

## Reintroducing Traditional Foods Into The Community

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Salish Foods, Culture and Medicines Workshop

Center for World Indigenous Studies

Lummi Nation May 8th 2004

Reintroducing traditional foods into my community: It has been something I've wanted to do for a long time. What I had wanted to do was the 'First Salmon Ceremony' that they do here. Our ceremonies were outlawed up until 1978 when Jimmy Carter signed the "Freedom of Indian Religion Act."

When I was in college at the Santa Fe Institute for Arts and Crafts we used to bring the Hopi people to talk about their prophecies. They have petroglyphs that show there is a line, they call it a road, and it is the life path we are supposed to be on. But in World War II it split, one road goes up and on forever, and one road just goes a short way and it ends. And that's the bad road and the one we've been on.

The way for us to get back on the good road is really simple, it's just through prayer and getting back in touch with the creator and getting the spirituality back in our lives. So that's been always in the back of my mind in what our people need for healing.

I came to the first Salish Foods Workshop at Nisqually with Dr. Leslie Korn and Dr. Rudy Ryser and I was so excited, because this is what I've been wanting to do my whole life and it gave me a focus, what to do and how to do it. Diabetes on my reservation hasn't been a gradual thing; it has been a sudden explosion. I'm one; I got it a few years ago. It seems to be mostly people hitting middle age that are developing this. It hits varied lifestyles, some people drank a lot, I didn't. Weight is an issue for me but there are some people who are in shape who have developed diabetes and that concerned me.

And yet the day before yesterday Leslie was talking about the medicines you get from the doctor and side effects. Some side effects are really severe, and if there is a side effect I'll get it. Some of the drugs control your blood sugar, but they'll destroy your kidney in the process. And there's another class of drugs that's even stronger, an older one that will control your blood sugar but destroy your liver. And so, I wanted to find methods to help people without these dangerous side effects. The side effect is death; they'll prolong your life from diabetes, but they'll destroy your organs, which will kill you. So that was another thing I wanted to address. This workshop gave me the inspiration. I organized a traditional foods dinner to reintroduce the foods and the medicines.

Originally we just invited the elders from all three bands; the *S'klallam* is made up of three surviving bands. It was with the elders and we talked about all of this. We asked them to remember the medicines and the foods and we asked them what they wanted us to provide at the next dinner.

And it did bring up issues. One of the things we discovered when we were looking for traditional foods is that some don't exist anymore. When I was a kid the wild goose berry was really common but I couldn't find it last summer, and I talked to some of the elders who they told me where there had been patches that don't exist anymore. Salmon berries are disappearing; we still have them but they are not as abundant as they used to be and that makes me angry. It makes you

sad; it makes you angry.

And then it does bring up the issue of the genocide. The fact that our religion was outlawed, our food was deliberately cut off from us, the fight we've had to have to be able to fish. Before the boat decision, Natives weren't allowed to fish, it was a sport of the white man and illegal. My Dad fished at night and he was always worried that someone would see the smoke from the smokehouse and that he would be arrested. And the same with shellfish, we had to fight for all of that so it did bring up all of those emotions.

That was a problem with non-Native staff; they didn't want to hear that native medicine was better for us. They didn't want to hear that there were other methods of healing, and they sabotaged some of the work. I'm on disability so I don't have much money, if I did I would have funded the dinners myself.

But I worked through the diabetes program and we organized volunteers.

Some of the problems were with the non-Indian staff, the nurses and nutritionists. What I'm saying goes against their field; I'm saying that our traditional foods save us, the modern American diet is killing us as is the food pyramid they believe in.

(I think part of the reason I got sick is that I ate the wrong food the other day; I had bagels and cream cheese and I don't tolerate dairy but I like the taste of the cream cheese so I had it.)

We had people volunteer. You see, on reservations when there is a funeral people will come together to provide food, so we already had a system of donated food, we just asked a fisherman to provide us with a fish, a hunter to get us a deer. Ducks are one of the ceremonial foods we have to have. They are getting hard to get out where I am from. After the first dinner (and it was successful, they filmed it), the staff started to get more and more interested and when they did their end-of-year report, they got a really good response. (They took credit for it.) It was a little easier as we went along to participate, but they didn't understand ceremony and sacred foods.

When I said we had to have duck they wanted to substitute pheasant. Now I love pheasant and we could have had that too, but we had to have duck. Huckleberries are also one of the sacred foods we have. We used to have a thanksgiving ceremony just for huckleberries, and I did a study on the huckleberries and everything they do, and just like Leslie said, especially for diabetics they're important. Our nurse wanted us to use blueberries because we could just buy those, and that's one of the fights we are still having. I wanted to go out and pick the huckleberries because I do believe that the creator provided foods for our bodies from where ever we're from.

The other berry that has been really important in our culture we call '*swassem*'. It has become harder to find because of spraying on the road. We get it near Port Townsend. You know people are buying up land and a lot of our plants that we need to get are on private land. A few years ago when they found out that Indian people were picking these berries, they called the county and had them sprayed, so they don't grow in a lot of areas. After our first workshop I spent two years on a quest to find the berries; we found them last summer finally. I would drive all over and talk to people about what they remembered; patches they remembered don't exist anymore, so we found some new ones. And we hadn't gathered from them. My Mom did when she was young. My cousins and I found this patch on the beach in Port Townsend and it was right on the banks, so it was straight up and down. We sent my male cousin up to pick a few berries, because he could climb up. And he'd pick a few and slide back down, climb up and pick a few and slide back down, and when we told people about it they looked at us like we were nuts because that's not the way you gather them! You put a sheet down and shake the bush until the ripe ones fall off. So we learned that.

The younger people don't go out and get devilfish or octopus anymore and two of my young cousins used to go out with

their grandfather; they were talking to each other about that. That was one of the best times of their life. So in talking they were trying to remember the procedures and what they did. They went out a few times and tried things and talked some more. Eventually they were able to get it and remember what their grandpa did. So they became really proficient, and they would get it for the dinners. One has moved to the east coast but the younger one, he went out and got us some for the dinner before, and for last dinner we had when Rudy and Leslie came, he took two younger boys out and taught them how to do it. So now we have three other people who can do it.

One summer I took out some young people, some teenage kids that were in the youth program (and this just blows my mind); they didn't know huckleberries were edible. I just couldn't believe that that was possible, but it just pointed out how we're not handing down the teachings. That we're not doing it consciously with intent and we need to start. So we had these kids take some to the elders who were so happy to get it because they can't go out and gather anymore. And our oldest lady cried when she got hers. It made such an impact on them, it meant so much to get something they couldn't go out and get themselves.

About having dinners - it is just such a healing thing. It will start when you start it; it's as simple as that. I tried to interest my Council in doing this, people in power, but they were interested in other things. I think it has to begin at the community level with the people.

There was a lot of reluctance, people thought it wasn't possible. People think they don't know anything but they do, and it's just a matter of bringing out the memory. People won't talk at first because they think they don't know enough or don't know much, or they're not sure. But in just talking amongst themselves, the memory will be triggered. That's what we did in the beginning, just asked people to talk. We just had a small round table and a few elders from each band.

One of the elders talked about the potato we used to have, and that's the quest I'm on now, trying to find it. He's in his late eighties now. He and my dad and another man used to go camping when they were teenagers on the rivers further west, and eat what they caught. He said the potatoes grew above on the hill, but the roots grew out of the bank so they could reach and pick them like apples. We don't eat them anymore and I want to find them.

At our dinner we got some from the Makah, they're called *ozette spuds*, the tribes are reintroducing them. I heard that around Vancouver that the *Katze* Band has found their traditional potato. Theirs grew in a swamp and they rescued it, are replanting and taking care of it and it's growing again. I think it's really important to do that. We have it in our power now to rescue things, and we have to, we have to find ways because they're disappearing.

In my quest for healing of the tribes I think it came to this, starting at ground zero, with food. Our teaching is that the first law of the chief is to feed the people, and I think that's ground zero where we start. Our sister Vera was concerned about me when I got sick, part of it being in a *smokehouse* again, part of it being in Lummi, where I was initiated, and then the food. So the food triggers the Indian spirit. It's really important, we do have a spirit that we do have to feed and the food is a part of that.

I'll say a couple of things about Leslie, and her work. I've been going to her for almost two years, a year and a half right now. I had gotten really sick and had a cancer scare, and I was tired, totally burned out. I had no energy; I didn't have the energy to fight off cancer if that was what it was. Leslie invited me, started doing the treatments that she was showing us here, and I think that saved my life. I know it did. It was a turning point in how I take care of myself and how I view myself. It's given me my life back and my energy; I really appreciate that.

One time I was in Olympia and I got a spider bite. I got really sick, I had the chills, and I couldn't sit up straight. I was

going to go home to see my doctor, but a friend told me to go see Leslie, and I did. She told me about a treatment using vitamin C. She told me to take 2000 mg every hour. The flesh around the spider bite got really hard, and then it started eating a hole down into my leg, it looked like it reached a vein and I got really scared. Leslie told me to keep taking vitamin C until I got diarrhea and that that was a sign of saturation in the body. I never reached that point, but the symptoms started abating right away and it did heal. I have trouble taking antibiotics, so this really helped me and I want to thank Leslie. And for having me here allowing me to tell about my program. I thank all of you for listening.

*Monica Charles is a Native writer and storyteller from the Lower Elwah S'klallam Indian Band on the Olympic peninsula. She is very involved in community activism and has committed her life to fighting for better living conditions and health of Native peoples through reviving cultural traditions. It was because of her initiative that the S'klallam biannual traditional foods feast was very successfully reintroduced into her community and already is spreading into other tribes as well.*