

## **Marvin DeFoe, Red Cliff Ojibwe, Minnesota**

Marvin DeFoe, a teacher, birch-bark maker and singer from Red Cliff, speaks about teaching and education, Ojibwe language preservation, making a birch bark canoe, connection to the land, and the balance of mind, body and spirit for good health.

When I first made wigwasjiiman, birch bark canoes, I was 18 years old, 17, 18. We did it for a project partly with our tribe, Red Cliff tribe, and the National Park Service.

When I was 18 years old, there was an opportunity to work with... to do interpretation for the public and to learn birch bark canoe skills with the group of us from our tribe, Red Cliff. We got together and more or less taught ourselves the art of canoe building. So we made several canoes that year. There was myself and Sammy Nowago and Barry Sky and Ron Depairie and Steve Baz, about five of us from our tribe made a canoe.

We gathered the material all locally, and we didn't really have an elder teaching us. So we, it was more like, your thoughts were how did our people make canoes, and that's what it was. So we just tried it. The first canoe we made, you probably couldn't stay afloat in it, not that it would sink, but the bottom was pretty round and you kept flipping over. But we kept trying. We never gave up. We got to do something a little different, so we changed it and changed it.

Once you start something, you generate an interest in it and you have an interest in it, so you want to know more about it. So you seek, then. You begin to seek that knowledge. So I went around and visited elders from different tribes, and it surprised me that when they were younger their grandfathers, their families made canoes. So they started telling me stories about that. Then we start asking questions, "Well, how did you do this?" And they would start telling you how it's done. So we take that knowledge and I'd apply it to what I know, and it keeps getting better.

Like I said before, it has been 21 years since I've first made my first canoe. I probably, usually make one every year. I remember the first canoe we made. We did a ceremony, put your tobacco out, and you feast it. And I remember going out on the lake, out on Lake Superior, where I lived, Red Cliff. It was like that lake smiled, the soul of the lake kind of smiled because the canoe once again floated on its water. It was a really good feeling.

Whenever you make anything, you always put yourself into it; you put yourself into the canoe. But it's like, I don't just go out and gather bark. Everything comes from the wood, your

bark, your cedar, you roots, your pitch, you put it on there. But the most important thing is that you give reverence, you give reverence to that bark, that tree. It's a feeling that's when you're talking to that tree, and you're asking that tree to have a piece of it's skin, if I could have your skin because I want to make canoe. Put tobacco down, just like I come up to a person and ask them for their skin. It's a feeling that I have for the tree, for all trees and particularly that tree.

You are using it to make something to use. It's like our people have used birch bark for centuries, ever since the beginning of the time we were here. Birch bark, wigwams, bark... It's like that tree is a sacred tree, all trees are, but birch to me is a little more because it was given to us to use to protect our families, our wigwams. Wigwams are made with birch bark; to protect our family we use that. Our canoes travel, to travel with on the water. We never had cars. We used canoes. It is a major mode of transportation. Our baskets, we make our makaks, our baskets, to hold our rice, to protect our rice. Our containers... You can even cook in birch bark. Cooking vessels, heat little rocks, put up in there, or you can boil water on the bark. Even our people use that in ceremonies, a lot of ceremonies we use this bark; there are many uses that was given to us, this bark.

But we don't own that, the spirits they own that. We are asking to use that. Just like the cedar we gather... I've done that. I've made a lot of people say, "You've never had knives like this, how come you're using that knife?" or you might use a drill. But the method we use remains the same. What do you want me to do, do you want me to sit here and make this in buckskin? Yeah, I like wearing boots, does that make you any less Indian, Anishinaabe? I don't think so, it's what's in your heart. It's what you do.

Going back, I remember the very first time putting that canoe in the water, and ever since then, every canoe is like that, to me, every one. I just think it has a spirit of it's own, that you're creating, you're making, it's got a spirit of it's own. And why do we do these things? They say, "Why are you making canoes?" Why do we do our traditional things that our ancestors have done, that maybe some of our grandfathers have done? We are doing things today that our people are still doing. There are still people that make canoes, wigwasjiiman, there's still amongst the tribes of the Ojibwe nation, but there's very few. There are still people that put their babies in cradleboards, tikinaagan. There are still families that do that, but there's very few that still do that. There's some families even take care of their (the baby's) belly button very few that do that.

There are very few people that still speak our language, Anishinaabemowin, there still a few, but we still do that. There's a few people that still do ceremonies. There's very few.

And why are we doing this? You know, I often think that: How are we going to be in the year 2020? In 2020, how are we going to be? Are we still going to live our life? Are there still going to be people making canoes or doing the ceremonies, and how are we going to survive? Is there still people taking that deer and preparing that deer the way we prepared it? Are there still people that have knowledge of that? Or to catch a fish, to go out there and catch a fish with your hand, are there people that can still do that? How about rabbits?

A lot of people think that, I for one am for education and all that, I believe that too. It's good to have doctors that know how to write and do all that stuff. But I think it's important as a nation that our people still learn and still retain our ways of survival. I think that's important. Because a lot of times you see the old people, the elders, the ones who still retain, who are still doing the ceremonies that our people have done for hundreds of years. A lot of times, you won't see them with a college education, you don't see them with that, so that just the importance.

Well, I do this. I spend a lot of time in the woods, and it's not just making canoes. I go hunting. I like hunting. I go ricing. I like ricing. I go fishing, doing a bunch of different things.

One time I was out ricing, ricing on the water, it was a whole field of rice, a whole lake of rice. Me and my pa were the only ones out there, only ones out there. You can just watch that rice fall in your canoe, and, gee, you feel good. And you figure, if this is all a person had to do, if this is all a person had to do was to rice, if this is all the Anishinaabe had to do was to go and get your deer and feed your family, life would be so much easier. And I kind of call that, when I try to teach the young people to call that McDonalds syndrome, too much fast, fast food, fast this, you got to eat that. Kids, people know how to get a hamburger, but they don't know how to cook it. Where does that come from? It's more of what was given to us the Anishinaabe. It was the only canoe on that lake ricing. Where did all the Anishinaabe go? Where are they? There is tons of rice. How come there aren't more out there doing that? How come there aren't more tanning our hides, you know, more of our people. That is the way that is given to us from the creator. He gives us that so we need to keep that going.

I think the relationship is, again that is what is given to us, for us to use. Medicine will leave the area if we don't use it, just like the animals, if we don't take care of them. Use it properly, in a way properly, the way it is it's going to leave us. It will leave you, just like us,

walking around here, here I am to work and do all this now. If you don't ask me to help you, pretty soon I'll say, "Well, you don't need me, I guess I'll go." That's what happens to a lot of the... life today isn't what it used to be. Things change. The trees have changed, even the grass, even that grass is getting shorter, is different. You talk to them old people, and even the rice is leaving, it's leaving them lakes. Part of it could be, yes, the environment. Birch trees are dying. I travel all around Lake Superior and look at the birch trees. They're dying, they're leaving, they're dying.

One time I was in Red Cliff driving around with some young men, and a deer came out, and there were asking all kinds of questions. They said, "What would you do if that was the last deer that ever lived? What would you do if that was the last deer that walked this earth that ever lived?" Then I said, "Well, you know what I'd do, if that was the last deer that ever lived, I would die with that deer. We'd be no more." I said, "I would go right with that deer. If it was the last tree that stood, I would go right with that tree, or no more rice, there would be no more. If there was one person left who spoke our language," I said, "I would have to go with that person. We'd be no more. We'd be no more. We wouldn't be a nation. We'd be gone."

So there are us people who have to keep that going. It isn't just a canoe, it's everything. It's the language. It's your ceremonies, the things you do to make you Anishinaabe, Anishinaabe, the things that make you who you are. Slowly it's going. Lake Superior where I live, "Used to be able to drink that water," an old man said, "Seventy years ago, pure as you could see right through it, pure." Today it's getting a little foggy. It's going. The earth, it's changing, stuff is falling from the sky that kills the trees, deer are getting cancer. The guy back home, he shot four deer, each deer had cancer, four of them, had growths sticking out the side of that deer, cancer.

Particularly with the bark, you can gather birch bark without killing the tree. You can do that, but you got to be careful. You just cut right on the surface of the first layer of the bark, cut on there in the summertime, and it pops right off. And that will grow back; the bark will grow back on the tree. You won't kill the tree at all. You won't kill it if you're careful. But sometimes when you make canoe, there are about 16 different kinds of bark, yellow birch, black birch, white birch, different bark for different things, but canoe bark...big, if you can find the bigger the better. It's hard finding them nowadays. One tree for one canoe, it's hard where I live.

I was out there one time gathering bark, was going to get one tree, cut down there, some people stopped me and they were kind of upset with me, "You're damaging that tree." Well I

said, "I'm going to make a basket." Then I looked across the road. Across the road there was probably 150 acres, slashed, all the trees were cut down because they wanted one tree. They wanted to get wood for their houses, logging. And I said, "Well what about all of them trees? This is only one." "Well, this one doesn't look good." "Well, look at all of them." And I just wonder if they put tobacco down for them trees. We fail to forget that. If you look in our houses, sometimes look up in your house. And look at the wood that's in your house. The trees that give up their lives for us, not just Anishinabe people, but all people.

Yeah, I often hear the old people, the elders talk how life was, but even in my eye, yes, 20 years ago, I could see a lot of people, I know on our tribe having a strong interest in our culture, not just canoes, singing, drumming, dancing, learning the language, learning our Anishinaabe language, more families picking it up, learning it and retaining it and practicing and living it, living that life. Yeah, there is more, even here, there is a strong interest in our identity, our identity, who we are as Anishinaabe.

Yes, I do a lot of teaching with kids. It is important because a lot of times I've found they're always searching, always searching for something. And I think all of us, we're all searching for who we are, how did we come to be, who we are and where do we fit in. I've found that working with youth and alcohol, drugs, mental health or whatever you want to call it really helps.

What really helps is utilizing the strengths of our culture, the strengths of the tribe, no matter what it is, and showing them and teaching them. What does it mean to be Anishinabe? Why do we sing? Why do we have drums? Why do we dance? Why is it important to take care of that deer that we have, and show them and teach them. How do you make a net? How do you make a net to fish, to catch their fish? You'd be surprised how many people don't know these things, and what I've found is they begin to know where they fit in. Instead of listening to rap music, pretty soon they start listening to pow wow music because there is nobody there teaching them, showing them. If more of us had done that, then pretty soon you plant a seed, and pretty soon then that person then teaches.

There are kids I've worked with in Red Cliff since they were young. Today now there are probably about three or four of them teaching, doing the same thing I did. They are 18 years old, 19, teaching, working with kids, showing them how to sing. It really makes me feel good that I was a part of that. The high school kids that I've worked with, for instance, will go into Head

Start now. They're going into Head Start and they're teaching the young kids how to sing. So it's a start, and it's just going to grow, and pretty soon...

Like I said, what are we going to be like in 2020? How is our life going to be? Are there going to be more people doing this? Maybe in 2020, nobody's going to be able to drive a car. We're going to run out of gas, but we'll still have canoes. We'll still be able to survive. I think we'll... through all the history and all that the Anishinaabe have been through, I think we'll survive. We'll be around. That's what my dad used to say. He used to say, "Look at that, a white man is still going to the moon, and the Anishinaabe, we're still burning wood." And I still burn wood, I've never been to the moon, but we're still burning wood.

What am I hoping for? My hope for the future is to work with people so that more Anishinaabe are living a healthy life and happy...

I got invited to the White Earth reservation to make and teach birch bark canoe building with the program. It's just a part time program that I'm doing. And one of the things I like to do is to share. I'll share my skills with the Anishinaabe, the ones that want to learn. So we've been here for about six weeks, doing a canoe project, working with anyone who would like to come in and learn the skill of making birch bark canoes. That's what I'm doing here.

Again, what I said is to, what I hope for the future, the... all people... for all of us to be healthy and to be happy with whatever we are doing. My hope for the future for myself is to help make people healthy and to teach the skills that I am best at so I can share that with the people, and that we all work together in developing that so that our nation can survive, can continue to survive. To be good at, and to help with the young people, to be good at with what they're doing. If you're going to be a good fisherman, you be a good fisherman, but be happy, be happy doing that. If you want to be a doctor, then be a good doctor, but be happy doing that. If you want to learn the language, learn the language and be good at it. Do your best. We need young people learning those things for all of us. So that is my hope for the future, and I think to do those things, then the Anishinaabe, we will have a future.

Our language, yes, definitely language is important to us, and for those of us who were not given the opportunity to learn, in my family, is it was, because of the history, everybody knows that story, but I think we need to re-learn our language because that is who we are. That is who we are, and it gives us an identity as a people, who we are through our language, who we communicate to. I would've probably started sooner in my younger years learning the language

because eventually you get stuck. You stop if you don't know your language. You're going to stop because you won't be able to do the ceremony. You got to be able to talk to the spirits in your language, so you get stopped if you don't know your language. Then to communicate, for our people to communicate with our environment the way Anishinaabe see the environment because that's the language they speak. They speak the Anishinaabe language.