

My Grandmother, She Raised Me Up Again

A tribute, to the memory of Art Tsaqwassupp Thompson

Taiiake Alfred

Art Tsaqwassupp Thompson was the spirit of regeneration. We are mourning his recent passing to the spirit world, but yet, we remember with pride the life he lived on this earth. He was a man who made the hero's journey from disconnection, fear and pain, facing and defeating demons all along the way. As we knew him, he stood as the most powerful carrier of his people's heritage and their most sensitive and dignified voice. When you met Tsaqwassupp in person, you were drawn into his strength as a Ditidaht man. It was a remarkable strength, all the more effecting because you sensed it's profound connection to the deepest roots of his people's experience - all of his nation's pains, the joys, the sufferings and the triumphs congealed in the living existence of one man. This life of dignity had not been an inheritance; it was fought for with blood and tears and sacrifice, and recovered out of the ashes of a life fire nearly destroyed by what his people did inherit: abuse, violence and drugs. If there ever was a person who embodied the spirit of a warrior reborn and who taught us how dignity can be recovered, it was this man. As my tribute to him, I am sharing these words with you, teachings he so generously gave to me.

Taiiake: What connection did you have, before, to being Nuu-chah-nulth, or Ditidaht?

Tsaqwassupp: I didn't have any connection when I was young. None. When I reflect back on that part of my life, it's like I was completely displaced. When I first started at the residential school, I had two languages - my father's, *Ditidaht*, and my mother's, Coast Salish, *Cowichan*. I didn't fit into white society because I spoke these two languages. And then I was rejected at home because the languages were beaten out of me in the residential school. Those people beat our culture and language out of us. I went home a tortured boy; a fractured, fragmented kid displaced from my people. I was displaced from society. As this displaced person, at 13 years old, I left home and became a logger. I did that for nine years until I injured myself, the whole time working with white people, predominantly. I learned their language. They had no sympathy for my situation, and I knew that.

It sounds like a tough situation for a teenager.

It was actually pretty scary. What happened with me is. I was abused at school. When I started work, I ended up bunking with this old white man. He spoke a foreign language - Italian, I believe. There was no communication between us; but there was lots of fear. I was a really racist bastard at that time, saying things like, "Fuck you, white man," and "You white cock suckers," and all that kind of stuff, all the time. That attitude didn't fit with this man, but I didn't care. He noticed that I was a really troubled person. So we got to talking about it, and I told him a little bit about some of the abuses that had happened to me, and he actually got kind of angry about it. One morning, he kind of set me straight as to who he was. He sat me there and said, "Look, I am not the guy that abused you. I'm not the guy who beat you up. I'm just an old man working at this job, and we have to get along. You and I, we bunk together. I don't do those kind of things. I've got a loving family, a nice wife, I got children. I don't do that stuff!" There was a sense of ease there after that, and I was comfortable with him.

That lasted until my buddies came to the logging camp. I moved in with them right away - they had a bigger bunkhouse. Then time went by and after nine years of working as a logger, I was really alcoholic, and I had become really drug dependent too. Things were so bad that I ended up spending seven years on the streets in Vancouver. I had a \$300 a day alcohol and heroin addiction. Just a waste. I hid from my family.

Do you think that was because of what happened to you in the residential school, or were there other reasons, other conflicts that drove you down?

It was a lot of things. During potlatch, when it come time to recognize the family, the ones who went to residential school were treated almost like, "This is the stupid side of my family, and I don't want them to be seen right now, so we'll just talk about them and then get on with our business." We heard the songs, we saw the dances, and we saw all of the beautiful ceremonial things moving around; but we didn't fit in. We didn't fit in with our own people, and we didn't fit in the outside society. We were rejected by both sides. That rejection goes a long way to explaining my being an alcoholic, and then being dependent on drugs on the streets of Vancouver.

Anyone ever try to pick you back up?

Every once or twice a year, my parents would find me. How they did it, I don't know - that's immaterial right now - but they would find me and nurse me back to health to some extent, put some groceries in my fridge, get me some clothes if I needed them, put some furniture in my apartment if I needed that, and try to coax me out of it. I wouldn't go. The last thing that happened to me on the streets was that my grandmother came over. By that time I was already in a hospital. I had institutionalized myself to get rid of my heroin addiction. I knew that I was already close to the end of it. I was 110 pounds, just skin and bones. My grandmother came to see me in the hospital and talked to me. "You have to become somebody else," she said. And she looked into my eyes and told me, "You're a better person than that." She said that I needed to. I guess if you translate it into English, it would be, "You need to put on another face. You need to put on another set of warrior clothes. You need to have those things with you." She told me that her dad, my great-grandfather, was the one that used to rub my hands and talk to me when I was a baby, and tell me how *atsic* I was going to be, or "good with my hands." She told me that story, and it made me feel loved. After that, I knew there was something else to life other than what I was doing to myself.

It sounds like even though you felt totally disconnected, there were people still holding on to that connection on the other side.

I knew my grandmother loved me. But with my parents, I felt abandoned: they had brought me to that residential school and just left me there.

You looked at your grandmother with respect and your parents differently. Was that basically because of the fact that they had given you up to the residential school, or did they treat you differently too?

I found my grandparents a whole lot more compassionate about what was going on in my life. Actually, not in too much great detail, but they explained to me about the laws at the time I was sent to school. They said, "Your parents were forced to drop you off there, and they were forced to leave you there. They were not in control." That's as far as they could explain it.

Thing about my grandparents, on both sides, was that they had a big cultural background behind them. I noticed it when we'd go to potlatches. I'd notice how people would respect them. I saw all of the dignity that they'd pack around. They would walk into that place with their faces up, not looking at the ground like a lot of us were. I saw people come over and shake their hands and welcome them to that place. It was a very respectful thing. I never saw my parents do that. Up to that point, when I was 22 or 23 years old, I had never seen my parents do those things. It almost seemed like they were ashamed of our culture. But my grandparents were never ashamed of it.

So when my grandmother came to Vancouver to see me in the hospital, she said, "When you get out of the hospital, you come and see me. Phone your dad and I'll come and get you." So I phoned my father when I was ready to come out, and the very next day my grandmother was there. My dad had a car, but she said, "No, I'm going to do this by myself." She came on the bus. She was 83 years old at the time, and she took the bus down from Nitinat Lake. She travelled all night. The first thing we did together was go back over to Vancouver Island, to a place just outside of Victoria they call Goldstream Park. There's a pathway that leads to a waterfall up there. Our people used to go up there to do what we call, *oosums*, traditional bathing. My grandmother's parents used to go bath up there. That's the first place we went.

There was no highway at the time, there was nothing there. It was a day trek in, a day trek out. When we got to Goldstream, she told me we were going to *oosums*. I already knew what that word meant. She said, "Take off your clothes, we're going to go in and *oosums*." It was like, I'm watching my grandmother undress. But she was naked and she had no shame, nothing. She walked right in the water. She said, "Come on, Son!" And it was cold, for me. But I could see her, and when I looked at her I noticed that she was singing a song, and there was not a quiver in her voice. It was in the month of October, and it was cold out. She bathed me, and she used these special songs, and she said, "We're going to make you a better man." She said, "You shouldn't be killing yourself; you need to be a better person. I know who you are, because I've already seen. I asked about you, and I was told about the things that you're going through, so I need to work with you." She brought me home. She called my dad and they brought me down to Nitinat. I never went to my dad's place; I went to her place. She'd do what we call, *ahapta*, which is talking all the time. Talk, talk, talk. Talk about how my great-grandfather was a whaler, where he used to *oosums*, the songs that he used to dance.

She was giving you back your memory.

That's exactly what it was. We had days of that. I don't even know how many days. It seemed like we were there for a month. We never saw anybody else. I think that was probably her instruction, that nobody come over and bother us. We'd get up in the morning at daybreak, we'd have breakfast, we'd go out and we'd go *oosums*, do some bathing in the ceremonial places. We'd come back home, we'd eat. We'd never go by car, only by boat. We'd row across the lake and then go into the river. And we'd come back home and we'd eat. And then some more *ahapta*: talking, talking, talking, about who we are. "Who am I?" "What's your destiny?" she would ask me. She'd say, "My daddy gave you your destiny years ago by rubbing your hands and singing songs to you when you were a little baby. He placed medicine in your hands and them together. *Atsic* means good with your hands, anything you touch. My daddy gave that to you. What are you going to do with that?" It seemed that I knew it was empowering, because it was like a real physical thing. I could feel something coming back.

After a while, we started going to all of the ceremonies that were happening in our area. I used to go to all of the ceremonies on the Salish side with my other grandparents too. Watching my grandmother, I could see that she understood this side of the Island and the Salish side as well; she was able to communicate in both languages. Listening to her speak in our language was fascinating to me. She said, "You know something? You used to do the same thing when you were a little boy. When you first started talking, you talked to me in Salish and you talked to me in Ditidaht. It's like you were two different people." My grandfather was a big chief on the Ditidaht side, and my grandfather on my mother's side was the number one chief of the Cowichans. His wife's father was the number one chief of the flats down at Nanaimo. On my father's side, Baquilla was a big chief. My grandmother, her father was a big chief, Watsuquatah. So we have blood running through my body that tells me I'm a bigger person than they said I was in residential school. In there, I was led to believe I was a nobody. But I am somebody.

You only came to know this only after she raised you back up?

Yep. I didn't have any other skills. I wasn't a carpenter, or a plumber, or a mechanic, or anything like that. All I knew was logging. When I was in my twenties, I came to Victoria for physical therapy after an accident where I hurt my back. I was getting bored, and a friend encouraged me to go back to finish high school, but I wanted to go to art school instead. After about six months of therapy here in town, I finally made up my mind to go back to school. So here I was, this grown man 23 years old, going back to try to finish school, with a grade six level education. What a shameful thing. That's the way I felt at the time. But when I got into school and looked around the room, I saw that everyone in there was a product of the same thing as me.

Marie Cooper was our instructor - a beautiful lady from Tsartlip, someone that had real inner strength. She was educated, she knew her language, and she knew her culture. She helped us get through that process. She said, "You all know that you're much better people than what you've been told in the past." Being empowered by her, I went from grade six to grade twelve in six months. That told me something: I was pretty smart. From there I went into art school. My grandmother had told me that being an artist is being the best warrior that you could ever be. She said, "If you don't

want to do anything else with your hands, do your arts, because that's what is going to tell people that we haven't died, and prove that they're not going to be able to kill us." She said, "As long as you're alive and doing your arts, people will know that we're not going away."

Holding onto culture is an act of resistance.

She trained me that way. She knew about my past in the residential school - I told her everything. She knew of all the troubles I had. She knew I was resistor of some kind: resistance to the education process, resistance to the school, the supervisors, to anybody with authority. Now I know what she did to me: she humbled me to be a better person, to look at things in a different way, through Native eyes again. I'll always remember her saying, "You've been given white eyes; you look at things through white eyes. You need Indian eyes again. You need to see something better in all of the people; never mind who damaged you, those people will be taken care of somewhere down the road. Don't worry about them."

Through all of that, my inner self was really calming down; but at the same time, the artistic side was coming up. Even at that time, I had the smarts to go down to the museum and look through all the catalogues and find pieces that belonged to different people, and then to reconstruct them in my own mind. When I started doing my art, it really meant a lot to me at potlatch time, when somebody would say, "Can you make me a head dress?" I'd ask him, "Where's yours?" And he'd tell me, "It's in a museum in New York ." It's really unbelievable how, as an artist, you can contribute back to the people and give them strength. You can see the pride that they get from getting something back that belonged to their fathers. In the songs that they used those things for it, it seemed like they danced better. One of their old treasures had come back, and the women danced with smiles on their faces.

When you were talking about your grandmother, I was thinking about how different her attitude was from the defeatism so many other people carry around with them today. She seems so really Indian. To me, it's not like who we truly are as indigenous people to be withdrawing within ourselves and giving up the fight. What we're doing today, it doesn't seem like something our ancestors would have done.

It's hard to be active in the culture, and to try actively to give somebody back their own strength. It's easier to lay down and say that you're beat. But it takes courage to do both of these things, actually. It takes a certain kind of courage to take it as a victim when your heart is still beating inside.

Fighting back brings on conflict; but to not fight back brings on a different type of tension within oneself. Maybe they both take courage, but I have to believe that resistance has more value as a stance.

I have a lot of friends who are still on the street. When I see them now, I give it right to them straight. I tell them that they were actually beat up when we were in school. They were and they still are beat. I tell them that they have never got out of the submissiveness that came with being beaten. That's what controls them.

One of my cousins lived on the streets in New York City for years and years. His sons went back and got him, picked him up and brought him back home. He's alive today and a part of our community because of that. There are very few people who come back from the streets and do what you and he have done: lived to tell about it.

I know that a lot of the friends I had in the residential school are still out on the street. I feel bad about that; but it's not my stuff to own. Whoever has the guts to step out of all that and come back to life with our people, those kind of people are rare.

I've often thought about it, and it's like they put on the mask of defeat and shame, and then they forget how to take it off.

I remember really well being in Vancouver and being stuck in that place. But I could still feel the heartbeat inside of me, eh? I could feel the heart beat, and I was still alive and I survived another day. Ever since I came back, my heart always went out to those guys who were on the street. I used to go back there, time and time again - but never go down to stay - and I'd say, "Come on you guys, come on back to my village." And they'd be like, "Ah Christ. it's easy for you to say, but it's hard for me to do." They'd always say those words, just like that.

Maybe they can't imagine that there is a place they can back to where they can you can exist as a whole person, as who they really are. Whether that place is a cultural, political, or physical space, it's just crucial to have. Without it, human beings seem to suffer fragmentation and disintegration. Being part of a community is just so important.

I've had individual forgiveness; but as a community member, I've never had that forgiveness. I've never been told by other people at home, like in the way my grandparents talked to me, "We forgive you for who you are, because that's not really you."

Even now?

Yeah. When I go home, they say, "Oh, that fucking high and mighty Art Thompson is back here again." And I say, "No, it's Art Thompson, Tsaqwasupp. I'm Tsaqwasupp, so I'm just like one of you people. The only thing that I've done is created good things with my hands. And it was all for the name of Ditidaht. It was all for the name of my family, and for my mother's family: my father, my grandmother, all of you that are supposed to be related to me. Every time I sign a piece of artwork, I don't just sign it Art Thompson, I sign it: *Art Thompson, Tsaqwasupp, Ditidaht* . That's all of us. And when I come home, you browbeat me! What I've done as an artist is hold you up. Yet when I come home, you beat me down again."

People haven't come to understand.

They can't see the good that I've done. They can't see the recognition that I've given them as the Ditidaht Nation.

Maybe the community as a whole needs to go through the same kind of recovery that your grandmother led you through?

The people in the village need to forgive themselves for who they are. That has not happened, and I don't think it'll happen for a long time. My grandmother told me that it's going to take at least three generations for us to get over this. I know we can't go back to the way it was before. We'll never go back and live in longhouses. But we can create a longhouse, and we can go back in there and sing the songs that our grandparents sang. We can live in these white man homes, but as long as we have that symbol, we can still go back to the way the old people were thinking. We can always do that, because every time we sing our songs, we visit our grandparents anyway. But what kind of people is it going to take to get there?

These are the kinds of things I have say to people back home: "We're still weak people; we're still very, very weak. I can talk to you for one minute and have you in tears. And you! I can talk for two minutes and have you in tears. About what? About your family history and the history of this place, and where you sit in this tribe." I'm not going to do that, even though I have the power to do it. I say to them, "What I do as an artist is hold you up, and it's up to you to come back and say that you're going to stay up there and that you're not going to be beaten down anymore." My grandmother always said, "You guys are big people, because it flows through your blood. Look at your bloodlines, and where they come from: you're huge!" It's taken such a long time; I'm 52 years old now, and it took up until two years ago to get it back from my brothers that, "You know, what you've done for the past 38 years is pretty good, because you've held us up, you've always used your name, you've always used Ditidaht." It's taken that long for my own brothers to see that. That's sad, in a way, because it shows the weakness in the village. I can see it still.

It also shows the wisdom of your grandmother, who knew what a long and hard road it is for our people.

You're right when you say that the whole village needs to recover. We saw that a long time ago, which is why with my own family, we've almost disenfranchised ourselves by living here in the city instead of in the village. We choose to be here because we don't like what goes on there. We know that we can have a better place for ourselves here, but we have to create it for ourselves and for our children. My grandmother said, "You don't have to live here to be Ditidaht." She said, "Look at your family; your family's dispersed all over the whole west coast of the island, and all throughout the states, and the east coast of the island. You don't have to live in Nitinat Lake to be Ditidaht. You can live anywhere and be Ditidaht, and you can be a strong one out there too."

Thinking about the experiences of so many of our people living in the city, it brings up the question of what it really is to be Onkwehonwe, an indigenous person. How do you and your family manage to hold on to such a strong identity living away from the village?

I think being indigenous is within oneself. You have to have self-identity. You have to be reassured as a Native person in order to expand as a person and give back to the culture. If somebody has pride and projects that pride, it makes your people stand up a whole lot better. I'm at a point in my life where I know who I am, and I'm able to give lots back - it may seem really big to other people, what I give back, but in actuality it's not even a thimble full of stuff. This year, I'm going to be giving back to two potlatches, and they think it's one of the biggest things. When I'm on the art market, I charge thousands of dollars for these things, but when I go back to the village I want 20 halibut and some dried fish, or I say, "Gimme two five gallon pails of herring eggs." It makes me feel like a king. That's what I always tell my family, "We're like kings, we're eating salmon all the time!" That's the way I was taught: when there was an *atsic* person who could create anything, his goods would be distributed amongst the village first to make them feel big about themselves, to make them stand up in a potlatch and dance, to make these women smile with sparkling jewellery, to give them a sense of self-pride.

You talk about how it is within oneself, but then right after that, you start talking about the connection to community. There's creativity, flexibility, and freedom in what you're saying about being Onkwehonwe, but there's also the necessity to have a connection with the past, with the culture, and with the community as well.

I think it's necessary for everybody to interact with the history. We do that anyway: we speak a language, we go to potlatches, we sing songs. That's all touching our grandfathers. That's like breathing the same air as all of your ancestors, and all of your descendents, and all of the people that you're related to. You know, my auntie passed away last year, and when it came time for her burial, my cousins asked me, "What are we going to do?" I said, "Well, you remember what we did when Granny passed away. What did we do then? Are we going to do the same thing with my auntie, your mother, where we argued about all her stuff?" No. Everything got gathered up. They opened up her box and put in all of her silver jewellery, all of her ceremonial rattles, all of her basket-weaving stuff that she needed. The way the old people talked, she was going to need that wherever she was going. So we buried her, and in death, we gave her dignity back to her. The thing I'm getting at is this: we give pride back to our people when we do these things, when we insist on honour and respect. It's being a different kind of warrior. You stand up for old values, forgotten values.

That's a lesson in the meaning of dignity.

We need to practice dignity. A lot of our people walk around with a falsely labelled "dignity," given to them as a medal hung around the neck by the Premier of British Columbia, or by some ordained Minister who bonks them on the head and tells them they're all holy again. We don't need that kind of "dignity." We need more of the real thing.



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