**Valuing Our "First Nations" Wisdom**

Many Forest School practitioners that I meet value the wisdom collected from the elders of the First Nations in North America and Australia. That is understandable, as their cultures were those of hunter-gatherers living in harmony with their landscape within recorded history, unlike our own. But we should not forget that we, too, have that cultural history, albeit from much longer ago. This year I have visited both the Orkney Islands and the Isle of Wight and at both ends of the U.K. there are the underwater remains of the hunter-gatherer Mesolithic people. And we should not assume that as we became more settled that all the wisdom of those ancestors was completely lost.

Until the industrial revolution we may have farmed but hunting and gathering were still integral parts of most people's lives. As well as trapping rabbits and other small game the yearly rhythm of the seasons was important, as indeed it still is in many rural areas. Fashionably described as "foraging", it is not only trendy youngsters who pick fruits, nuts, flowers and fungi. And the "fruits" of shoots are often shared around in village communities, where locals are casually employed as beaters. My own village Flower and Produce Show regularly includes preserves from the hedgerow as well as from the garden. Many country-dwellers can still "read" the sky and forecast the weather. Some claim more mysterious skills - locally I know one wart-charmer and one lady who tames the wild birds who visit her garden. Others of you will also know shamanistic elders with special abilities.

Similarly, regional occupations close to the environment such as longshoreman, sailor, hill farmer, ghillie, gamekeeper, forester, etc. give opportunities for the handing down of specialist knowledge relating to natural phenomena. Uses for growing things and ways to survive in hostile environments often go hand in hand with a deep affection for their specific locale. Some of these skills have been recorded and just because it can be read in a book or viewed on an app it is no less valuable as knowledge, although we all know that being tutored by a real person is an infinitely deeper way to learn when this is possible. Rather than reinventing the wheel, listening to our own elders can reap valuable rewards.

For those who are running Forest School sessions for parents and toddlers the opportunities are built in to the job when it is the grandparents that attend. Listening, watching and encouraging them helps us to bridge the knowledge-gap that exists with many younger parents and thus to create stronger communities of knowledge. The wheel is coming full circle and such knowledge once again has currency, at the very moment before it disappeared for ever. Forest School practitioners are just the right people to become custodians of our own "First Nations" knowledge.

As well as listening to older people, the stories, traditions, sayings, rhymes and songs that are handed down hold nuggets of old wisdom. For example, blackberries picked after the 31st October may not be sour because the devil flew over them on All Hallows' Evening, but rather because they ripened when the sun had less strength in it. I suspect that if those country sayings were collected in foreign lands we would pay them more heed. We need to hear them with fresh ears, as if we had never heard them before. Our fire circles are just the places to hear, share and pass on our "First Nations" culture. And maybe we need a "fire circle" on the web site for sharing these treasures between our wider Forest School community. Let us take pride in our own traditions and deep knowledge about our local environments, and value them with the same respect we afford to all of the world's ancient wisdoms.

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