Joe’s journey: When I began talking (maajii-gaagiigidoyaan)

This month I’d like to tell the story of how I started talking at the dances. Sometimes people will ask me about the first time I ever started talking at the ceremonial dances, and dishes. It must have been about almost 30 years ago while I was attending a dance and a well-respected elder said to us younger guys “some of you better start learning how to do this, we won’t be around forever”. I have been to the dances all my life and I have sat on them since I was about 8 years old. But up to that point in life I was almost distracted while attending and thus not paying close attention. I never was worried that these guys speaking wouldn’t be around forever and felt didn’t need to learn the talks. Every once and a while I would pick up a thing or two. Looking back, I wish that I would have listened better.

When I was at that dance one of the ladies that sat on the drum offered me asemaa and asked me to talk for the bundles. I began by looking around the dance hall for anyone else that could do it. I couldn’t see anyone that would be able to, so with that I looked at her and said “yeah I can do that”. Then I could feel those words re-enter my mind. When I got up, I was so nervous, seeing many of those elder women that aren’t around anymore, I was sweating and almost having second thoughts about speaking. Then I remember some things my uncle and other old men used to say and went for it. It was short and sweet to the point kind of talk. I kept looking over at them old ladies for their expression, and to my surprise they were neutral. After I was done the ceremony went on like normal. After a while I had some people come up to me and say I did great, and some would let me know some things/spirits to include and or advice in the future talks. That’s where I think I started to really listen to the speakers, after all these decades of going, that is what brought me to truly listen. Shortly after that I was put on another drum as a “speaker” position. A few of the elders that were on that drum told to me that “you can come to us if you need help/advice” I can remember one elder gentleman even gave me his phone number to talk.

You bet I took it and ran with it, and with that my talks developed. A nice side effect was that I started going to many other dances, something that I do to this day. I still am learning from those speakers. Learning every time, I have approached a speaker, they have been nothing but helpful. One speaker I can remember telling me when I asked if I could use that time “it’s not mine, it's all of ours to use”. So, when you hear me talk those are talks, I learned from other people. We are a very verbal people, and we learn a lot from listening to other people. I also don’t consider myself a fluent speaker, and I will never stop learning both in my language and in English. Everyone has something to teach the world, and I will be doing that until I am in the grave. I also went and got an education at SCSU where I learned how to talk to our own native people. Another person I learn from is a Dakota friend while we are on our little road trips. But he is just one among many that teach me and help keeping my talks developing. I am very thankful to all them and I think everyone should hear what everyone else has to say because it has helped me developed as a person spiritually and behaviorally. Language is an ongoing learning experiences that I wish I would have done years ago. But maybe that is how creator planned for me to do. These are just some things I think about when being asked about my journey through this life. I know for sure that I will keep trying and learning especially a young man that I am helping to speak for our dances and dishes. I encourage people to learn so that they can understand and speak the language. Sometimes I ask people “do you understand what I told you?” and they will tell me “No” so I tell them “Come over some time and I will tell you about it” so that people can grow as individuals in our ceremonies. There are no “stupid” questions when it comes to our ceremonies, language, and your own development because if we can’t answer the question, we will know who to talk to. Continue learning, never stop. I went to a dance down in Menominee this last weekend and learned some spiritual teachings still at my age. Miigwech mii iw.