

Story of the Eye Tooth

Today, I am going to tell you a story. I wish it was the story of the eye tooth, but I haven't heard of a very interesting story involving eye teeth. The eye tooth's proper name is the cuspid. Doesn't really rhyme with anything, but sounds like cupid or stupid. Now there's a rhyme. Anyway, there's a common mistake people make about cuspids, or eye teeth, dogs have big cuspids, and some human beings have pronounced cuspid teeth too. Or maybe they wish they had big cuspid teeth, but teenagers who wish to be vampires should be left alone, as long as they're not hurting anyone.

Anyway, as I was saying, a lot of people assume that big cuspid teeth mean that you're carnivorous, that is, a meat eater, or a predator type animal, and I know some boyfriend's may seem to be predatory without big cuspids, but the truth is, it's really carnassial teeth that tend to make animals carnivorous, that is meat eating. They're used in tearing and kind of sawing, and carnassial teeth are usually the upper pre molar and the first lower molar and...oh I see. This probably isn't very interesting unless you're a dentist. I'm neither of those things, but I am concerned about teeth.

The thing about teeth is, they're like our children, by that I mean when we are blessed with the gift of a child in our life that's the only one of those we get. I'm not saying, we can't be blessed with more than one child, but they're unique. Same with our teeth. They're unique to each of us. If we don't take care of them, which we should do, because if we don't they go bad. Then what are we going to do? Get dental work? Dentures? Bridges? Get gum surgery? Orthodontics? Teeth whitening? Composite and Porcelain tooth veneers? Implants? Bonding? Fillings? Crowns? Caps? Root Canals? Extractions? Oh my. Wouldn't it be better to avoid all this work by being preventative? Not having to go through these procedures, which can be a little scary. And that's for adults. What about our children? Little ones need lots of care. I'm sure you all know that. Whether that's changing a diaper, helping them use the bathroom if they're a little bigger than

the diaper stage, or even helping them eat food. We do all these things naturally, because we love our little ones. Right?

Let me tell you a story, I like to think of it as a reminder to all of us, a reminder to find the Nanabush in all of us. You know who Nanabush is? I'm using the Ojibway word, but she has many names in all the Native cultures. Anyway, the story. Well, long ago, long long ago, when human beings and animals shared the earth in a way that was much more in balance than today, and human beings and animals actually talked to each other. Treated one another with respect and dignity.

Well anyway, long ago the human children were being looked after by the animals. And the animals were great caregivers. They fed the human children, healthy food mind you. Not sugary stuff. And they cleaned their teeth, because the animals knew how vital our teeth are to our well being. If you get a toothache as an animal it can mean the death of you. So they took extra care to see that the human children had healthy teeth. The animals also made sure the human children were clean, and that they played well with others and each other. And that they didn't run with scissors. Well, o.k. I threw that in, but you get the idea. Well as the human children grew Nanabush would come to visit them from time to time. She loved playing with the children as they were a good reminder to her of why we are here. Some of the purpose in our lives. After a time though, the animals grew concerned. And they expressed their concern to Nanabush. They said to her, "we have a problem with the children."

"What's that?" Nanabush asked.

"Well, the children are human children."

"Yes." Nanabush replied, thinking this was a rather obvious observation.

"Well look at them Nanabush. Don't you see what's wrong?" But Nanabush couldn't really see anything wrong with the children. They were playing happily on the ground. Some sleeping. Some laughing.

"Well, no" Nanabush said, "I don't see any problem. They're on the ground sleeping. Laughing. Doing what human children should do."

“Well that’s it” said the animals. “They’re on the ground. They don’t know how to walk. And we can’t teach them as animals, for we are four legged creatures. Not two legged. Or winged.”

“Good grief” said Nanabush, and she slapped her forehead, kind of like Charlie Brown from the comic strips, but that was still a long way from being invented. “I’ll see to this right away” said Nanabush. And off she went.

Well, Nanabush went to the person who would know how to help with this problem. Manitou. The Creator. Nanabush went to see the Creator, where this was I’m not sure, but I think that place was changed so that all of us could get to it from inside ourselves. Anyway, Nanabush said, “Creator. I need help. The human children don’t know how to walk.” The Creator already knew this of course, but the Creator is polite and let Nanabush have her say.

“Nanabush” said the Creator. I don’t know if that’s a good Creator voice or not, but let’s pretend. “Nanabush. You must travel to the mountains. There you will find some coloured stones. Look for them and you will find them. Then you are to return to the children and you will know what to do. Now go.”

I like to think the Creator was sounding like the Wizard of Oz in that movie, and maybe Nanabush gets real scared and goes running off and dives through a window, but I doubt it. So off Nanabush went. Off to the mountains, and she looked and looked and just as she was about to give up, there she saw, a coloured stone. Round and just right to fit in a pocket. Well as she picked it up, she looked and there was another one. So she picked that one up. And there was another. And another. Soon she had all the coloured stones she could carry and Nanabush returned to the animals and the children. But she was puzzled. What was she to do with the stones? She didn’t know. You’ll know when you get there, she reminded herself. And as Nanabush arrived the animals were very excited, for they hoped Nanabush would have an answer. And she did.

When Nanabush saw the children lying upon the ground, sleeping, laughing, and playing, she knew they must be taught to walk. So she took the stones and threw them into the air over the children. Now had this been more modern times some people would probably freak and think, oh no, those stones

are going to hit those kids. Oh my goodness. But the Creator knew what she was doing when she told Nanabush that she would know the answer, and before the stones even came close to hitting the children or the ground, they changed. Changed into these beautiful, winged creatures of many colours. Now originally, they were called flutter bys, but somehow that got changed to what we know today as butterflies. Lots of butterflies. Well the children were amazed, even the ones sleeping woke up at the commotion, and as the children looked, they reached for these beautiful new creatures that had come to be on the earth. They reached, but the butterflies kept just out of reach, soon, all the children were reaching for them, and as they reached and started to rise up onto their legs to get a better reach, the butterflies moved up and flew higher. Soon all the children were on their legs, reaching, and following the butterflies, and soon, they knew how to walk.

So Nanabush took care of those human children so well. Just as you take care of your children so well. This story, like I said, reminds me that there's a Nanabush in all of us. Reminding us of how important it is to make children our priority. Oh. And the teeth. The eye teeth. Cuspids. Remember that word? No rhyme for cupid or stupid. There's something very important about these teeth. Which was really the reason I wanted to talk to you today. One of the things that makes us all human beings are stories. And this is most important for Native people. Stories tell us who we are. Remind us. Guide us. Teach us how to live. And I couldn't find why cuspids are called eye teeth. But I kind of like to think they can show us something important to see.

There's one practice Native people did from long ago, that I always admired. And it's an art that hasn't been lost. You still see it today and can learn it today. It involves the bark of the birch tree. Birch bark biting. Now originally Native people would bite the bark of birch trees, mind you, it had to be of a certain thickness, you didn't just go rip off a piece of bark from any old birch tree and start chewing on it like a beaver, you had to have the right thickness. Beavers can do that 'cause trees are like their natural food. Come to think of it traditional native foods weren't things like sugary drinks and chips and sweets, it

was things like moose and berries and wild rice. Mmmm. Anyway, once you prepared the birch bark by finding the right thickness, then you would fold the bark and bite it. Creating beautiful patterns. Patterns that were used to guide decoration on our clothing, and also just for the sheer beauty of what birch bark bitings are. The thing is, you need cuspids to do this art. This craft that Native people have done for thousands of years. Eye teeth. See. If you don't take care of your teeth, or your children's, you might not be able to do something that reminds you of who you are. Now I'm not saying you have to bite birch bark to be Native, but wouldn't you like to be able to do it if you wanted to? To have the choice? Sure you would. And your children want that choice too. But they need your help. Just as you help teach them to walk like butterflies and Nanabush, you need to teach them how to take care of their teeth until they're old enough to do it on their own. And what greater gift can you give your children, than to remind them of who they are. And where they come from. Thanks for listening. Meegwetch.