

Adapted from “Notes of a Translator’s Son”  
by Joseph Bruchac

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[1] The best teachers have showed me that things have to be done bit by bit. The motion of drawing back a bow and sending an arrow straight into a target takes only a split second, but it is a skill many years in the making. And if I can tell an old-time story now about a man who is walking about, *waudjosef ndatlokugan*, a forest lodge man, *alesakamigwi udlagwedewugan*, it is because I spent many years walking about myself, listening to voices that came not just from the people but from animals and trees and stones.

[2] Who am I? My name is Joseph Bruchac. The given name is that of a Christian saint. The surname is from my father’s people. Yet my identity has been affected less by European ancestry and Christian teachings than by that small part of my blood which is American Indian and which comes to me from a grandfather who raised me. I have other names as well. One of those names is Quiet Bear. Another, given me by Dewasentah, Clan Mother at Onondaga, is *Gah-neh-go-he-yo*. It means “the Good Mind.” There are stories connected to those names, stories for another time.

[3] I can only go onward by going back to where my memories begin. How many memories of my childhood are my own and not those someone else had of me and told me about when I was older? The memory of me climbing the ladder, unafraid and right behind the old man, when I was only two, was my grandfather’s. But it was recited about me so often that it became inseparably associated with my thoughts of my childhood. I know that I always dreamed of flight. I still do fly in my dreams. And though I’ve had some spectacular falls, I still love high places, cliffs and trees and resounding waterfalls. I inherited that fearlessness about high places and dying from my grandfather, just as I inherited certain stories. Here is one of them which is as much a part of my own fabric as if I had been there when that day was being woven:

*I only went to school until I was in third grade.*

*What happened then, Grampa?*

*I jumped out the window of the school and never came back.*

*Why?*

*I got in a fight with a boy who called me an Indian.*

[4] I was always close to my grandfather. He delighted in telling how I was his shadow, how I carried my stick just like a spear and followed him everywhere. But, close as I was, he would never speak of the Indian blood which showed so strongly in him. I have a tape recording we made soon after we returned to live with him.

*Are you Indian, Grampa?*

*No.*

*Then why is your skin so dark?*

*Cause I'm French. Us French is always dark.*

[5] Yet I was conscious of the difference, of the way people looked at me when I was with my grandfather. When I was a freshman at Cornell University he came to visit, bringing two of my friends from high school, David Phillips and Tom Furlong. They spent two nights in the dorm, all of them sleeping in my room. My grandfather told everyone that David was my younger brother. They looked at my grandfather and then, more slowly, at me. David was black. When they asked me if it was true, I said, "What do you think?" When the fraternity rushing week came later that semester, I was on more than one "black list."

*O my God, Joe, that's Grampa sitting there by the coffin!*

[6] I looked at the old man sitting in the front row in Burke's Funeral Home, right next to my grandfather's casket, and my own heart clenched its fist. Then the man looked at us. His face was younger and slightly less dark than that of his last surviving older brother. It was Jack Bowman. Though he lived in Lake George, the home of a more or less underground community of Abenaki Indian people even today, we had never met him before. In the year we had to get to know Jack before his own heart found a weak aorta, we heard more stories about my grandfather and his family. We also heard some of the denials of Indian ancestry, even though Jack offered no more of an explanation than his brother had for my grandfather's cutting himself off from his own side of the family after he married my grandmother, a woman of high education whose marriage to a semi-illiterate and dark-skinned hired man of her father's sparked scandalized comment.

[7] After Jack's death his wife Katherine fessed up. Yes, she said, Jack and Jesse were Indian. Everyone knew the Bowmans were Indian. She put it into writing and signed her name. It is the closest thing to a tribal registration that I will ever have. But it is enough, for I want to claim no land, no allotments, only part of myself.

[8] There are many people who could claim and learn from their Indian ancestry, but because of the fear their parents and grandparents knew, because of past and present prejudice against Indian people, that part of their heritage is clouded or denied. Had I been raised on other soil or by other people, my Indian ancestry might have been less important, less shaping. I was raised in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains near a town whose spring waters were regarded as sacred and healing by the Iroquois and Abenaki alike. This is my dreaming place. Only my death will separate it from my flesh.

[9] I've avoided calling myself "Indian" most of my life, even when I have felt that identification most strongly, even when people have called me an "Indian." Unlike my grandfather, I have never seen that name as an insult, but there is another term I like to use. I heard it first in Lakota and it refers to a person of mixed blood, a *metis*. In English it becomes "Translator's Son." It is not an insult, like *half-breed*. It means that you are able to understand the language of both sides, to help them understand each other.

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