Wawezhi’aa

The drums were given to us to help the Anishinaabe people, not just in dire times but also celebrations (births of a child, jobs to name a few). Sometimes because of the many downs we have, we seem to think that the drum is only helping us when were in need and perhaps that is true. Many people do come to the drum for assistance, there’s a lot of not good things that happen in our community that we hope the drums will assist with. That is what I see a majority of the dishes I have seen lately are for things that aren’t positive.

One of the things I want to talk about this month is the wawezhi’aa and just like in past articles that this is my interpretation of how to do this ceremony. I know other places and drums do it differently, I do it as I was taught years ago. My understanding is that the ceremony is to help those that are in mourning of a lost loved one, it is to help them through that process. Now again some people may do it different, but usually at the funerals there’s a bundle that is put by the casket. That bundle is usually brought to a drum keeper, some of the teachings I’ve been told is that the funeral bundle is given to a non-local drum keeper because if they were to give that to someone local because once that bundle is opened and the clothes of the deceased are walking about it might bring up further grief of that family. In addition, use our drums in the spring and fall, if the bundle is given around the spring time, then I would tell the family that they are able to have one year to process their grief. That following spring is when we could conduct the wawezhi’aa ceremony. Shortly after my discharge from the military, I was discharged in the spring (April to be in fact) I went to a drum ceremony and people there were glad to see me and they told me that they were going to do the wawezhi’aa ceremony. The drum keeper and the head warrior came over and told me they could use me for this ceremony so I immediately agreed. They told me a little bit of what will be going on, at that time I was put as the 4th Ogichidaa (or veteran), just to follow the others in line and listen and watch what happens. After you dance around and mark the individuals, I was supposed to tell the people why I am allowed to do this. The first two Ogichidaa during that ceremony were WW2 veterans, when the first one got done, he talked about his experiences during his service. I was taken back to my service a little bit. When the second Ogichidaa got up and spoke, I really felt deep feelings for these guys for what they had gone through during their service. And the third Ogichidaa served in Korea, and even he made his service sound more like a little like a horror story. He told the people about when he was sitting in the truck at night with his wounded comrade and the temperature was below freezing by the way you could see their breathe. And the Ogichidaa knew that his comrade was in trouble and pain so he looked at his comrade and the last words out of the comrade’s mouth was “goodbye” as he froze to death. And I still use part of that talk today, that they have seen life leave this earth. And now I am up there talking as the 4th Ogichidaa, I mentioned that I wore the uniform, fought in combat, ended up wounded, and seen blood on the battlefield. Very short and to the point, just enough. To this day I was shook by what I had heard come from those veterans’ mouths.

I was involved in a few more after that. I never really learned back then just always following everyone else, it felt good helping people through that mourning process. One day after we had got done with that ceremony an elder gentleman approached me and said “you know joe you might be leading these sometime in the future” this was before I was into learning everything about the dances. “I did these a while back and I just wanted to tell you how I do it, this is the way I was taught by some of the elders that did this before me” he said and I really took to listening because I really vividly remember that conversations. Not too long after I was made 1st Ogichidaa which is the position that leads the ceremony. When we did this for the first time I did it the way he told me, no complaints and the people were happy I did it. After a few more then there was one day when I was at a non-local dance and the members had asked me to assist them to be lead Ogichidaa. And as I started to do it the way I was taught one of the singers yelled at me “joe you’re doing it wrong” so that some of the people in the audience yelled back “joe you’re doing it right keep going” and this banter went back and forth so I stopped the ceremony right there as they kept discussing the way that the ceremony is done. Eventually they said “Joe, you’re doing it right” to which the singer that started it just got up and left the dance hall, I thought half of the dance hall would leave and they didn’t. After I got done with that, it’s when I decided whenever anyone’s asks me to do this no matter the reservation, I tell them “Yeah, I can lead this but I am going to do this the way I was taught. And if you’re not okay with that please find someone else and I will follow their lead.” Since then, no one has objected to that.

Now a little bit about the Ogichidaag, I think I’ve read it where because of what those veterans have seen and been through in combat they were the ones to help people in their communities with tough things. I remember my uncle once saying “these veterans have seen a lot of pain both emotional and physical, some guys lose it out there because death is not an easy thing to see. And some of them have taken life as well as see life leave, if need be, a solider takes life. That is one of the toughest things to do” he said. But it is something that the solider has to deal with, there is a lot asked of them. This is why we have those Ogichidaag perform that for us.

I remember him talking about the wawezhi’aa ceremony, long time ago there was a Bwan (Dakota Man) that belonged on the drum and he had a son who he was very proud of for the things his son was able to accomplish in his life. The son sadly passed away and when that happen the man lost his faith and began to talk bad about the powers at be. In addition, he also quit going to the dances and stopped taking care of everything in his life from his body to his mind. But people kept coming to him and asking him to come back but every time he refused to come back due to his current state. After a while he did decide to come back, once he did, they performed this ceremony. They washed him up, washed his hair, hands, feet and the veterans put those marks on him, after this is done that is when the community will get up and give them gifts. The drum members start first then everyone else in the audience and once this is complete then the speaker will tell them one final message “now that you’ve done this it is time to let that person go, it won’t be easy but its necessary for your life. While we let them go don’t forget them, especially if they visit you in your dreams then set a dish or if you’re thinking of them set a dish”. After that the man will get up and dance with the person who brought you to that seat, and with every step you take it’ll take your pain away because you have the community dancing with you agreeing to help you during this time.

The drums in the community that do these ceremonies are the Bwanzhii-dewe’iganag. This is what my uncle said long time ago, there could be different stories but this is one I have taken to heart. I could easily understand the losing of faith, as I did that for a split second when I lost my late wife. The thoughts that filled my mind were very similar to that man in the story so I can feel for him. And I have been in the chair during the ceremony, and I’m probably still here because it really does work if you let it. It is a very strong and powerful ceremony for us as Anishinaabe to use when our people are grieving. This is just the basics to the ceremony, perhaps in the future we will get deeper in to the interworking’s of the ceremony. For example, like who do we wash up? Some only do members on the drum. Some of them also make women that get washed be “honorary” members, and how that affects the drum going on. I asked my uncle one time “why don’t you do that?” “I want them to come because they want to, not because they have to” he said. Just because I’ve done it for a long time doesn’t mean I have all the answers. There are many things that we do on the drum that people may not fully understand, and maybe it’s our job to teach those so that they feel more comfortable to ask the drum for help when it is their time in need. Miigwech, Mii iw.