"The Year the Roses Died"

Gichi-mewinzha gii-oshki-niiging akiing, a very long time ago, when the earth was new, there was a horrible year that was remembered as "The Year the Roses Died." In that long-ago time a large number of animals depended on the roses for their food. But that spring there were no roses, not on the wide prairie, not in the mountain meadows nor in the most hidden forest glade. The roses were gone. When the animals realized the roses were really not going to grow that spring, there was a great outcry and a call for a council meeting to determine what had happened and, most important, "who did it?"

The *waawaashkeshiwag,* the deer, lowering their antlered heads with great dignity, said that they knew it was the *bineshiinyag,* the little birds, who were responsible, because they had seen them eating the flowers.

The bineshiinyag flew to a branch in the middle of the clearing and chirped, "We may have eaten a few flowers, but it was really the *aamoog,* the bees, who were responsible, because they ate the pollen."

The aamoog buzzed angrily. "We did taste a little of the pollen but it is really the *memengwaag,* the butterflies, who are responsible, because they left their eggs on the roses, and their caterpillars hatched and ate all of the leaves."

The memengwaag flitted. "We had to have some nursery for our children, and they were hungry when they were born, but it was really the waawaashkeshiwag who ate the stems."

The waawaashkeshiwag said, "We ate a few of the stems, but it was *Waabooz,* Rabbit, who dug up and ate the roots."

All of the animals turned and looked at Waabooz, and then they all jumped him. They grabbed his tail and broke it off, and that is the reason why to this day *waaboozoog,* rabbits, have such tiny tails. Then *Ma'iingan,* Wolf, grabbed one ear, and *Ma'iinganens,* Coyote, grabbed the other. *Esiban,* Raccoon, grabbed one of his back legs, and *Ginebig,* Snake, wrapped his long body around the other. And they pulled and they pulled

while Waabooz howled. That is the reason why to this day his ears are so long and his legs are so stretched out.

They probably would have killed Waabooz, but *Makwa,* Black Bear, rose up on his hind legs, swaying side to side, and growled, "All right! Drop the waabooz! I don't like him much either, but Creator must have had some purpose for him, or Creator wouldn't have bothered creating him."

Just then the *Manidoo,* Spirit, whose job it was to watch over that place, rose up and said, "What seems to be the problem?"

"Well," said Makwa, softening his growl to show respect, "you see, Your Honor, it has been determined that Waabooz is responsible for the disappearance of the roses."

The Manidoo said, "Killing the Waabooz will not bring back the roses. You all noticed that the roses were in trouble, and you all decided to take your own shares even if it meant killing the roses forever. There is no honor in this. This is not keeping creation in balance as you were told to do in the Beginning Time."

All the animals hung their heads because they knew that the Manidoo was right.

"Well," said the Manidoo. "I will bring the roses back, but this time I am going to give them protection so you won't be tempted to eat them up entirely again. And I am also going to leave Waabooz as he is so that you will always be reminded of the disgrace of forgetting the balance."

So now, when we see the thorns on the roses and the poor misshaped waabooz, we are reminded of the Year the Roses Died.

Mii iw, Miigwech, That's it, thank you.

The Primacy of Plants

The story of "The Year the Roses Died" embodies the teaching of the place of plants in the order of life on *Gidakiiminaan,* our Earth, whom we call *Ninga,* "my own mother." We are told that humankind was the last created, the youngest, and therefore the most dependent of all the different forms of life. This is really no different from what non-native science teaches. Plants are the source of life on this planet. Without plants, the rocks would not break down into soil. Without plants to take the sunlight into their own bodies and by the use of chlorophyll trap the light of the sun into a usable form of energy, no animal life could survive. Plants take in carbon dioxide and make oxygen for all animals to

breathe. If plants are not here, neither are we. We are all in this life together and to survive we must all survive.

The Anishinaabeg have always believed that the ultimate good is a bountiful land that could and would supply all that humankind needs to sustain life. This planet of ours has four orders of life. The first created, the elder brothers[1] are the Earth forces: the minerals, the rocks, the wind and the rain and the snow and the thunder beings and all of the rest of the beings we refer to as weather, and the *Aadizookaanag,* the Grandfathers and Grandmothers, our ceremonies, songs, and traditional stories. The second created, the second brothers, are the plants: the trees, the greeners and the non-greeners. The third created are the nonhuman animals, the four-leggeds, the flyers, the creepers and the crawlers and those who swim. The fourth created, the youngest brothers, and therefore the most vulnerable, are human beings. All four orders of life are interconnected. None can survive without the others except for those of the first order, and if they had to survive alone they would not be happy because they could not do as Creator directed everyone to do in the Beginning Time. They could not take care to see that all of life continued as Creator had intended.

This philosophy sees humankind as the weakest because they alone need all three of the other orders of life to survive at all. Humans are not at the top of the order of creation. Humans are not the lords of this earth. We are at the bottom because we are the most dependent.

Modern society does not think much about the other orders of life. Perhaps that started to happen when we no longer had to hunt for our meat and till the soil for our vegetables and grains. When we removed ourselves from the lives of our ancestors and found other ways, more artificial ways of being, we could begin to disregard the harmony that has sustained us this far. Safe in cities, getting our meat in cellophane-wrapped packages in the supermarket and our fruit and vegetables and our grains in paper bags, we could forget about our elder brothers the animals and the plants. But we forget them to our peril, for we cannot survive without them. Only the rocks and the thunder beings and those other life-forms of the first created order can survive alone. We are the babies of this family of ours. We are the weakest because we are the most dependent. We should remember that more often, or the time will come when the rocks and the thunderers will be grieving and here on this beautiful planet all by themselves.

1 For "brothers," read "brothers and sisters." Language changes constantly. When I was a child learning English, we understood that the name of our species was "man." It did not imply that only males were meant. It meant that our kind of animal was called "man," and that it included both male and female. Personally, I resist attempts to change the language for the political interests of one particular group or another. I miss the female part of our language that is being eliminated by well meaning folk who think that by calling a woman who writes poetry a "poet" instead of a "poetess" we will somehow eliminate the very real discrimination against women that exists in our time. If I thought that women would be instantly granted full citizenship and economic rights if I stopped saying "shepherdess," "inheritrix," or "seamstress," I would of course do so. I just do not think the problems we face are that simple. To destroy the female parts of the language to hasten an undefined political end just seems dumb to me. I also think it is a smokescreen to keep women from demanding change. In my time I have seen brilliant women spend their life's energy trying to have the Bible rewritten into gender-neutral language, when they could have been working on the social conditions that affect women. This problem is one of English, not our Anishinaabe language. In *Anishinaabemowin,* the Ojibwe language, there is no "he" or "she." The third person singular is both male and female. The person speaking and the person listening are supposed to be smart enough to know which is implied. Further, in Anishinaabemowin, the *Manidoog,* spirits, are neither and both male and female.

We are all in this together. For one part of creation to survive it must all survive. I have nightmares about the glaciers melting in Alaska and the permafrost in the Northwest Territories. How different our fates would be if those who now have the power on Turtle Island knew and believed the legends. Sometimes I wonder where the people who have the power expect to go if they succeed in destroying this land? Do they think they will just find another place to pillage the way their ancestors found the Americas? They might be in for a shock if they intend migrating to Mars or even further. They might read about the scientific experiments that were worked on the international space station. One experiment told about salamanders who were born and grown in space. There was something wrong with their nervous system. Some scientists speculate that the salamanders were somehow affected because they were cut off from the electrical pulses that the Earth gives off. Removed from here they did not make it elsewhere. We are all children of this same Great Mother. As Kee always said, "Blessings and balance. Balance and blessings, for from balance comes all blessings."

I know for myself, in my own life, all of the Anishinaabe lessons on the interconnectedness of all things goes beyond vague ecological fears and/or popular sentiments. I know from pure personal observations over the past half century and more that my personal actions have repercussions in my own life as well as in the lives of those around me. I know that if I kick someone in a fit of temper at noon, I can expect to be kicked myself. And the kick that I get back will come quickly, and it will not be in proportion to the kick I dealt. I will be lucky if the kick I get does not break my leg, and I usually get it before the sun goes down. I also know that my own health and the health of those I love are intimately connected to my actions. I do not just mean that if I do not feed my family enough vegetables they will get more colds. I mean that my respect for power, traditions, and ceremonies, or my lack thereof, will result in the health and the "luck" of me and mine. This has been brought home to me most forcefully in regard to my own health. Once I participated in a ceremony that I was worried was not being performed properly. Within hours I had pneumonia, and it became double pneumonia before I put two and two together and made amends. My health problems occurred even though the "fault" and/or misdeeds of the people involved were in no way my doing. I am sure that I have often simply stepped in all innocence into the disharmony created by others. I am always, however, grateful to take the harm on myself

because I have my daughters and my husband and many other people whom I love. If harm is to come to one of us I am glad if it comes to me and not them. Our old ways tell us that health is directly connected to the harmony of creation. One does not always gather only what one personally sows. Sometimes we gather what others around us have planted and nurtured. Innocence is not protection!

This worldview that tells me I can get sick because someone else creates disharmony by lack of respect for power is not the worldview of the greater society. It does, however, come close to the branch of physics called quantum mechanics. My favorite quote about that discipline says, "If anyone tells you they understand quantum mechanics, they are lying." Periodically I try to understand it myself, even though there was a definite lack of non-native mathematics and sciences in my education. The part of it that I find similar to our *Anishinaabe-inendamowin*, Anishinaabe mindset or worldview, is the experiments on subatomic particles that seem to suggest that the attitude of the researchers can have a direct effect on the subatomic particles that they are studying. If they measure them, the particles will react in the way the researchers are expecting them to. It seems that the very act of observing the particles has a direct result on their actions. "If you build it he will come." "If you measure it, it will do what you are expecting it to do." It might be a stretch, but to me it tends toward our Anishinaabe view of reality that the actions and even the thoughts of the person can "change" reality, and not just the reality of the person doing the thinking or the acting. *It can change all reality.*[2]

All of the above taken together means for me that reality is not concrete. It is fluid. And that fluidity is influenced by personal actions, words, and thoughts. Ripples go out from our deeds and our words, spoken or unspoken. What we do, even what we think, changes what happens. It changes reality for everyone. No wonder we are in such a mess. If all that is true, I guess we are pretty lucky to still be treading water in the world. It does behoove one, however, to be eternally thankful to Those Who Protect Us. Without Them? . . . It is not even to be imagined!

2 Kee often made the comparison between Anishinaabe philosophy and subatomic particles in her lectures.

How Do We Know This? or the Descent of Our Knowledge

When reading this account of the ethnobotany of the Anishinaabeg it may occur to the reader to ask, "How do these people know this stuff?" Some of the information has been in the

literature of plants since Early Contact Days with Europeans, but much of it is not in the literature at all. Some of it is hinted at in dusty ethnology reports in the basements of research libraries, but the rest of the information simply is not reported in the professional literature at all.

So where did the authoress get all of this? I got all of the information contained in these pages, with the exceptions that are clearly marked with footnote citations, from Keewaydinoquay. I am not proud of my ignorance, but when I came to Kee I knew one plant, a dandelion, and then I was only sure of that identification if the plant was in bloom and growing on my front lawn. Other than that I was a clean slate that Kee wrote upon at her leisure. And where did Kee get her knowledge? She was apprenticed in the old way to Nodjimahkwe of Cathead Point Village, Leelanau Peninsula, Michigan, circa 1920s, an old and honored Anishinaabe mashkikiiwikwe, when Kee was nine years of age. She continued to work with and for her mashkikiiwikwe until Nodjimahkwe's death.

So, where did Nodjimahkwe get her information? Kee was present in Nodjimahkwe's kitchen in the late 1920s or early 1930s, when a researcher who said he was from the Smithsonian Institution interviewed Nodjimahkwe and was given the descent of her knowledge. In the old days an apprentice learned to recite the names of her teacher's teacher's teachers, and Nodjimahkwe could recite hers, and mine, back four hundredyears. Kee said she had always meant to commit the list to memory, but she never did. She always thought she had the time to do it later, until Nodjimahkwe died. But Kee always took comfort in the fact that she thought the list was safe in the keeping of the Smithsonian Institution.

Any way I look at this, it spells a very old tradition. Kee always said that the real value of our medicinal knowledge was the fact that it had been tried and tested on human subjects, not rats, and that it had been gathered and retained for thousands of years. Indians are nothing if not a pragmatic people. They do not keep what is not valuable. To have retained and kept and utilized knowledge for that long a time, it stands to reason that the People down through the ages thought it valuable because it was effective in making their lives and the lives of their children easier.

But where did the *Gete-Anishinaabeg,* the Old-time Indians, get the information that they passed along in this manner? There is a lot of academic speculation on that question. I can say

absolutely, however, that it was not gathered by the use of what is called The Doctrine of Signatures. That is a European idea and concept that says that people learned medicine knowledge by observing the shape of plants and deciding by such observation that a certain plant or part of a plant would cure a certain part of the human body because the shape of the plant's leaf or root, etc. was similar in shape to that corresponding part of the person. The Doctrine of Signatures says God put a "signature" or "writing" or "clue" to the benefit of a certain plant within the growing structure of that plant that a person could read as if it were written in a book. This is a doctrine that Medieval and Renaissance Europeans believed in, and it is perpetuated down to the present day in the herbals that those early botanists wrote.

But that is not how the Anishinaabeg learned this medicinal knowledge. Kee always said that if one followed that doctrine in our land they would soon graze themselves into an early grave. She said if a person believed that and simply turned their apprentices loose to go try out the plants in the forest, they would very quickly be in need of a new batch of apprentices. A single bite of Water-Hemlock, *Cicuta maculata,* will kill. The mushrooms called Destroying Angel, *Amanita virosa,* and Death Cap, *Amanita phalloides,* both would kill with great effectiveness if a person just ate them willy-nilly. Kee always said, "There is no place in ethnobotany for a mistake. Dead is dead, and there is no degree of 'deadness'." One has to know what plant one is taking to use as medicine or as food. To just go merrily along trusting to the idea that one will know a poison by the way that it looks would be to invite disaster.

So if our people did not use the Doctrine of Signature to decide which plants would cure what human ills, how did they know? How did they accumulate this knowledge to pass it along for their descendants to follow? I was taught that there is both a spiritual aspect of this kind of discovery and a practical, physical part of it, too. One is a spiritual idea and one is a physical idea. The spiritual idea is that the mashkikiiwininiwag and the mashkikiiwikwewag of old were gifted with this knowledge by direct spirit gift when they were told these things in their dreams and in vision. Do I believe that? Of course I do. Once one has had vision one believes in it absolutely. But was that the only way or the final way that the plants were known to be effective? No! One gets the idea in vision or dream, but one then tests the knowledge. In the old days it was considered a fine and brave thing to be the one

to offer to test such knowledge for the good of all of the People. Often old people would offer themselves as human subjects to test the particular plant or medicine. Now Anishinaabeg are practical people. If a plant killed Grandfather, of course, one did not also then feed it to the new babe. And this accumulated medicinal knowledge was tested and retested on human beings probably for millennia. Absolutely none of the modern, scientifically discovered, tested, and approved medicinals can say the same.

So how was this knowledge kept after it was gathered in this method? It was kept by means of the master–apprentice model of education, where a trained and practicing medicine person would take an oshkaabewis who was gifted with the knowledge bit by bit in return for their help in the gathering and preparing of medicines and in the physical cures of the patients. One can think of it as very similar to the modern way of teaching medical doctors who work as residents in hospitals after a period of instruction to learn the practical and finer parts of their craft from other professionals. This master–apprenticeship model was, in some parts of Anishinaabe country, directed and controlled by the Midewiwin. One could think of the Midewiwin as corresponding to the accreditation program of the American Medical Association.[3]

This knowledge was also encoded and preserved in our Aadizookaanag. Our Aadizookaanag are our "Library of Alexandria," our "Library of Congress," the repository of our oldest and most valuable knowledges, encoded and transmitted to us in easily remembered forms that Their knowledge and wisdom may be kept by all of the People for the benefit of the People down through the centuries and for centuries into the future.

3 The Midewiwin is concerned with the spiritual and mental health of the People as well as their physical well-being, or as we would say, it is concerned with the total health of the patient and the People and Creation.

Talking to Plants

It is not an easy task to put all of the philosophy, mindset, and worldview of a people into a few words, let alone to do so on behalf of a whole people. Nevertheless, I must try to describe enough of Anishinaabe-inendamowin for my readers to understand the place of the blessed plants in the universe as our people traditionally thought about them.

All things created are alive. Some of the things created by humans are combinations of many beings. But the beings whom Creator made are all alive. They are different life-forms. They reproduce and grow differently than humans. They talk

differently than humans. They Pass Over[4] differently than humans. Rocks are a good example. Their life span is so very much longer than ours; it is no wonder we are such different beings. The rocks are the bones of our Mother the Earth. Their language and ways of being are very much different from ours. I often think about how the rocks must view us. We are so temporary in this world. Our whole lifetimes are so short compared to that of a rock. Do they even know we are here unless we talk to them? Are we just a momentary buzzing in the perception of something that has existed for so many, many eons? How does a rock multiply? One can think about it as rock-sex. They do break apart and come together again to create more of their kind. One can begin to understand that by watching, really watching, a lake. Watching and truly seeing the world around us might help us realize that we have a purpose in the world, too. And it might help us realize how much harm humans can do to the balance when they see themselves as the only beings on this planet. Kee spoke of the rocks' teaching that was given one Summer Solstice to the People. The rocks said, "You humans are so very slow to learn!"

Creator created balance in the beginning. There is not much interest in Anishinaabe-inendamowin in the nature of Creator. It just does not matter much to the Anishinaabeg what Creator is, whether male of female or both or neither. The People just did not think it necessary to explain Creator. What is necessary is to acknowledge Creator and the idea of balance that Creator wove into the fabric of our universe.

All the parts of creation have special jobs. Each species has special jobs. Each individual has special jobs. All of the different orders of life, all of the different species, and individuals have both a physical and a spiritual purpose. And all of the jobs are necessary if the whole of creation is to be kept in balance.

The plants always know their place in the cycle of life. They are always willing to serve their fellow beings, for we are all brothers and sisters in the cycle together. The plants are closer than we to Creator because they were created before mankind. They are willing to give themselves to maintain the harmony, but they are owed the honor of being *asked* for their sacrifice.

Whenever it is necessary to change the balance as we find it, we have to talk to the individuals involved to get their consent to the change. We have to talk to the rocks if we want to crush them into gravel to make our walkway. We have to ask the earth if we

4 Passing Over is the traditional way of speaking about death. Kee always said, "There is no death. There is just a change of form."

want to place our home in a certain place. We have to talk to the plants if we want to obtain their help in the healing of ourselves or of another being.

In the beginning one might feel silly talking to a plant. But one will soon get used to the idea. It will even get to be fun. Nodjimahkwe said that the trick is just to think about the plants or the individual rocks or the individual animals as the other "persons" that they are.

When one accepts the gift of the plant one is asking that plant to become him or her. Speak to the plant and tell it who needs it. Ask before taking. Promise that the plant's grandchildren will live after it and that you will protect them in that place. To fulfill this promise, one must know how that plant reproduces. Never take the only individual plant of its kind in an area, for the plant is trying to establish itself there. If one feels that one does not have a choice, that a death will occur if one does not take that plant, then one is morally obliged to see to it that the plant is reintroduced and protected in the spot from which one took it. But, usually, if there is one plant in an area there will be others, too. Just look and make sure before taking the plant; then you will know how much you personally owe to that plant. It is always wise to know the price before one incurs the debt.

One time Kee was spending the winter alone on *Minis-kit-igaan,* Garden Island, in the middle of Lake Michigan. As luck would have it, she slipped and broke her leg. As she had no means of calling the mainland for help, she had to set the leg herself. She had some dried boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*) in her cabin, so she made it into tea, and she drank all of it. Then as soon as she could get around again on a crutch, she stripped the island of growing boneset. At the time she felt she had no choice but to take all of the boneset she could find, because she had to heal the leg if she was to get by until she could get medical help. But after that she spent the rest of her life purposely sowing boneset all over the island. Her friends and students who heard that story would send her envelopes full of boneset seed, which she would lovingly take out to her island and sow in spots she thought boneset would like. In her need she took the boneset, but she well repaid her debt.

When taking a plant be sure to ask for both a spiritual as well as a physical healing for oneself or one's patient. Nodjimahkwe said the reason people would go to "The House of Many Windows," the hospital, and come back seeming to be cured, only

to just get sick again, was because the healer had only worried about the physical and not the spiritual healing of the person. The plants have both spiritual and physical healing to offer. It is just necessary to ask for the help they can give. Talking to a plant is valuable because it will make one feel connected to the plant, to the cycle, and to the balance. If one feels connected, one's patient will feel connected, too.

Really talk to the plant. In the fall, after the seeds fall, if one wants to take a catnip plant (*Nepeta cataria*), one should explain why, in the way one would explain if one wanted another human being to give blood to save a loved one. Say, "Little Catnip Plant, will you please give your being and your life for the well-being and the life of the children of my family?" It is considered better if one can tell the plants which person they will be making well. One could say, "Little Catnip Plant, will you please send your spirit along for the healing of my little daughter, Makoons?" Then one gives the plant *asemaa,* tobacco (Real Indian Tobacco is *Nicotiana rustica*) or kinnikinnick[5] to honor it[6] and says, "I promise not to take so much of you that you will not continue in this spot. Your grandchildren will live after you." Once one has asked one can usually proceed to collect the material one needs with the confidence that the plant people will send their spirits along to heal both the patient's physical and spiritual being.

Still, one has to be prepared for the possibility that when one asks permission to harvest a particular plant the answer may be "no." One time a student of Keewaydinoquay wanted to pick a plant when they were out gathering together. He made the offering as he had been instructed to do, and he asked the plant to please come along to make a tea. But while he was talking to the plant a bee flew out of the flower and dropped dead at his feet. He ran back to Kee visibly shaken and asked her what it meant. She went back with him to see the plant herself. When she saw the plant, she told him that he had been attempting to pick the wrong plant. The one he had been intending to take as a healing tea was a deadly poison. The student was instructed to put down more kinnikinnick to thank both the plant for its warning and the bee for the sacrifice of its life to preserve his.

Another time Kee asked the cattails if she could have some of them as she wanted to weave a mat to show her students how Anishinaabeg wove cattails in the traditional society. Each step she took into the "shallow" water where the cattails were growing became deeper. The waves went wild. The cattails got slippery,

5 Kinnikinnick or kinnick is a mixture of native plants that are used in prayer as an offering to spirit. A longer explanation for making kinnick is offered in the chapter on bearberry and in the recipes section.

6 The reader will find references to individual plants using "it" throughout this book. The decision to use this pronoun was a difficult one to make, as English speakers often assume "it" is used only in reference to inanimate objects. In Anishinaabe belief, the plants referred to here as "it" are considered animate, cognizant beings.

until they slipped right out of her hands. Then the whole plants started to lay themselves flat down into the water. Kee decided to get out of there, and it was not a moment too soon. Before she got back to dry land, the waves were almost over her head. She realized that she had asked, but the answer had been "No!"

Indigenous or Imported?

I was once in an ethnobotany class being taught by a Euro-American who thought he understood the Great Lakes Anishinaabe mindset and culture enough to teach a university class on the plants used by our indigenous peoples of this area. To show the class the plants, he took us on a field trip to an overgrown area near campus, between the railroad tracks and the Milwaukee River.

As we were walking along, taking notes about the plants as he pointed them out and lectured us, one of the kids in the class said, "Hey! Isn't that a daylily (*Hemerocallis fulva* and *Hemerocallis flava*)? Can't you eat daylilies?"

The teacher replied, "Yes. It is a daylily, but I wouldn't touch it. It is an introduced plant. It isn't indigenous to North America." And with a sniff he lead the class on down the trail.

I stopped and looked around. Every white kid had dutifully followed the Euro-American teacher down the path while every Indian kid in the class hung back, dropped to their knees, and were digging the daylily bulbs out of the sandy soil with their fingers, pens, and/or pocket knives. The bulbs disappeared into numerous backpacks and the smiling Indian students ran to catch up with the group. I all but laughed myself sick.

That was the difference for me, right there. The Euro-American sniffs and says "Not real Indian," and the real Indians were taking home supper and enough bulbs to plant in their backyards, too. Indian folk are pragmatic. Intellectual games, like distinguishing which are "real Indian" herbs and which are plants introduced to this continent in the past five hundred years, are simply not as important as obtaining food.

Birch is a circumboreal plant with many species. It grows all across Northern Europe and across Russia to the Pacific. Because of the fact that it grows in Europe and Asia, an attempt has even been made to say that it is an introduced plant in North American.[7] That idea would be laughable if it was not characteristic of the way North American Indian ethnobotany has been

7 While I was working for Kee, she was given a Ph.D dissertation to read that tried to make the point that birch trees are not indigenous to North America. She loved it. She thought it was a great joke. She said, "I suppose the Europeans taught us to make birch bark canoes and birch bark wigwams and birch bark baskets, too."

traditionally treated by European academics. One wonders if they are even aware of why it is that they insist that every useful plant, every worthwhile thing in their ken, really originated in their own homelands in Europe.

I myself am an immigrant. I was born and lived as a child in Canada. I know the temptation to remember the homeland as a better place than the land one is living in here. I know how for years one can never quite give up the idea of going home again. With my family, it was tea that we missed and memorialized. Tea just did not taste the same in Wisconsin. Part of that was the water. The water in Wisconsin is harder and does taste different than it did in my home in Canada. The tea itself was different, too. For years one could only buy Lipton, a far inferior tea to the fine imported English teas of my childhood. Every time we would go home again we would fill our suitcases with tea bags to take back to Wisconsin. To this day my family in Canada sends me tea at Christmastime. It is a part of "home" I cherish.

This same "pining for the homeland" is, I am convinced, the reason that European academics have for generations insisted that all of the useful plants were brought here either intentionally or unintentionally by the European settlers of North America. Kee would always laugh and say, "Ya, this whole continent must have been just solid rock, not a plant in sight, before the Europeans came here. It must have been a pretty empty, sad place all right. Not a leaf. Not a blade of grass. Not a tree."

In actuality many of the plants that are common in North America are simply also common in Europe and Asia. This last wave of immigration from the "Old World" in the last five hundred years since the European invasion of the Americas is not the only time new peoples have come onto Turtle Island.[8] And people from the Americas have gone the other way, too. The native peoples of Alaska still visit their family members who are only a short boat trip across the Arctic waters in Siberia. Since people have gone back and forth for millennia, the plants must have done the same. Whenever medicine people move they make sure the plants they are going to need come with them.

Indian people and the rest of the twenty-first-century inhabitants of this continent have to deal with twenty-first-century North America. We have to deal now with the land as it is. It would be helpful if the people who have the power in the land now stopped bringing in other foreign species,[9] but if they cannot or will not, we still have to deal with what comes here. It would

8 Turtle Island is North America. After the Great Flood, the world was recreated by our Great Uncle Naanabozho from a paw full of mud that was brought to him from the depths by the muskrat. Naanabozho placed the mud on top of a great, grandfather turtle, and he caused it to grow into our world. The Great Turtle is still holding the world up, but if he tires another turtle swims underneath him, lifting him up, helping him to hold up our Turtle Island.

9 I think that the worst thing the non-natives have intentionally brought here is the Japanese ladybug. It was purposely brought here in the 1970s to be sold to organic gardeners with the understanding that it would kill bugs in gardens without the use of pesticides. Those ladybugs did do that, but they also bite people. I remember the time when little children loved ladybugs. They were pretty, and they were harmless, and one could sing a little nursery rhyme to them to get a wish. Now ladybugs are the enemy.

help, though, if everyone adopted a more indigenous philosophy about plants and started to utilize the virtues that different plants have to share with us. If the people in the South started to eat the kudzu (*Pueraria montana* var. *lobata*) the way people in parts of Asia do, or weave it into baskets, or use this plant in any of the array of possible uses for it, they would not have to spend money on huge eradication projects. McLean Hospital, in affiliation with Harvard, released a study that says that if an extract of the roots of kudzu is given to binge drinkers for as little as one week it reduces their beer consumption by one half, totally without side effects.[10] Surely there are enough binge drinkers in the South to eradicate the kudzu in a very short time if they started to use it the way it has been used in Chinese medicine for hundreds of years.[11]

If the people in the Midwest started to utilize purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), they would find it is useful as an emergency food, that it can be made into a recreational alcoholic drink, that it will tighten skin to counteract wrinkles, and that it can be used to give a sheen to blond hair. It also brightens and soothes eyes, making them less puffy. It is an intestinal disinfectant that is helpful in treating diarrhea and food poisoning. It has a number of other potentially vital medicine applications (Bremness, 186). If all of that were commonly known, there would be a run on purple loosestrife that would soon root out the last of the plants that now are threatening to displace many of the native, wetland species. If one uses a "weed," it is not a problem.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "What is a weed? A plant whose virtues have not been discovered."[12] Personally I think a "weed" is a plant growing where the ignorant do not want it to grow.

10 Virginia A. Smith, "Fruit of the vine: Kudzu extract may help binge drinkers cut consumption in half, study hints," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel,* 18 May 2005, 3A.

11 For more information on the array of uses of kudzu, see Foster and Duke, 192.

12 Emerson, *Fortune of the Republic.* Quoted in *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations,* 207.

The Use of Story in Ethnobotany

While writing up these ethnobotany notes and trying to record the information that was so freely given by my own teacher, Keewaydinoquay, and by my ancestral teachers through her instruction, I have thought about the place of Story in the teaching of this knowledge. I have gone back and forth on it, as I believe my teacher also did, trying to get the right balance of Story to other information.

When Kee was teaching at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, she dearly loved to include the specific stories that had traditionally been told about specific plants that she was

presenting to her students. She often bewailed the fact that she had so little time in a semester course to give her students all that she thought they should have to keep themselves and their future families in health as well as to preserve the knowledge for the future, what she always called "The ongoing of the People." Some semesters she told one story and some she told others. And usually she had to abridge the stories for the sake of an hourlong class in which she also had to lecture on the medicinal and other virtues that the plants have to share.

"I wish I could tell this one properly," she would say. "But this is supposed to be a botany class and not a folklore class." Then she would shrug and tell the story she wanted to tell anyway. She just thought that the stories were simply too important to leave unshared even if it meant abridging the much-abused syllabus yet again.

Because I worked for her for a number of years[13] I was able to hear the different stories, some told only once, some offered every semester. I quickly caught on that I was in a unique position and took careful note, especially of the stories that Kee thought essential to the teaching of a particular plant.

13 I was her teaching assistant and lab assistant for both the ethnobotany and the philosophy courses, teaching discussion groups and lab sessions in our ethnobotany lab.

Now, as I sit to write down those stories, I am faced with Kee's dilemma again. How much to share? How many stories to include? Which ones to tell in outline form for brevity's sake and which ones to put into as complete a form as I am capable of rendering?

And, since I started working with Kee and in the years that have passed since that instruction, I have accumulated more and more stories. What do I do with them?

I was pondering this recently, and I had a dream. Dreams, of course, are most important in our way of being. They often bring insights that we struggle with in waking life. They are direct contact with our Helpers, the Grandmothers and Grandfathers, our contacts with Other-than-Human Power. Once one has been trained to trust one's dreams, one often finds them very, very helpful in life's quandaries.

In the dream of which I speak, I was working on cattails. I was in my office at my computer, trying to write about all of the things Kee had told me about them. The room was full of cattails. They were growing all around me as I sat at my keyboard. I was trying to decide if I should include the Naanabozho story of the "Dancing Cattails." Kee had not told me that story in

her ethnobotany classes nor in personal instruction. I had first come upon it when I was studying Ojibwe language with Roger Thomas.[14] And the story itself does not actually say, at least it does not say to me, a virtue that cattails have to share with Anishinaabeg. But in the dream I decided that I should include the story with my notes.

14 Roger Thomas was a Bad River Ojibwe and a Ph.D candidate in anthropology who taught courses in Ojibwe language and native cultures and storytelling at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee from the 1990s until his death in 2012.

Upon waking I knew I had to write the "Dancing Cattails" story and include it in the chapter on cattails. I trust my dreams. I have been carefully prepared to tell the difference between the random sorting of the day's events that dreams can be and a Power Dream that is to be taken more seriously. I do know the difference, and I always try to take freely offered gifts, both for their own value and so as not to insult Those Who Gift Us. So, the "Dancing Cattails" story is in this book. But that decision opens more questions. I include this particular story because of the Dream Sanction.[15] But how about the others? It does not take me long to decide that just because I personally cannot see a direct reason why the story was told and kept down through the ages, that does not mean that there is no reason. I know that some of our stories are very obvious teachings encoded in a form that makes them easy for anyone to understand. "Naanabozho and the Squeaky-Voice Plant" actually tells us that the *Lycopodiaceae* have three virtues to share with Anishinaabeg: 1) instruction by example in why one must not be arrogant about one's place in the scheme of things; 2) that all creation must survive for the proper balance that Creator intended; and 3) that the squeaky-voice plant has a medicine to keep people from madness and wild behavior. But not all of our teaching stories are so transparent. Some of them do not spell out the lesson in so straightforward a manner. Some are the kind that one can ponder over a lifetime until, when one has read or heard it told for the fiftieth time, one suddenly "understands" it. Suddenly it makes sense. Suddenly one sees connections that are so obvious that one has a flash of shame that one did not "see" it sooner. As with all literature, one can only understand as one's experience has prepared the ground for one's cognition. So? What do I do about the stories? I put them in, of course. Just because I do not personally understand does not mean that there is not profound truth and instruction encoded there that a wiser or more experienced person might find.

15 By "Dream Sanctioned" I mean that I was instructed to do this and given permission to share this by my dreams.

And I have precedence for this discussion. When Kee left teaching at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, she took a research grant to work at the Newberry Research Library

in Chicago. She told me she was off to find more of the plant teaching stories. She intended at the time to spend her retirement writing those stories, to restore them to access for use in teaching about the plants. I do not know what new-ancient stories she found in her hunt, but at least she left me the "direction." If Kee thought it was valuable to find and repatriate the stories to what she always thought was their original purpose, I think so too.

Therefore I have decided to include the stories Kee told me as well as the ones I have found over the years and the ones I find specifically for these writings.[16] She always said, "Stories are alive, and they go where they wish." If they come to me, I intend to pass them along.

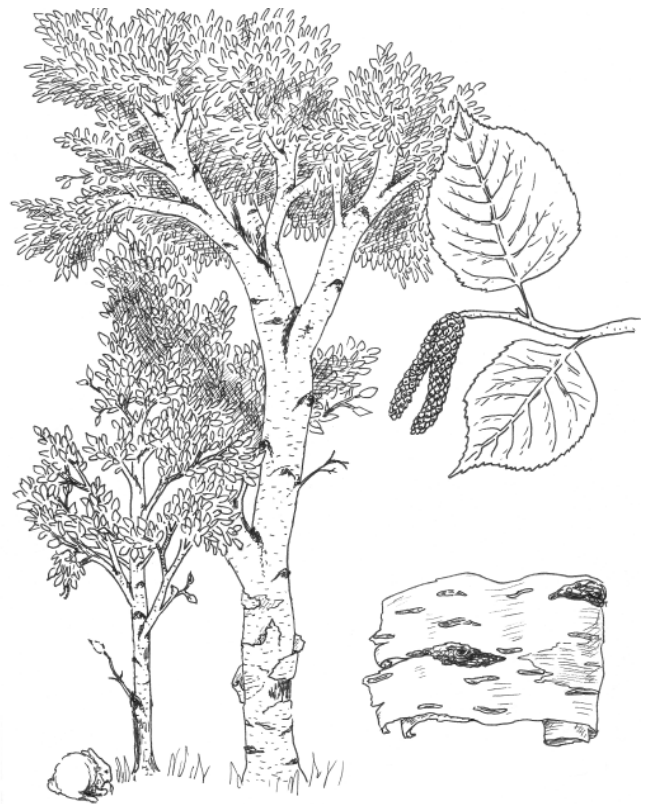
16 Stories not from Kee are identified with notes.

My Grandfather Birch: Nimishoomis-wiigwaas, Wiigwaasi-mitig

Birch (White or Paper Birch)
Betula papyrifera

The second most sacred tree to the Anishinaabeg is the Paper, White, or Canoe Birch, which, along with Cedar, is so prevalent in the whole Great Lakes area. It is considered to be sacred because it comes from the air, being a gift given by the Thunderbirds and endowed by them with many virtues to share with the Anishinaabeg.

Grandfather Birch has pitied the Anishinaabeg, and he gives so much for the ongoing of the People. Even the names of the three modern tribes who make up the People of the Three Fires, all of whom call themselves Anishinaabeg (or a slight variant on that word), come from principle gifts that Grandfather Birch shares with us. Kee taught that the name Ojibwe was associated



My Grandfather Birch: Nimishoomis-wiigwaas (*Betula papyrifera*)

with *ozhibii'ige,* he or she writes, and that is still the name for the tribe in sign language. It refers to the ancient, pre-Contact, writing system that the Anishinaabeg have that works by conveying thoughts, not words or sounds. The Sacred Scrolls of the Midewiwin, which record the ancient songs and ceremonies, are written on rolls of birch bark. The Potawatomi, the *Boodewa-adamii,* whose name comes from *boodawe,* he or she builds a fire, are the Keepers of the Sacred Fire of the nation. It is Grandfather Birch who shares his wondrous bark for the lighting of fires. The Ottawa or *Odaawaa,* which comes from the word *adaawe,* he or she trades, were the middlemen, the traders of the Anishinaabe nation. They traveled the whole length and breath of *Anishinaabe-waki,* Indian Country, in the great trader canoes made of the bark of Grandfather Birch. All three branches of the Anishinaabeg take their modern tribal names and identities from the gifts freely shared with them and their ancestors by the tree they have always called Grandfather.

Before the People came to the Great Lakes Region, on what some researchers and Native scholars call the Great Miigis Migration, from the ancestral land of Waabanaaki, said to have been an island in the far eastern sea, they made ceramics, clay pots for cooking. But once they arrived here in the "Land Where the Food Grows on the Water," where they found *manoomin,* wild rice, they abandoned ceramics in favor of birch bark vessels. It is much quicker to make a makak than it is to dig the clay, work it into a vessel, before one builds a fire to lay a bed of coals to fire a clay pot. And, once made, a birch bark bowl will take an awful lot of rough handling that would crack ceramic. Makakoon can be made to order to accomplish the task of most any vessel required in the camp, for harvesting, or cooking, or storing of food and/or other possessions. Although makakoon are quick to make in comparison to a ceramic pot, they are by no means one-time dishes. Once used they can be washed, dried, and used again and again.

To make a makak a person takes the bark of Grandfather Birch, either from a standing tree or from one cut for the purpose or one recently blown over in a storm. The best and easiest time to take bark is in the late spring when the sap is rising. In the Upper Peninsula of Michigan that is usually mid to late June. In the more southern areas in Wisconsin and Michigan the sap usually rises as much as a month earlier. In a cool valley or on the north side of a hill, the sap in the trees may be further delayed. A spring that has been unusually warm or unusually cool may also

affect the time to take the bark. One simply has to observe the trees in one's area and adjust the harvest time to the trees' needs.

A skilled craftsperson can take the bark from a standing tree without killing the tree. They just have to be careful not to cut too deep and not to girdle the tree. The tree will be able to heal itself, but it will never regrow the beautiful, gleaming, white bark of its former condition; therefore, one would not take bark from the one carefully grown and preserved shade tree on one's own front lawn.

It is easiest to work bark as soon as it has been taken from the tree, but it is also possible to work the bark at a later period. The resins between the layers of the bark will harden once the bark is removed from the tree. No amount of soaking in water will soften the bark to restore it to the pliable condition that it had as soon as it was harvested. Warmth is what is needed to resolidify the resins and make the bark soft again, so that it can be bent without cracking. There are people so skilled at working birch bark that they can hold a sheet of bark over an open fire, either a camp fire or a gas stove, but one has only a few seconds between having pliable bark and having a flame in one's hand. It is far safer for a craftsperson to iron the bark with an electric iron. If the bark is older, it may take several minutes of ironing before the resins are soft enough, but if one keeps the iron moving, as one would do when ironing a shirt, one can achieve a bendable bark without scorching the material. Some people resoften the resins in birch bark by plunging the bark into boiling water. That will work very nicely, too, but one might need a rather large kettle to accomplish the job if one is making a large makak or a canoe.

Once the bark is soft and bent into the desired shape, one laces up the sides, the seams or the rim with *wadab,* the split root of the black spruce or balsam fir, or with *wiigob,* the inner bark of the basswood tree. Both wadab and wiigob can be harvested, prepared green by removing the outer bark, splitting the material into the desired thickness, rolling, drying, and storing the material for future use. When one wishes to use the wadab or wiigob, one can resoften them and bring them back to a pliable condition by soaking them in warm water. To sew the birch bark, one pokes a hole in the bark with an awl[15] and pulls the lacing material through the hole.

A very skilled craftsman could make an almost airtight makak. Nodjimahkwe, Keewaydinoquay's herb mother, had a makak that was airtight. She used it to store her most important medicine.

15 In pre-Contact times, before the People had access to metal for use as an awl, the thorns of honey locust trees or hawthorn trees were used for this purpose, or a sharpened animal bone, especially a split and sharpened rib bone of a deer.

If a completely waterproof makak is desired, one melts the sap of a conifer tree. The sap of any of the native fir, spruce, or pines can be used for this purpose. A little crushed charcoal is added to the liquefied sap, and the mixture is dabbed or "painted" on the seams. This step would not be done if one intended to place the makak directly on a fire, however, as it would make the vessel catch fire.

Amazingly, although birch bark is very flammable, it is possible to place a makak directly on a bed of coals to cook food directly. The top of the vessel may catch fire, but it will not burn below the level of the water inside. If one doubts, this try putting water in an unwaxed paper cup, filling it with water, and placing it in a fire. The water will boil away before the cup burns. The same thing happens with a makak. When making a makak to be used directly on a fire, one bends the bark with the orange, inside bark on the outside and the white, outer bark on the inside of the vessel.

Although it is possible to place a makak directly in a fire, it was not often done in the old days, before the People traded for iron pots. Usually a person cooked supper by heating igneous rocks in a hot fire and then slipping them one by one into a makak holding stew or soup. It takes only a few rocks to bring such a supper to a boil and to keep it there until the dish is cooked. If a few ashes were inadvertently added to the pot as well, they were either overlooked or welcomed as an addition of seasoning to the finished product. A few ashes add a salty taste to food.

One does not have to craft a traditional makak to do a quick job. To make a quick carrying container, which would help if one just happens to find a stand of ripe berries while one is about on another task, is a very simple project. One just takes a piece of bark, rolls it into a funnel, cup shape, and secures the sides by means of a split twig from the same birch tree. One takes a short twig, about one-quarter to one-half inch thick, makes a slit in the cut end and slips it onto the folded piece of bark, the way one slips a clothes-peg on a line to hang clothes. Howa! Instant berry bowl!

A similar cone-shaped makak has several other uses in traditional Anishinaabe technology. At sugaring time in the early spring, many little cones were made, sewn with wiigob, and used to mold sugar cakes given as treats to the children of the family. If such cakes were not molded in a birch cone, they were also sometimes formed in the upper mandible of a duck.

Cone-shaped birch *makakoon,* containers, were also used in medicine. A large birch cone was made that would cover a patient's nose and mouth. A hot coal would be put in the end of the cone, on top of a layer of sand or moss to keep the coal from burning through the bark too readily, and herbs would be put on the coal to produce a smoke as an inhalant for those medicines whose virtues were best conveyed in smoke. This was a bit tricky, however, as care had to be taken that the patient did not tip the cone and get a hot coal on his nose. If freshly taken, damp birch bark was used to make the cone, there was a better chance that the coal would not ignite the birch bark before the patient had a chance to benefit from the healing smoke. It was a tricky thing, but it was used when a patient was considered too fragile to be taken into a sweat lodge for the administration of the healing smoke.

A large birch bark cone was also used in the moose hunt when the hunter wanted to lure moose by imitating the amorous moose mating call. A lovesick moose can be lured to the hunter by an imitation of his light of love. All in all, birch bark cones had many and varied uses in the traditional Anishinaabe world.

Grandfather Birch surrounds the traditional Anishinaabe from the moment of his or her birth. A newborn babe, one even too small to strap into a dikinaagan, is placed on a birch bark tray and laced into a *waapijipizon,* a moss bag.[16] The birch bark tray is made of two equal-sized pieces of bark that are laced together with their white, outside of the bark on the inside of the tray, and the orange, outer bark on the outside of the tray. The natural curve of the bark of one piece will counter the curve of the bark on the other piece, making for a stronger tray that will keep its shape. When the child grows a little he or she can be strapped into his or her dikinaagan that is made of Grandmother Cedar.

Because it is a waterproof material, birch bark was the preferred covering for the roof of the *waaginogaan,* the traditional dome-shaped wigwam that was the home of all of the tribes of the Great Lakes area. Pieces of birch bark are stitched together with wadab or wiigob, and the seam smeared with melted conifer sap to which charcoal had been add to ensure a dry roof. When the band moved to different seasonal camps, it was a simple matter to take the birch bark mats off the roof, roll them, and carry them to the next site. They were so light in weight that one person could easily carry the whole roof of their home on their back.

Another added attraction of having a birch bark roof was that it would never be struck by lightning, for the thunderbirds will

16 This teaching comes from Annie Wilson, traditionally reared Anishinaabe elder of Manitou Rapids First Nation Reserve, through the Masters of Indigenous Thought program of Seven Generations Education Institute, Fort Frances, Ontario. Annie Wilson was called by Queen Elizabeth "a living treasure." [I just put that in because I never before knew a person my queen thought was wonderful!]

not strike a birch tree or an article covered with birch bark. Kee always told the story of how this aspect of birch was first discovered by Naanabozho and told to the People:

"Naanabozho and the Thunderbirds"

Gichi-mewinzha, once in the long ago time, Naanabozho was sitting outside of his lodge feeling very downhearted. He had a comfortable home, a hardworking wife, and good hunting, but he still felt the lack of something. As he sat he gave the matter a lot of thought and finally decided that what he lacked was fame. If only his name was well known and spoken with reverence by the Anishinaabeg, then he felt he could be content. But how was that to be accomplished? The thoughts occupied his mind for some time, until he decided he could not figure it out alone. What he needed was advice. So he put on his moccasins and set out for the village of the Anishinaabeg. The adults of the village all called to him, but they had no time in their daily routines to stop and talk to him. He walked on somewhat dejectedly until he found the village children playing a game down by the lake. He caught one little boy by the hand and asked him to sit down for a moment to give him advice. The boy was somewhat surprised that the Great Naanabozho was in need of his advice, but he dutifully sat down on the ground to listen.

"Boy," said Naanabozho, "As you know, I am Naanabozho, son of the West Wind Spirit and an Anishinaabe woman, and I am a very important person. My problem is how do I get the People to honor me? What is it that the people think is impressive in a man?"

The little boy put his head in his hand and thought and thought on the question. "People think a man is a great man who is a mighty hunter. They always talk about the hunters of old who made a lot of meat and who called everybody to a big feast."

"Howa!" said Naanabozho, "A great hunter, eh? I can do that. Nothing is easier for me. Soon I shall have so much game and call so great a feast that the People will be telling stories of my hunting for generations." He jumped up and happily set out on the trail of game. He hunted for hours, but, except for one little squirrel that somehow managed to dodge his arrows and escape, he saw no game at all.

"Huh," Naanabozho grumbled. "This hunting is tiring and more difficult than it seems. Still I really want the honor not the

"Naanabozho and Paul Bunyan"[1]

A hundred years ago, Naanabozho was walking along the St. Croix River in Minnesota when he heard a great cry of distress from the northwest. He heard the *binewag,* partridges, drumming out the distress call on the hard ground. Then Naanabozho heard the *maangwag,* loons, take up the call as their long, long, haunting voices echoed across the lakes. As Naanabozho started to run toward the call he heard the *makwag,* bears, all stomping and huffing. Then the *bizhiwag,* lynx, and the *gidagaa-bizhiwag,* bobcat, started to scream in their highest, most frightened voices. The *zhiishiibag,* ducks, were quacking hysterically, and the *nikag,* Canada geese, were honking their deepest, most terrified calls. As Naanabozho ran he heard the cries of his relatives the Anishinaabeg, too. He ran and he ran until he had covered the two hundred miles from the St. Croix to the deep Northwoods in record time.

As he ran through the woods the cries and honks and quacks and screams and huffs and drumming changed to "Naanabozho is coming! Naanabozho is coming!"

It was a very tired Naanabozho who stumbled into the camp of his relatives the Anishinaabeg, where he was quickly told that the loggers with their great champion Paul Bunyan were clear-cutting the pines. Naanabozho stopped only long enough to reassure his relatives that he would try his best to help before he rushed on toward the sound of the crashing trees.

He found Paul Bunyan swinging his ax and cutting down a whole row of three hundred year old *zhingwaakwag,* white pines, and *apakwanagemagoog,* red pines, with one swing. The giant trees crashed to the ground before Paul Bunyan's ax as if they were so much grass being felled by a gardener swinging a knife.

Naanabozho called out to Paul Bunyan, "Hey, fella. Stop that! Creator gave the trees to my relatives the Anishinaabeg, and their four-legged and winged and creeping Elder Brothers, too. This is their home. They need these trees. Without them, nothing will be able to live in this land."

1 This is my retelling of a story told in the 1950s to a group of researchers, working on a grant from the University of Minnesota Fund for Regional Writing, who were trying to determine the status of the oral tradition among the Minnesota Ojibwe. They determined that mostly the elders in the Ojibwe communities kept the tradition. They said their youngest storyteller had been born in 1903. Coleman, Bernard, Ellen Frogner, and Estelle Eich, *Ojibwa Myths and Legends* (Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1962), 99.

Well, Paul Bunyan hardly paused in his swing to listen to Naanabozho, so pretty soon the fight started. Naanabozho and Paul Bunyan argued and roared, wrestled and fought each other for three long days and even longer nights. Pretty soon it sounded like *wese'an,* there was a tornado! All of the loggers and all of the Anishinaabeg and all of the birds and animals hid, trembling at the din they made.

The Anishinaabeg say that Naanabozho must have won that battle, or there would not be one tree left standing in the north woods today.