

Yá gaaw ch'a yéi iguwáatl' ax tuwáa sigóo x' axwdataani. Yax yeidi yoo xat duwasáákw. Chaak. Doclawaytee naax xát sitee. Angoon kwáan áyá xát. Lingít áyá xát. Lingít sh tóo xaltóow. In this brief Tlingit introduction, I said that I would like to speak for just a short while. I explained that my Tlingit name is *Yax yeidi*, and that I am of the eagle moiety and of the killer whale clan from Angoon, Alaska. I ended by identifying myself as a Tlingit and explained that I am learning the Tlingit language.

Last June, I spent a week in Juneau, Alaska with a group of 20 Native kids at a Tlingit culture camp. I was the only kid living outside of Alaska to attend the “Latseen Leadership Training,” which is sponsored by the Sealaska Heritage Institute. *Latseen* is a Tlingit word that literally means “strength.” The camp focused on strengthening Native youth leaders in order to preserve the Tlingit culture. At this camp, I participated in several cultural activities that I had never experienced before. Through these activities, I gained a greater appreciation of who I am and a greater sense of belonging within my Native community.

On my first day, we honored the memory of our ancestors by restoring a Tlingit graveyard. A local cemetery groundskeeper first spoke with us about the importance of honoring our ancestors, and respecting our elders and the dead. When we first arrived, I was shocked at the decrepit state of the graveyard. It had been neglected for many years. Moss covered the crumbling headstones and the high grass was almost up to my knees. My displeasure with the state of the graveyard motivated me to work hard and help beautify the area. As a group, we cut the thick, tall, rough crab grass, pulled up the stubborn weeds, and brushed moss and dead leaves off the grave stones. However, I focused most of my attention and efforts on rehabilitating a small prayer house that I know would have collapsed if I leaned on it. I washed its windows, cut the surrounding grass and supported its sides with bricks. I did so knowing that this house is a place where we could connect with our ancestors through prayer. This place of worship was too important to let crumble away. After a few hours spent cleaning up the area, the graveyard was once again recognizable as a place of respect where our ancestors were properly laid to rest. We then repeated prayers in Tlingit and left our work behind us. As I walked away, I looked back at our work and the little prayer house. I felt content in our

work and proud that we had restored this sacred place to an appearance worthy of respect and recognition of the memory of our ancestors.

Through another activity, I gained appreciation for our spiritual relationship to the land and the gifts it offers us as Native people. This activity involved a hike to collect the ingredients to make a traditional Tlingit salve. Tlingit people have used devil's club for medicinal purposes for centuries. Yet, I was skeptical that the salve we made would be comparable to the usefulness of Neosporin, as we were told. The trail took us through beautiful old growth forest and along a rushing river. When I identified the necessary ingredients, I remembered what I had learned about the importance of showing my gratitude for the gifts I was about to receive from the land. I gingerly stepped around the fragile plants and carefully plucked devil's club stalk and collected tree sap. In place of these gifts, I offered a few strands of my hair. It is Tlingit custom to give something of yourself back to the land when it gives to you. Gifts of the land are sacred. Unlike in western cultures, Tlingit people work with the land as opposed to extracting from it. Respect has to be shown. We recited Tlingit phrases in gratitude, and when we removed the palm fronds and pulp from the stalk, we returned them to nature.

Later, we boiled the ingredients to make the salve. I combined my ingredients with a block of honeycomb wax and watched as it simmered into the desired consistency. I decided to test my salve on my mosquito bites and the scratches on my ankles and arms. I methodically dabbed the now solidified waxy salve on each little red spot and patted every little scratch. I waited. The itchiness soon stopped. Two days later, my bug bites and scratches were mostly healed. My previous skepticism gave way to delight. I had created a traditional medicine, known as the "Tlingit aspirin," that my ancestors used to treat ailments ranging from coughs and colds, to tuberculosis. The sacred process of working with the land had yielded a medicine as powerful as any western medicine.

Another activity that has great meaning for us as Tlingit people is subsistence fishing and hunting. Harvesting food from the sea and returning some of that harvest is an important part of Tlingit life. We experienced this by skinning, carving and dissecting a seal that had given itself to us. I had never skinned or cut anything open before, other than a worm in my 7th grade biology class. Before we got started, the man who procured the seal introduced himself in the traditional Tlingit way. I was never so grateful for

verbosity. The boys who were accomplished hunters quickly went to work cutting open the seal and pulling out the entrails. I turned away and plugged my nose. Slowly, I turned back towards them. I was nervous and apprehensive as I gazed at my blood-smeared friends, but I ended up standing right between two of them, and intently watched them work. A short time later, I found myself asking if I could try my hand at skinning the seal. I had a ridiculous smile plastered on my face as I took the knife and gave it a try. I quickly wrapped the skin taunt around my hand. I was surprised by my eagerness. I took great care in not taking too much meat from the carcass and not cutting any holes in the fur coat. I was methodical and keenly focused on my task. In these moments I had a revelation. While I had started the day disgusted, by day's end I was actually skinning a seal. I did not have the same mentality I had even a few hours earlier. After the meat was filleted and stored, the seal parts were divided amongst our group. True to Tlingit values, nothing was wasted.

The camp also involved a total immersion into the Tlingit language. Language is an important part of any culture. Learning the language of my ancestors brought me closer to them, and to fully realizing my own Native identity. A major focus in our daily language class was learning how to introduce ourselves properly in Tlingit. This forced me to delve into my Tlingit genealogy. As Tlingits, we identify ourselves as members of a group or clan rather than as individuals. Developing my Tlingit introduction became a study of not only my own family, but our clan memberships. I sought answers from relatives I had not spoken to in a long time. I learned more about my clan, and my father and grandfather's clans, and how to say these clan names in Tlingit. It was exciting that as I learned the Tlingit language, I also learned more about my own family and its place within Tlingit group or clan structure.

Our final assignment involved making a video that highlighted how we had grown and changed over the week. My group decided to tell a story that paralleled Dorothy's journey in *The Wizard of Oz*. Dorothy searched for home only to find that she was home all along. Similarly, I searched for a home in my culture only to come to the same conclusion: I had always had a home in my culture; I just needed to embrace it.

When I arrived at camp, I could not help feeling like an outsider. Many of the other kids came from villages in Southeast Alaska where everyone knows everyone and

where Tlingit culture thrives. In contrast, I live in a city where we do not even know all our neighbors and where Native cultural activities are not as abundant. Through my experiences, however, I came away feeling a strong spiritual connection to the Tlingit culture. I have a greater appreciation of what it means to be Tlingit. I realize I do not have to speak Tlingit, skin a seal, or have a full blood quantum in order to be Tlingit. My greater understanding of traditional Native values, my willingness to embrace them, and my excitement over my involvement in my culture, is what it means to me to be Tlingit.

Gunalchéesh ax x' éitdei kayees. aaxí. Thank you for listening to me.
Gunalchéesh. Thank you.