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The Feather

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The drums pounded. The distant echoes of feet striking the ground in unison equally roared into the dusk air. The crackling of the large fire that was created was scarcely heard above the stomping, chanting and the intense rhythms of the handmade drums. The children watch in awe of their elders, experienced in traditional dance and song. The sight of the celebration is nearly as intense as the sounds and alluring smells from the various meats and bread being cooked wafting through the air. It is a night of celebration. Fall and winter are approaching, signaling the impending finish of the hard work of farming season. As the summer winds down and the nights become cooler, it becomes storytelling season. Storytelling is not only for teaching, but entertainment and reward for the excellent work that the community has put forth during the balmy summers. The stories always hold significance and deeper meaning, either about interactions with family and community, or about the wonder and amazement of earth's capabilities. The celebrations that occur last for hours and contain food, song, dance and storytelling by a respected and talented elder. The stories are told near the end of the evening, often around a fire because the air has chilled without the warmth of the sun.

When the storytelling (signaled by a single beating drum) is about to begin, the children, losing stamina from the rigorous dances, are all eager to take a seat on handmade pillows in front of the storyteller's tree trunk perch. The small toddlers sit at the front of the crowd, tilting their tiny heads upwards to look up at the majestic storyteller sitting there, smoking a birch bark pipe filled with natural tobacco, a successful yearly crop and one of great value in trade. The young children seat themselves behind the toddlers, some with cooing siblings on their laps. The taller children and adolescents fill out the back rows, respecting not to block the view of the storyteller. It is a known attribute of the stories that are told to be visual and expressive, the body movements contributing as much to the story as the words.

As the rest of the crowd assembles, the boisterous chaos has dulled to a low murmur with the occasional excitable giggle or shriek from a child. A wave of silence washes over the crowd as the storyteller holds up her hands to attract everyone's attention. She is an older woman, dressed in a deer skin outfit, complete with detailed moccasins. She has dark black hair with a few random wisps of silver. Already the crowd can see she looks very wise. She has the most beautiful chocolate brown eyes that capture the attention of everyone she makes eye contact with. A few observant members of the crowd notice she is delicately holding a large eagle feather. She lifts the feather to the sky and smiles, reflecting on the beauty and endless stories that are possible from such a seemingly



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simple but, in fact, complex object. She twirls the stem between her thumb and forefinger, still admiring the strength and grace of this glorious eagle's feather. She adjusts her gaze to the intently quiet audience who are watching this magnificent woman take in so much pleasure from observing the natural wonder.

"Men, women, fellow elders, children" she begins, gesturing her graceful hand towards the crowd, "we are all unique, special and hold talents that contribute to who we are. We all, however, share a common bond. Together you create a community; a loving place of being that creates, recognizes and supports each individual's creativity and strength". It was at this point the storyteller lifts the feather back into the air and states: "In many ways a community is like this feather".

The crowd exchanges questioning glances as they ponder, some aloud, how a small and delicate feather could possibly be compared to a large and strongly bonded community. Everyone felt this community was one of the strongest and hardest working in the area. The storyteller held her hands in the air to signal silence once again so she can continue telling the story. Immediately the crowd hushed, everyone intrigued with curiosity by this woman and the wisdom in her story.

"A feather is like a community in many ways. In strength, purpose, function and structure" she continues, repeating her opening idea. "Each element of a feather is similar and can be related to a community, and the ways in which that community functions."

The crowd is captivated at the introduction and natural ability of the storyteller to hold the focus of such a large gathering of people. Even the small children stay completely focused on her. Storytelling has been passed down through her family, and it is evident she has had years of practice and experience watching other members of her family, learning their stories and applying her own flair. The members of the community standing now settle into a more comfortable and traditional seated position sitting atop their folded legs.

"The stem" she continues, pausing dramatically to run her fingers over the centre of the feather, "is the central and seemingly most important part of a feather. The stem in your community would be the chief. The duty of the chief is to create order, to support each individual in their talents and life calling. The chief essentially is a central element, holding everyone in a community together for a common goal. Each hair of the feather represents a person in the community. Although the stem and the chief are both of great importance, both rely on the numerous hairs and members of their tribe to function. Without the strands of a feather, the stem would be just a branch, just as a chief without a tribe would feel not feel a greater sense of purpose. Likewise, assortments of hairs need a stem to hold them together and guide them through the air, just as a chief is needed to guide everyone in a community on a productive and cooperative path. Neither is more or



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less important because without one another, the purpose of the other could not and would not be fulfilled. It is possible to succeed as individuals, but working together produces a greater reward for all involved."

Thoughtful looks cross the faces of the members of the community, including the chief. Being chief is a great honour and privilege but he knows without the members of his great community he would not be the great and wonderful leader he has become. With a small smile and nod of approval the storytelling continues...

"The duty and strength of a feather is also to be marveled. For the size of a feather, the incredible amount of responsibility and importance placed upon it is noteworthy. Imagine a seemingly delicate object that enables a living animal to fly, sometimes quite impressively for great distances at great height, fighting the elements and avoiding attackers. Even small communities share this great duty of responsibility by taking on the remarkable tasks of raising children, creating food and clothing, and being self-sufficient in the community for the needs and necessities of life. Creating and maintaining a functioning community is no small task, just as flying is no small task for a feather."

By this point the storyteller has already won the respect of the entire crowd with her divine wisdom and experienced technique of storytelling. The children have shuffled forward, and are now sitting right at the feet of the storyteller. She pauses between each detail of the intricately woven story of ideas to decide which element to discuss next. Often her stories begin with a framework that she spontaneously elaborates on, rather than some of the traditional stories or myths that cannot be changed because of the sacred or enduring themes. She felt some subjects were better left to the individuality of each crowd, especially on subjects such as family and community. This thought led her to the next similarity that feathers and community share...

She again lifts the feather to full view and continues with her wisdom. "This particular feather is one of great beauty. This feather is large and rigid. The colours blend together but also appear individually. If I were to find another great feather of equal beauty and strength, it would not be exactly the same as this feather. No two feathers are ever alike, just as no two communities or people are ever alike. Feathers may have different duties but overall work to help the animal. Despite the small differences in the feathers, they all serve a purpose: to assist with flying, or to keep the animal warm, or to support the weight of a bird hovering in the water. Some feathers steer, some support, some guide the direction of flight- all important necessities of a flying animal. All feathers have a purpose and a reason for existing. All feathers, even the different branches of feathers work together, because cooperation produces a better outcome with more reward and less exertion. The important similarity to all feathers and communities alike is that regardless of the size of the feather it still contributes to a phenomenal obligation of duty. Even small feathers and small strands of a feather are hard working and equally important to



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the overall movement of a feather".

The community unanimously agrees that working together is more effective. Farming season is ending, and the gathering knows without working together, their continued success of farming and trading would not be possible. Each person may be in charge of a different task but all duties lead to a parallel goal.

“This feather is missing some strands but it is still beautiful to admire. A feather is fragile yet strong. If it becomes tousled or injured by wind, rain or natural happenings that occur, the strong bonds of the feather hold it together until the difficult times have passed. Should the feather become damaged, the other parts balance the extra work among themselves until the feather is rebuilt, helping others along the way. Every piece is important to making a feather work correctly, and the loss of strands can be difficult, but, with the help of others the community as a whole can heal. Slight flaws in the structure of a feather are normal, the feather can sense and adapt to this difficulty. In times of hardship and damage a community and a feather both learn the benefits of working together.”

The storyteller pauses to inhale another puff of her birch bark pipe and considers the next piece of wisdom she wants to share. After a short pause she continues...

“Sometimes the strands of a feather start moving in a wrong or dangerous direction. It is to be expected by the fellow strands to guide the strayed fibers in the right direction, unconditionally, without holding a grudge or judgment even if the overturned feathers have affected them. A single movement affects the whole feather, just as one person without similar goals would affect a community. The stronger the bond in a community, the less resistance and troubles will be faced later on. Connectivity between people and between the sections of a feather is why both are so successful if those important connections are maintained. Respect and love one another, and work together as a community. Be like the feather, soft yet strong with considerable potential to do great things by working together”

With her story complete, she stands and faces the crowd to voice a quotation important to her that she uses to complete every story she tells: "Kishpin bontoyeg kidatsokanan, kiga onikemin kajibikinamagoyeg" (If we cease sharing our stories, our knowledge becomes lost). The community bursts into cries of praise and admiration of the storyteller and her impressive insight. Each person stops to thank her for the entertainment and education she has provided them.

As the crowd disperses back to their respective homes, the overall atmosphere is one of quiet reflection. Satisfied smiles and thoughtful expressions cross the faces of the crowd. They all look forward to hearing another great story in time, but will never forget



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the story of the feather.

Author's Statement:

I was inspired to write “The Feather” last year after I had finished reading the “Our Story” anthology that I had received as a top ten finalist in the 2006 Canadian Aboriginal Writing Challenge. As I finished the collection of unbelievable stories, I was looking at the cover which featured a picture of a feather. As I was looking at the cover of the book I was thinking about the main themes of the anthology being a sense of community, the importance of elders, and the role of symbols in aboriginal culture. I began to think of how I could connect a sacred symbol such as a feather to the great sense of community aboriginal people share. Since storytelling is a large part of aboriginal culture, I felt the best way to portray the comparison between a feather and a community was to have a respected elderly storyteller sharing a captivating story on why a feather and community, seemingly so different, are quite similar. Both feathers and community are important in aboriginal culture, and linking the two seemed only a natural subject for a story.

I also chose to incorporate other aboriginal characteristics, such as the end of summer celebration as the setting for a storytelling gathering; the physical and emotional expression of the storyteller; the nature and community oriented theme of the story; the birch bark pipe; the elements of education and entertainment in a story and the inherited flair of storytelling passed down through generations.

Storytelling is such a powerful and beautiful aspect of aboriginal culture, and I hope I was able to capture the emotion and education that goes into performing a story that has meaning and the ability to connect to an audience that can relate to the subject.