

from *One Native Life* by Richard Wagamese.
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Learning Ojibway

I WAS TWENTY-FOUR when the first Ojibway word rolled off my tongue. It felt round and rolling, not like the spiky sound of English with all its hard-edged consonants. When I spoke that word aloud, I felt as if I'd truly spoken for the first time in my life.

That first word opened the door to my culture. When I spoke it I stepped over the threshold into a new way of understanding myself and my place in the world. Until then I had been like a guest in my own life, standing around waiting for someone to explain things for me. That one word made me an inhabitant.

It was *peendigaen*. Come in. *Peendigaen*, spoken with an outstretched hand and a rolling of the wrist. A beckoning. Come in. Welcome. This is where you belong. I had never encountered an English word with such resonance.

I felt awkward speaking Ojibway at first. There's a softness to the language that's off-putting when you first begin. It's almost as if timelessness had a vocabulary. But with each enunciation that one word gained strength, clarity. I had the sensation I was speaking a language that had existed for longer than any the world had ever known. The feeling of Ojibway in my throat was permanence. I stood on unknown territory whose sweep was compelling. *Peendigaen*. Come in. With that one word, I walked fully into the world of my people.

I learned more words after that. Then I struggled to put whole sentences together. I made a lot of mistakes. I was used to English structure, and I created sentences that were awkward and wrong. People laughed when they heard me, and I understood cultural embarrassment. It made me feel like quitting, as if staying with English could spare me the laughter of my people.

Then I heard a wise woman talk at a conference. She spoke of being removed from her culture, unplugged from it and set aside like an old toaster. But she remained a toaster, she said, and the day came when someone plugged her back-in and the electricity flowed. She became functional again, and the tool of her reawakening was her language.

She spoke of the struggle to relearn her talk. She spoke of the same embarrassment I felt, of being an oddity among her own. She spoke about the difficulty in getting past the cultural shame and reaching out for her talk with every fibre of her being. And she spoke of the warm wash of the language on the hurts she'd carried all her life, how the soft roll of the talk was like a balm for her spirit. Then she spoke of prayer.

Praying in her language was like having the ear of Creator for the first time. She felt heard and blessed and healed. It hadn't been much, she said. Just a few words of gratitude, like prayers should be, but the words had gone outwards from her and become a part of the whole, a portion of the great sacred breath of Creation. She understood then, she said, that our talk is sacred, and speaking it is the way we reconnect to our own sacredness.

We owe it to others to pass our language on. That was the other thing she said. If we have even one word of our talk, then we have a responsibility to pass it on to our children and to those who have had the language removed from them. We learn to speak for them. We learn to speak so we can serve as a tool for someone else's reconnection.

I'm still far from fluent. I still spend far more time using English, but the Ojibway talk sits there in the middle of my chest like a hope. When I use it in a prayer, in a greeting, in a talk somewhere, I feel the same sensation I did with that first word at age twenty-four—the feeling of being ushered in, of welcome, of familiarity and belonging.

An English word I admire is "reclaim." It means "to bring back, to return to a proper course." When I learned to speak Ojibway I reclaimed a huge part of myself. It wasn't lost, I had always owned it; it was just adrift on the great sea of influence that is the modern world. Like a mariner lost upon foreign seas, I sought a friendly shore to step out on so I could learn to walk again. My language became that shore.

I introduce myself by my Ojibway name, according to our traditional protocols, whenever I give a talk. I can ask important questions in my language. I can greet people in the proper manner, and I can pray.

For me, *peendigaen*, come in, meant I could express myself as who I was created to be. That's what this journey is all about—to learn to express yourself as whom you were created to be. You don't need to be a native person to understand that.