



Pick Your Path to Health

Feeding the Ancestors

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Two summers ago, a friend and I trekked north to Wikwemikong, Manitoulin Island, where my Grandmother had lived and taught school among the Odawa people many years before. We were on our way to a family reunion of sorts, to the Odawa homecoming Pow wow that takes place every summer the first weekend in August. In the trunk of my car was a Pendleton blanket etched with the symbol of the turtle. I was bringing it to give to the community in thanksgiving for the gift of spirit they had given my family through my Grandmother. Needless to say, it was a weekend filled with dancing, renewing friendships, and feasting.

Unlike my experiences in the South, the traditional fare of fry bread (called bannock in Canada) oozing with chili and cheese was not high on the menu. Instead we feasted on fresh-caught baked whole lake trout, stuffed with herbs and wild rice, butternut squash, corn soup, and beans of every kind. We ate moose stew with turnip and onion, poached whitefish, venison braised on an open fire. For dessert we polished off fresh blueberries and blackberries picked from nearby bushes. We drank home brewed wild strawberry tea, and water straight out of Lake Huron. In short, we feasted on what Mother Earth had provided the people since the beginning of time.

Dorothy and Colleen, the architects of these feasts, characterized what they were doing as "feeding the Ancestors." They were proud of the fact that they knew how to prepare traditional foods and were working actively in the community to change the way people were eating. It is their personal war against obesity, their enemy - bringer of diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. And it was especially satisfying for them to see us pass up the regular Pow wow fare for what is our real food heritage.

Obesity among Indian people is a recent epidemic that has emerged only within the last two generations. It has happened because of the widespread replacement of traditional food and lifestyles with those of the dominant culture. The tradition of fry bread was born in Sixth Fire time, in a climate of dependence on the U.S. government for food and a place to live.

Ironically, obesity is more common among those who live in poverty and isolation. When the money is tight, it goes first to keeping a roof over our heads and heat and electricity in the house. After that, it is spent on food that is cheap, usually high in fat and starches. Without transportation, refrigerators, or proper ways to store foods, people become captive eaters at surrounding fast food restaurants that can provide a cheap meal and convenience stores that stock their shelves by the law of supply and demand. Government supplements of processed cheese, lard, butter, milk, and flour only add to the problem. By the end of the month, parents are going without and the bellies of their children are being stuffed with cheap empty calories.

On the Rez and down in "Indian Town", here are few places for kids to gather and work off all that fat and starch they eat while watching TV. There are no gyms, no running tracks, not even sidewalks, no swimming pools, baseball diamonds, football fields, or even ice rinks. The schools consider themselves ahead of the game if they have books, desks, and even running water. Facilities for physical education exist only in dreams.

Many students are fed two meals a day at school. But the rule of high-fat and cheap starches applies to poor institutions just as much as it does to poor families.

But even under these dismal circumstances, we can take heart. The path to better nutritional health is clear and easy to follow.

The first step is to push ourselves away from the table loaded with killer foods like cheeseburgers, French fries, pizza, and yes, even fry bread. The next step is to turn the law of supply and demand at the local convenience store in our favor. We need to walk past the potato chips to the whole grain crackers, push the white bread out of the way and reach for whole wheat bread. When we pick up a box of cereal, we can read the ingredients on the back and put it back if the first or even the second or third ingredient is sugar. We can practice not putting anything in our mouths unless the per-portion amount of fat listed on the package is less than 10 grams. We can read the back of every box or package of food before putting it in the cart. Is this food loaded with fat or sugar? Do the terms I do not understand outnumber the ones I do?

Good carbohydrates like beans are just as cheap as enriched white flour. Vegetables like carrots, turnip, squash, and onions keep well without a refrigerator. Basmati rice cooks in 15 minutes, the same as expensive boxed white rice. It tastes great and is an excellent source of fiber and

other vitamins. And we can buy a 25 pound bag of it for less than 10 dollars. We can put our extra money into fruits like apples and oranges instead of cookies and candy, stay away from the fast food restaurants. We can share a potluck meal with a friend instead. That's how we feed the Ancestors.

We can go to the community center or walk down the lane and seek out the Elder women who live nearby. Elders are our resident-experts in making food dollars stretch. Ask them to share their old recipes. Ask them how to cook beans, make corn soup, or use a beef bone, a carrot, an onion, a potato, some pearl barley, and a can of stewed tomatoes to make enough soup to last an entire family several meals. Then go ahead and try these recipes. Don't forget to share the results with those who shared their recipes in the first place! It's a great way to get positive feedback if our kids turn their noses up.

We can go to our kids' schools and watch what they are served for breakfast and lunch. If it involves a lot of fat, sugar, and starch and only a little fruit, whole grains, lean meat, and vegetables, we can speak to the kitchen staff and the person in charge of meals. Give them the recipes from the Elders. Show them that with the same money, they can lay a better foundation for good eating habits. We can form a committee of concerned parents and, as a committee, offer to help in food selection and even preparation.

We can grow our own vegetables in backyard or communal gardens. In fact, we can grow enough for everyone on the street. When it's time to harvest, we can gather our neighbors together and have a canning bee. Teach the children how to pick tomatoes, shell peas and shuck corn and keep them away from the 'boob tube'. Share the wealth and share the friendship. That's how it was done in the old days. That's how the Ancestors are fed.

Finally, if we want to find out about proper nutrition we can go to the local library or public health clinic and read all about it. There are also lots of resources and ideas on the Internet. When I want to try a new recipe, I check it out online and compare the variations with the recipe in hand.

Here are some sources to get you started on the path to better nutritional health. Here's how to start feeding the Ancestors.

General Resources

National Women's Health Information Center

<http://www.4girls.gov/eat/index.htm>

Telephone: (toll free) 1-800-994-9662

American Institute of Cancer Research
The New American Plate

<http://www.aicr.org/nap2.htm>

1759 R., Street, N.W.

Washington, DC 20009

Telephone: (toll free) 1-800-843-8114

Native Nutrition Resources

(These resources are available only on the Internet - You can go to your Local Library or Friendship Center for Internet access.)

Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment

<http://cine.mcgill.ca/TF/index.htm>

Turtle Island Native Network: Culture: Spotlight on Food

<http://www.turtleisland.org/culture/culture-food.htm>

Download a free Native American cookbook!

Healthy Native Foods and Commodity Food Items Cookbooks

<http://www.ncidc.org/food/cookbook.htm>

Three Sisters Cookbook

<http://www.oneida-nation.net/FRAMESfood.html>

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>. To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."