezens.

And while that Kwezens

is lying down, and looking up

she sees Ajidamoo up in the tree

"Bozhoo Ajidamoo! I hope you had a good winter,

I hope you had enough food cached."

But Ajidamoo doesn't look up because she's already busy.

She's not collecting nuts.

Gawiin.

She's not building her nest.

Gawiin, not yet.

She's not looking after any young.

Gawiin, too early.

She's just nibbling on the bark, and then doing some sucking.

Nibble, nibble suck.

Nibble, nibble suck.

Nibble, nibble, suck.

Nibble, nibble, suck.

Kwezens is feeling a little curious.

So she does it too, on one of the low branches.

Nibble, nibble suck.

Nibble, nibble suck.

Nibble, nibble, suck.

Nibble, nibble, suck.

*Mmmmmmm.
This stuff tastes good.
It's real, sweet water.
Mmmmmmm.*

*Then Kwezens gets thinking
and she makes a hole in that tree
and she makes a little slide for
that sweet water to run down
she makes a quick little container
out of birch bark, and
she collects that sweet water
and she takes that sweet water home
to show her mama.*

*That doodoom is excited and she has three hundred
questions:
"Ah Kwezens, what is this?"
"Where did you find it?"
"Which tree?"
"Who taught you how to make it?"
"Did you put semaa?"
"Did you say miigwech?"
"How fast is it dripping?"
"Does it happen all day?"
"Does it happen all night?"
"Where's the fire wood?"*

*Kwezens tells her doodoom the story,
She believes every word
because she is her Kwezens
and they love each other very much.
"Let's cook the meat in it tonight,
it will be lovely sweet."
"Nahow."
"Nahow."*

*So they cooked that meat in that sweet water.
It was lovely sweet.
It was extra lovely sweet.
It was even sweeter than just that sweet water.
The next day, Kwezens takes her mama
to that tree and her mama brings Nokomis
and Nokomis brings all the Aunties, and
there is a very big crowd of Michi Saagiig
Nishnaabekwewag
and there is a very big lot of pressure.
Kwezens tells about Ajidamoo.
Kwezens does the nibble nibble suck part.*

*At first there are technical difficulties
and none of it works.
But Mama rubs Kwezens' back
she tells Kwezens that she believes her anyway.*

*They talk about lots of variables like heat and temperature
and time
then Güzis comes out and warms everything up
and soon it's drip, drip, drip, drip.*

*Those Aunties go crazy
Saasaakwe!
dancing around
hugging a bit too tight
high kicking
and high fiving
until they take it back home
boil it up
boil it down
into sweet, sweet sugar.*

*Ever since, every Ziigwan
those Michi Saagiig Nishnaabekwewag
collect that sweet water
and boil it up
and boil it down
into that sweet, sweet sugar
all thanks to Kwezens and her lovely discovery,
and to Ajidamoo and her precious teaching
and to Ninaatigoog and their boundless sharing*

Every spring, while tapping a stand of maple trees, I remember that this is one of my favorite stories. It's one of my favorites because nothing violent happens in it. At every turn, Kwezens is met with very basic, core Nishnaabeg values – love, compassion, and understanding. She centers her day around her own freedom and joy. I imagine myself at seven running through a stand of maples with the first warmth of spring marking my cheeks with warmth. I imagine everything good in the world. My heart, my mind and my spirit are open and engaged and I feel as if I could accomplish anything. I imagine myself grasping at feelings I haven't felt before – that maybe life is so good that it is too short; that there really isn't enough time to love everything.

In reality, I have to imagine myself in this situation because, as a child, I don't think I was ever in a similar situation. My experience of education, from kindergarten to graduate school, was one of coping with someone else's agenda, curriculum, and pedagogy, someone who was neither interested in my wellbeing as a kwezens, nor interested in my connection to my homeland, my language or history, nor my Nishnaabeg intelligence. No one ever asked me what I was interested in nor did they ask for my consent to participate in their system. My experience of

education was one of continually being measured against a set of principles that required surrender to an assimilative colonial agenda in order to fulfill those principles. I distinctly remember being in Grade 3, at a class trip to the sugar bush, and the teacher showing us two methods of making maple syrup – the pioneer method, which involved a black pot over an open fire and clean sap, and the “Indian method”, which involved a hollowed out log in an unlit fire, with large rocks in the log to heat the sap up – sap which had bark, insects, dirt and scum over it. The teacher asked us which method we would use – being the only native kid in the class, I was the only one who chose the “Indian method”.

Things are different for Kwezens. She has already spent seven years immersed in a nest of Nishnaabeg intelligence. She already understands the importance of observation and learning from our animal teachers, when she watches the squirrel so carefully and then mimics its actions. She understands embodiment and conceptual thought, when she then takes this observation and

with love and trust. Kwezens watches as her mama uses the sap to boil the deer meat for supper. When she tastes the deer, the sweetness, she learns about reduction, and when her mama and her go to clean the pot, she learns about how sap can be boiled into sugar. Kwezens then takes her Elders to the tree already trusting that she will be believed, that her knowledge and discovery will be cherished, and that she will be heard.

Kwezens learned a tremendous amount over a two-day period – self-led, driven by both her own curiosity and her own personal desire to learn. She learned to trust herself, her family, and her community. She learned the sheer joy of discovery. She learned how to interact with the spirit of the maple. She learned both from the land and with the land. She learned what it felt like to be recognized, seen, and appreciated by her community. She comes to know maple sugar with the support of her family and Elders. She comes to know maple sugar in the context of love.

To me, this is what coming into wisdom within a Nishnaabeg context looks like. It takes



Photo Credit: Pat Kane

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson shares stories illustrating the Nishnaabeg concept of Kobade, the links in the web that connect all people in relationships to their ancestors, grandchildren, land, language, and way of life.

applies it to her own situation – by making a cut in the maple tree and using a cedar shunt. She relies upon her own creativity to invent new technology. She patiently waits for the sap to collect. She takes that sap home and shares it with her family. Her mother, in turn, meets her daughter’s discovery

place in the context of family, community, and relations. The land, aki, in this story, is a teacher, is knowledge, is medicine. Aki holds everything that is meaningful for Indigenous nations, peoples, communities, and families. Stories hold the land, and they connect us to the land. Younger citizens

might first just understand the literal meaning. As they grow, they put together the conceptual meaning; with more experience in our knowledge system, the metaphor. Then they start to apply the processes and practices of the story in their own

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lives – when I have a problem, I'll go to my aunts or my grandparents. After they live each stage of life through the story, then they can communicate their lived wisdom, understood through six or seven decades of lived experience and shifting meaning.

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Different versions of the story happen all over my territory every year in March when we return to the sugar bush. Kwezens is threatened by land theft, violence, pollution, global warming, school. But Kwezens is there anyway, making maple sugar as she has always done, in a loving compassionate reality, propelling us – propelling me – to re-create the circumstances within which this story and Nishnaabewin takes place. Kwezens challenges me to do the same and to not just dream alternative realities, but to create them, on the ground in the physical world, in spite of being occupied.

Kwezens brought maple sugar to the Nishnaabeg. The production of maple sugar has sustained our nation for generations. It is a cornerstone of our economy, a medicine. It holds stories and ceremony, and is a part of our system of governance. Kwezens, this little seven-year-old girl, changed her nation.

What if Kwezens had no access to the sugar bush because of land dispossession, environmental contamination, or climate change?

What if she was too depressed or anxiety-ridden from being erased from Canadian society, removed from her language and homeland,

targeted as a “squaw” or a “slut” or a “drunk Indian”?

What if the trauma and pain of ongoing colonial gendered violence had made it impossible for her mama to believe her or for her mama to reach out and so gently rub her lower back at that critical point?

What if that same trauma and pain prevented her aunts and Elders from gathering around and supporting her when there were technical difficulties?

What if colonial parenting strategies positioned a child as less believable than an adult?

What if Kwezens had been in a desk at a school that didn't honour at its core her potential within Nishnaabeg intelligence? Or if she had been in an educational context where having an open heart was a liability instead of a gift?

What if she had not been running around, exploring, experimenting, and observing the squirrel – completely engaged in a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg way of knowing? What if she hadn't been on the land at all?

What if Kwezens lived in a world where no one listened to girls? Or where she had been missing or murdered before she ever made it out to the sugar bush?



During Idle No More, which was a few years ago now, I kept getting asked the question, “What do you people want?” Sometimes it was asking nicely and sometimes not so nicely, and so I

I want my great grandchildren to be able to fall in love with every piece of our territory. I want their bodies to carry with them every story, every song, every piece of poetry hidden in our Nishnaabeg language.

thought, “You know what, maybe it's a really good thing to articulate in a very clear way what I want.”

I want my great grandchildren to be able to fall in love with every piece of our territory. I want their bodies to carry with them every story, every song, every piece of poetry hidden in our Nishnaabeg language.

I want them to be able to dance through their

lives with joy. I want them to live without fear because they know respect, because they know in their bones what respect feels like. I want them to live without fear because they have a pristine environment with clean waterways that will provide them with the physical and emotional

networks. It is a long kobade, cycling through time. It is a web of connections to each other, to the plant nations, the animal nations, the rivers and lakes, the cosmos, and our neighbouring Indigenous nations.

Kina Gchi Nishnaabeg-ogamig is an ecology of intimacy.



Summit participants watch the short film, 'How to Steal a Canoe,' by Amanda Strong featuring spoken lyrics by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and music by Cree cellist Cris Derksen.

sustenance to uphold their responsibilities to the land, their families, their communities, and their nations. I want them to be valued, heard, and cherished by our communities. I want my great, great grandchildren and their great, great grandchildren to be able to live as Mississauga Nishnaabeg, unharrassed and undeterred in our homeland.

The idea of my arms embracing my grandchildren and their arms embracing their grandchildren is communicated in the Nishnaabeg word, kobade. According to Elder Edna Manitowabi, kobade is a word we use to refer to our great grandparents and our great grandchildren. It means a link in a chain – a link in the chain between generations, between nations, between states of being, between individuals. I am a link in a chain. We are all links in a chain.

Doug Williams, a Mississauga Nishnaabeg Elder, calls our nation Kina Gchi Nishnaabeg-ogamig – the place where we all live and work together. Our nation is a hub of Anishinaabe

It is an ecology of relationships in the absence of coercion, hierarchy, or authoritarian power.

Kina Gchi Nishnaabeg-ogamig is connectivity based on the sanctity of the land, the love we have for our families, our language, our way of life. It is relationships based on deep reciprocity, respect, non-interference, self-determination, and freedom. Our nationhood is based on the idea

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It is nationhood based on a series of radiating responsibilities.

This is what I understand our diplomats were negotiating when settlers first arrived in our territory. This was the impetus for those very first treaties – Anishinaabe freedom, protection for the land and the environment, a space: an intellectual, political, spiritual, artistic, creative, and physical space where we could live as Anishinaabe, and where our kobade could do the same.

This is what my ancestors wanted for me, for us. They wanted for our generation to practice Anishinaabe governance over our homeland, to partner with other governments over shared lands, to have the ability to make decisions about how the gifts of our mother would be used for the benefit of our people and in a manner to promote her sanctity for coming generations. I believe my ancestors expected the settler state to recognize my nation, our lands, and the political and cultural norms in our territory.

My nationhood doesn't just radiate outwards, it also radiates inwards. It is my physical body, my mind, and my spirit. It is our families – not the nuclear family that has been normalized in settler society, but big, beautiful, diverse, extended multi-racial families of relatives and friends that care very deeply for each other.

This is the intense love of land, of family and of community that has always been the spine of Indigenous resistance. The fact that we're here today is a miracle because it means our families, like every Indigenous family, did whatever they could do to ensure that I survived the last 400 years of violence. In order for my kobade to survive and flourish the next 400 years, we need to join together in a rebellion of love, persistence, commitment, profound caring, and friendship. ●

**Editor's note: This piece has been edited for length and clarity.*

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Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is a renowned Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist, who has been widely recognized as one of the most compelling Indigenous voices of her generation. Leanne is the author of five books including Dancing on Our Turtles Back and Islands of Decolonial Love. Working for over a decade an independent scholar using Nishnaabeg intellectual practices, Leanne has lectured and taught extensively at universities across Canada and has 20 years of experience with Indigenous land-based education. She holds a PhD from the University of Manitoba, is currently faculty at the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, and is a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Ryerson University. Leanne is a band member of Alderville First Nation.