

Identity

Robert Francis
MAIF Gathering
September 2014

Complete and Uncut Version

Top 10 Things You Can Say To Impress A White Person Upon First Meeting:



- #10. How much white are you?
- #9. I'm *part* white myself, you know.
- #8. I learned all your people's ways in the Boy Scouts (*Order of the Bullet*).
- #7. My great-great-grandmother was a *full-blooded white-American princess*.
- #6. Funny, you don't *look* white.
- #5. Where's your powdered wig?
- #4. Do you live in a covered wagon?
- #3. What's the meaning behind the square dance?
- #2. What's your feeling about river-boat casinos? Do they *really* help your people, or are they just a short-term fix?
- #1. Oh wow, I really *love* your hair!

Please accept this in the spirit of tongue-in-cheek humor in which it is offered, and please don't try any of these at your next job interview.

This list was compiled in the Francis family living room in Bates County, Missouri and was first published in the Spring 2001 issue of Signals: Newsletter of the Indian Fellowships of Missouri (Now Mid American Indian Fellowships). Since that time, this list has appeared in whole or in part (without citation) in uncounted e-mail posts on websites and in at least one published textbook. I have read this list to American Indian audiences and to predominantly non-Indian audiences. The reactions are remarkably different. Indians tend to laugh more loudly as the list progresses. Non-Indians laugh politely at the first one or two, then laughter decreases as brows furrow with confusion. Why is the list funny to American Indian people? I think it's because this list has to do with....

Identity Issues

I can't know for sure, but I suspect that every American Indian person deals with Identity issues. At the back of every mind is the question: "Am I a *real* Indian, or more precisely, am I a real Cherokee, a real Miami, a real Apache, a real Lakota, etc., etc.? The reason for this may be found in hundreds of years of identity attacks orchestrated by colonizing

cultures. The strategy of colonizers in dealing with indigenous peoples has been and continues to be - either kill them outright or kill them as tribal peoples. "Kill the Indian but save the man" was the motto Richard Henry Pratt voiced for the Indian boarding-school system. The thought was and still is, I think, that indigenous tribal identity and culture must be eradicated. Admiration and hatred of Indians are simultaneously drummed into the hearts and minds of every American. Indians *were* (always past tense) noble and proud people, but Indians stood in the way of progress and the supposedly divine plan for American domination and hegemony.

Some Indians may think they are the only ones with identity issues. There is a whole list of stereotypes non-reservation Indians commonly hold regarding reservation Indians:

- Reservation Indians are all "full-bloods".
- Reservation Indians are all raised in their indigenous tribal cultures.
- Reservation Indians all speak their native tribal languages.
- Reservation Indians have no identity issues.

All of these are false stereotypes. While it is true that growing up on a reservation is different than growing up as an Indian in an urban setting or in a rural non-reservation area, while it is true that each environment has its own set of disadvantages and advantages, I really think American Indians everywhere have more in common with one another than we have in common with non-Indians, and I think identity issues are one of the main things we hold in common.

In Sherman Alexie's novel *Indian Killer*, someone is killing prominent white men in Seattle. The killer is assumed to be Indian, since an owl feather is left with each body. The book contains many well-developed characters; the killer could be any one of them. There is a young man, stolen by an Indian Health Services doctor on the day of his birth and sold to a childless, white couple. He knows he is genetically an American Indian but has no idea of what tribe. When a white person asks him of what tribe he is from, he says, "Lakota", because he thinks that's the tribe all white people see as most romantic and the only *real* Indians. When an Indian asks him, he says, "Navajo", because he thinks all Indians secretly wish they were Navajo, since the Navajos still have their land. There is a Spokane Indian in the book who serves as a Roman Catholic Priest. To a young friend, the priest confesses that there is a war going on inside him, all the time. There is an indigenous-studies professor who was ceremonially adopted by a Lakota family many years before and who basically hasn't seen them since. There is a young college student from an Indian reservation who is scandalized by what she sees as the professor's spurious claim to Indian identity, but then, she herself also has reasons to feel less than a *real* Indian.

But hey, it's not just Indians who have identity issues. I've noticed that most European-Americans seem to have a hard time introducing themselves. Most seem to think the only important thing is what they do for a living. If I ask, "Where are you from; who are your people?" they seem at a loss for an answer. Basically, I'm asking: To what place or to what land do you connect? Who are or were your parents? Who do you hang out with? To what group do you belong? Who are you in relation to the Earth and to the peoples of the Earth?

A History Lesson

Identity in this land before the European Invasion was based in the group. Every person was born with clan Identity and tribal identity. If you were of the ethnicity commonly referenced today as "Cherokee", you would have thought of yourself as one of the Anikituwa, the Anitsalagi, the Aniyvwiya. You would have also thought of yourself as one of whichever of the Seven Clans you were born into. Now, identity could and did change. Often the same or equivalent clans could be found in multiple tribal groups, and sometimes a person would peaceably move from one tribe to another during the course of a lifetime. On the other hand, a person might find himself or herself transferred from one tribe to another as a prisoner of war, adopted into a clan in order to, in some sense, take the place of or make up for the loss of one killed or captured by the tribe to which you were born, and yet, in some ways, the earlier identity was always remembered and honored. And so, we have the story of a man called Groundhog's Mother, a Shawnee war captive who became the most renowned physician among the Cherokees, yet it was always remembered that he was Shawnee. And, there was Chiksika's, Tecumseh's and Tensquatawa's mother: born Cherokee, captured and adopted by the Muskogee Creeks, later captured and adopted by the Shawnees but returned to her Chickamauga Cherokee relatives as an older woman.

In the 13 Anglo-American colonies, there were more Indians or indigenous persons than there were persons of European origin or descent. Does that surprise you? Europeans and European-Americans were the minority for a long time, and while the colonists thought of the Indians as "living in the woods", the Indians also thought of colonial towns as being "in the woods", this according to a paper entitled "Out of the Woods" written by Richard Robbins, Jan 31, 2005. It was all a matter of perspective. The way of the English colonists was to recruit a few tribes as border-patrols and slavers while maintaining enmity with other tribes, essentially a divide and conquer policy. In times of war, Indian captives were sold into slavery by the English colonists. However, English war captives were most usually adopted into the clans of the tribes receiving them. When, during peace talks, the return of such captives was demanded, adoptees almost invariably returned to their former families with great reluctance, often escaping back to their Indian families at the first opportunity. In the early decades of English settlement, colonists often deserted their English communities to assimilate into Indian towns. This was a common enough occurrence that laws were passed in most colonies to punish such "renegades", if caught, most usually with the death penalty. Among the early colonists, there were generally more men than women, resulting in a common practice of taking Indian wives, either peaceably or even by force. At least one colony (Massachusetts) outlawed marriage between colonists and Indians. German-speaking immigrants and their descendants (and by the time of the American Revolution there were more of these than of English-speaking colonists) in most cases tended toward more peaceful association with Indians than did their English counterparts, often choosing to settle close to Indian towns, trading with the Indians, seeking out the services of Indian physicians, partnering with and often intermarrying with Indians. Freed and runaway African and African-American slaves also often associated with Indians or found refuge in Indian towns. Indians could be found living in many, if not most, towns of the colonists. Europeans and Africans or those of European and African descent could be found living in Indian towns. It was a chaotic time, a time cultural clash, when identity was fluid and often not easily defined.

I've often been asked about the euphemistic term "Black Dutch". As I related in the addendum to my paper "120 Questions", there is more than one story of explanation about "Black Dutch". A common story is that, as Germans and Indians often

intermarried and also as whole families might move from one town to another, with Germans (as well as other types of European folk) sometimes joining or moved into Indian towns or Indian families moving into German towns, when soldiers or bounty hunters seeking Indian scalps came around asking questions, German settlers explained the presence of Indians living among them by saying, "Oh, they are Black Dutch; they came with us from the old country." Another story about the use of the term "Black Dutch" concerns the large numbers of Cherokees, Shawnees, Delawares and other Indians who came to Missouri before it was part of the United States. By the time American settlers began arriving in Missouri in any large numbers, there were Indian families settled all over and living, by all appearances, pretty much like white folks. Only thing was, they were a bit darker in complexion, or at least some of them were. Missouri, the "Gateway to the West" was supposed to be an "Indian Free Zone." Indians were not allowed to live here. So, whenever suspicious neighbors questioned an Indian family about their heritage, they generally answered, "Oh, we're Black Dutch." Of course, I think this happened in other places too, not just Missouri. There is one other story about the term "Black Dutch" that I heard only once. It seems that when The Netherlands claimed New Amsterdam (what is now New York), many single young men came over from The Netherlands, seeking their fortunes. Some of these young men married Lenape women and took them back to The Netherlands with them. In The Netherlands (Holland), the offspring of these unions were referred to as "Black Dutch." There is no doubt that there are descendants of these marriages still in The Netherlands, however, many of these "Black Dutch" immigrated to America, the land of their mothers, where they continued to refer to themselves as "Black Dutch."

In school, you probably learned about the caste system of India, a system of discrimination that, although officially outlawed, remains in effect for all practical purposes. What they probably didn't tell you in school is that there is a similar caste system in America with the primary American castes being white, black and Indian. Now, 525 years ago, I don't think any of these designations even existed. Indigenous people in this land all had our own tribal identities, no one had come along to lump us together as the "Indian" caste yet, although I think the Norsemen had already labeled us "Skraelings". People in Africa had their own tribal identities as well; it was only when they were removed and brought here that they were lumped together as the "black" caste. The Europeans had their own tribal identities too. No one thought of themselves as "white" until they found themselves living in the midst of peoples having darker skin tones.

There are many shades or gradations of caste within each of the primary designations. There was a time when a person of Irish descent was not considered white. Presbyterian Scots-Irish were white, but Catholic Irish did not enjoy white status. Later, Slavic immigrants and their descendants were looked down upon, as were Italians and Jews. There was a time when none of these enjoyed white caste status and privilege in America. You are probably thinking, "Well, what about Hispanic people?" I'll get to that later.

As the Eugenics Movement came into full sway in the early 20th Century, the "One Drop of Blood Rule" became the norm, beginning, I think, in the Commonwealth of Virginia and spreading across much of the country, the law basically said that a person with any known African ancestry was black, period. Well, usually, they said "colored" back then, the main point being that even one drop of black blood will prevent a person and that person's descendants from ever attaining white caste status and privilege. And, I

thought all blood was red. Eugenacists in Virginia wanted to apply the “One Drop of Blood Rule” to known American Indian ancestry as well but encountered opposition from the many influential white Virginians claiming descent from John and Rebekah Rolfe a.k.a Pocahontas. The compromise was to allow that a person might have as much as 1/16 American Indian ancestry and still be white, but it took a minimum of 1/4 American Indian ancestry for a person to be officially considered American Indian. Even then, throughout the country, those persons deemed to be of 1/4 or more American Indian ancestry were generally referred to by the disparaging terms “breed” or “half-breed”, terms that, regrettably, have not fully passed away even today; the only “real” Indians being “full-bloods”. In practical application, Virginia, at the height of the Eugenics movement, shoved all its people into two categories: “white” and “colored”. This even though the Commonwealth of Virginia has, within her boundaries, American Indian communities still living on reservations so designated when Virginia was a British colony.

At the end of the Mexican-American War, one of the stipulations in the treaty between the United States and Mexico was that persons with Spanish surnames living within the newly acquired American territories would have “white” status. Have you ever noticed how, to this day, on American census forms, anyone designating themselves “Hispanic” is also asked to designate themselves either “white” or “non-white”. Years ago, having just seen the most recent census results, I asked a friend from El-Salvador, “Why is it that the vast majority of persons in the State of Missouri who designate themselves ‘Hispanic’ on the census, also designate themselves ‘white’? This seems strange to me, since most Hispanic people in Missouri would seem to be of primarily American Indian ancestry.

His answer was, “If you’re not black, you’re white.”

But of course, it is all just on paper, an empty treaty promise. Just because a person has the option of designating herself or himself “white”, that does not mean that person will actually enjoy white caste status and privilege.

By the way, Mexico has its own caste system, similar to the caste system in the United States, with the top caste being Spanish or white. Actually there are many “white” Mexicans whose ancestors came from other European countries aside from Spain. A person whose ideas about Mexico come only from tele novellas might think the majority of Mexicans are white. However the majority caste designation in Mexico is “Mestizo” meaning “mixed Indian and white”, although in practicality, the term really means a person of American Indian descent who has gotten with the program of colonization and no longer identifies as a tribal Indian. Other castes that exist or have existed in Mexico are “black”, meaning those of African ancestry; “mulato”, meaning those of mixed African and European ancestry but actually a disparaging reference to a person being like a mule; and finally “lobo”, meaning those of mixed African and American Indian ancestry and conveying the disparaging notion that such persons are wild, like wolves.

“White” is a caste or status. “White” is not a “race”. “White” is not even a color; it is the lack of color. It seems to me that “white” is not even a real identity, since “white” is not about who a person is but about who a person is not.

In American schools, history is taught from a European-American perspective. American Indians, if mentioned at all, are minimized, disparaged and dehumanized. American Indian students are alienated, basically made to feel like foreigners in their

own land. This may have something to do with dropout rates and suicide rates being higher for American Indian students than for any other ethnic group in the United States.

Have you heard the phrase “Born and Bred”? This phrase was commonly used in the 19th Century, not so much today. In fact, today it’s sort of confusing. So, what did the phrase mean in the 1800s? The “Born” part is easy; its meaning hasn’t changed, but the term “Breeding” as applied to human beings in the 19th Century, was generally a reference to education. That’s why high schools of that time were often called “seminaries” from the root word “semen”. You sent the kids to school to get them bred or inseminated with knowledge. I know, it sounds dirty, but it’s the way people talked and thought back then. There was and is the “Nature versus Nurture” debate. Some thought a person’s ancestry or genetics determine who and what they are and will become. Others thought each child was a blank slate upon which to write and that education is what made a person who and what they were desired to become. I think both sides in the “Nature versus Nurture” debate are partially correct, and both sides are partially incorrect. I said all that to say this: The term “half-breed” originated in a time when it could have more than one meaning. There were Cherokees of the 19th Century who had no known European ancestry but who were called “half-breeds” because of a white education which had turned their heads toward devaluation of Cherokee culture and placing high value on European-American cultural imperatives. There were other Cherokees who had European ancestry and yet were called “full-bloods”, because they spoke Cherokee and continued to place high value on Cherokee culture. It’s something to ponder.

From The World of Harry Potter

When I first read the *Harry Potter* series of books, I was surprised by the identity issues J.K. Rowling explores in her seven-volume epic story. In the world of Harry Potter, there are magical people and muggles, which is to say, everyone else. Within the ranks of the magical people, there are those who are called or who call themselves purebloods, half-bloods and muggle-borns. The muggle-borns (magical people born into non-magical or muggle families) are sometimes referred to by the disparaging term “mudblood”. Squibs are non-magical people born into magical families. A squib born into a family that prides itself on being pureblood is a major embarrassment, as it gives the lie to the pureblood claim, which most magical people know is a lie anyway, as magical-people and muggles have intermarried since before anyone was keeping track, which is also an explanation for the fact of muggle-born magical people constantly cropping up in families with little if any remembrance of magic. So, does J.K. Rowling know some American Indian people, or what?

Disparage, Divide and Conquer or Put it Together

American Indians often use the categories of “full-blood” and “mixed-blood” (a slightly less derogatory label than “half-breed”. On a few occasions, I have been sitting in a talking circle in which one person will say, “I am a ‘Full-Blood....’ with such a tone as to minimize and disparage the identity of every other person in the circle including their own children, since in each such situation I have witnessed, the spouse of the person so proud to be “Full-Blood” was a non-Indian. Occasionally, one may hear the term “corpuscle-Indian” bandied about, which is the same as saying, “That person’s Indian blood-quantum is so watered down that they only have a single corpuscle floating around their veins.” The term “apple” is sometimes applied as a way of saying, “That

person may look like an Indian on the outside, but inside he or she is white.” And then, there is the term “wannabe”, which is to say, “That person is not a real Indian, just someone who wants to be Indian.” Many if not most Indians have thrown such terms around, probably without thinking much about the implications. Some people are called “wannabes” simply because they didn’t grow up on a reservation, or because they didn’t grow up in the same community as the person calling them “wannabes”. Some are called “wannabes”; because their pigment is not dark enough or is too dark, or because they have the wrong type of hair. It is all subjective, and the one using this and other disparaging terms makes himself or herself judge and jury of indigenous identity, betrays her or his own fractured and vulnerable indigenous identity and becomes a pawn in the colonizers’ game of divide and conquer.

Perhaps a person was not raised within Indian community; perhaps they have been informed of Indian ancestry, or perhaps there has been a denial within their family concerning Indian ancestry. But still, there is something that draws that person to Indian community. Maybe that person is a “sport”, which is to say, one in whom long forgotten ancestry and genetics have resurfaced in an undeniable way (And, here you thought your grandpa called you “Sport”, because you liked basketball and baseball.). When such a one re-enters indigenous tribal community according to indigenous tribal terms, that person is no “wannabe”. Of course, there are others who just want to play Indian. These are not “wannabes” either, they just want to play around with sacred things or use Indian identity like a mask one may put on or take off according to convenience.

If you have identity issues; join the club. We all have them. Genealogical research is a good thing to do, but you will not eliminate identity issues through genealogical research. Likewise, DNA testing may be a valid tool, assuming you have enough money and know exactly what DNA test you are purchasing and what it can and cannot reveal, while keeping in mind that DNA science is still in its infancy. And even then, you will not eliminate identity issues with a DNA test. Strive to know yourself. Who are you? What are your significant dreams? Where are you from? To what land do you connect? To what people do you belong?

A Chickamauga Cherokee Identity Lesson

As a Chickamauga Cherokee, I have been taught that there are four souls or four aspects or depths to a person. Here is a brief and incomplete description: There is the Vital Soul or Body Soul. This includes the flesh, heart and blood, breath, bones, liver and sexuality. It is our connection with the Land, with the Earth, with animals and plants, with ancestors and progeny. Then there is The Voice. This is what one says good and bad, poems and songs, our works that remain. Also this is that aspect of self that can be sent out. Then there is or are The Three Fires of the Mind. This is the inward voice of knowledge and understanding, the ability to silently listen and plan along with emotional feeling. This is our connection with the people. Finally, there is The Attender. This is the divine presence within. This is connection with all, oneness with the universe, identity as an aspect of the entirety

Many Attacks on Indian Identity

There continue to be many attacks on indigenous tribal identity in this country. There is an attitude held and expressed by some that only full bloods can be *real* Indians or that only members of federally recognized tribes are real Indians, as if the very government

that has worked so hard to eradicate Indians should have the last word on Indian identity. Others express the opinion that there are no real Indians anymore, since no one today lives as Indians lived before European contact. An extension of this logic would deny the continued existence of *real* Europeans as well. Some are of the mind that a person must look a certain way to be Indian, generally like the spray-painted Italian actors they've seen in old westerns. I've been asked, "With ancestry from so many places, why choose Cherokee as your identity?" To begin with, I don't think I chose my identity. But, if I were to choose, I might consider where I live. I don't live in Scotland or Ireland, England, The Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, France or Denmark. I live here, and in spite of everything, this remains Indian country.

Other attacks on Indian identity come from well-meaning Christians who misunderstand and violate Jewish origin stories by taking them in a crudely literal sense and then universalizing them, saying, "All people descend from Adam and Eve, Noah and those dispersed from the Tower of Babel". Others go so far as to say American Indians are misplaced and misguided Hebrews. These are attempts to undo and remake Indian identity to fit alien worldviews and proselytizing agendas.

And then there are all those Cherokee jokes:

- What did Columbus say to the Indians when he first landed? "Hey, did you guys know I'm part Cherokee?"
- What do you have if you've got a whole bus load of Cherokees? One full-blood.
- Cherokees are lovers not fighters; that's why everyone in the country claims to be part Cherokee.

Hey, if you are telling African-American jokes, you'd better be African-American or black. If you are telling Jewish jokes, you'd better be Jewish. If you are telling Polish jokes, you'd better be Polish. If you are telling Cherokee jokes, you had better be Cherokee, otherwise you will come across as an ignorant person vainly trying to compensate for feelings of inferiority or as someone with such a low opinion of yourself that you feel you must put others down in order to lift yourself up. Hey, it doesn't work that way; when we try to put others down, we put ourselves down. And, by the way, no one has fought harder or longer against white American aggression and expansionism in North America than have Chickamauga Cherokees, as the nucleus of the Chickamauga Confederacy and later as participants in the Miami Confederacy and the Shawnee Resistance. Incidentally, the Miami Confederacy defeated and nearly wiped out the United States Army, not once but twice.

Some attacks on identity are not as obvious as others. For instance, New Agers generally come across as being respectful of everyone, yet there are some who would basically put everyone together in a disconnected eclectic soup where cultural distinctions completely disappear in a New Age melting pot. All these various attacks on indigenous tribal identity are basic denials of the value of or the divine pattern of diversity.

Some attacks on identity come from family members. Just as with other Indians, most Chickamauga Cherokee people have divisions in our families. Some may devalue their Indian culture, while others choose to follow as fully as they can. Still others may try to straddle the fence. Some may deny Indian identity or even deny any and all Indian ancestry. An entire family may have been in denial of Indian ancestry for generations, and then there comes one or more than one who is/are different and who must seek out

and follow the tribal culture. Of course this is going to cause trouble and division. Of course there will be attacks on identity. Having siblings or cousins for whom indigenous tribal identity is important must seem threatening to a person who is highly invested in being “white”.

Indian Identity is Many-Faceted

Although seen by many today as the most important factor in indigenous tribal identity, the concept of “Blood Quantum” is a pretty recent invention or fiction. In the old days, a person was Cherokee by virtue of belonging to one of the seven Cherokee Clans. There was no such thing as being a partial or provisional member of a clan. One was born into the clan of ones mother. Conversely, should one find oneself within a Cherokee community, as a war captive, refugee or immigrant seeking inclusion, one might be adopted into a clan. Every ethnicity or human group on Earth has a way of bringing those from outside the group inside the group. Born or adopted - it made no difference in the old days, so long as the adoptee took the adoption seriously.

There was a boy named Joe Casteel, Jr., of English and French ancestry. His father ran a trading post between the French Broad and Holston Rivers. The Chickamauga Cherokees, maintaining that the Casteels had engaged in the practice of kidnapping and enslaving Chickamauga children, attacked and burned the trading post on May 28, 1793, killing most of the family. One girl of 10 years old was wounded severely, but survived. Joe Casteel, Jr., four-years-old at the time, was carried away and taken in by Talijuska or Double Head and adopted by his wife, Gigageluyasdi or Red Ax. Joe Casteel, Jr. Became Sagoni Digahole or Blue Lizard (Please do not pronounce his name “Dig a hole”; it’s pronounced “Dee-gah-hoh-lee”). He was later educated by missionaries who attempted to reunite him with his sister, but she wanted nothing to do with him, denying that he was her brother, because he was every whit a Chickamauga Cherokee. In fact, he was basically written out of existence in his former “white” family.

One of Uncle Richard Craker’s primary mentors was Elmer Casteel, the great-grandson of Joe Casteel, Jr. or Sagoni Digahole. Most of the information concerning the Chickamauga Cherokee ceremonies and spirituality that we keep today along with much of the history, was passed down through Elmer Casteel to Uncle Richard. Now, I am sure that Elmer Casteel had other Chickamauga ancestors aside from Sagoni Digahole. But the thing is, Sagoni Digahole was entirely Chickamauga Cherokee, and no DNA test will ever admit to that.

Also in the old days, a person was Cherokee by virtue of participation in Cherokee culture or spirituality and life-ways:

- By being a person of the Sacred Fire
- By keeping the Cherokee Ceremonies, tribal taboos and clan taboos

We Chickamauga Cherokee also have our own “One Drop of Blood Rule”: One drop of Cherokee blood makes one Cherokee, regardless of other ancestry and regardless of appearance. Eskaqua or Bloody Fellow also known as The Prophet Clear Sky said, “Even should the habits and the customs of the Cherokee people give place to the habits and the customs of the whites, or even should they themselves become white by intermarriage, not a drop of Indian

blood will be lost. It will only be spread more widely, but not lost.” Comanche Chief Quanna Parker was of the same mind.

But, in an article entitled “Kayapo Courage” in the January 2014 edition of National Geographic, Kayapo Elder Pukatire is quoted as saying, “Let the white people have their culture, we have ours. If we start copying white people too much, they won’t be afraid of us, and they will come and take everything we have. But as long as we maintain our traditions, we will be different, and as long as we are different, they will be a little afraid of us.”

Who your close friends are - who you hang out with says volumes about who you are. A recent study from Yale University and the University of California shows that close friends share much more DNA than strangers. In fact, close friends with no known genealogical kinship will typically share as much DNA as fourth cousins who share a common great-great-great grandparent. Of course, spouses are in that category of close friends. Like attracts like. Have you ever heard the term “Spiritual Genetics”?

Once I listened as a blond-headed blue-eyed Ojibwe powwow m.c. said, “Look around you at all these Indians. You see every complexion; every color of hair. Indian is not a race. Indian is not a religion. Indian is who you are.”

When the late Michael Doris, author of many great books for young readers was asked the improper question, “How much Indian are you?” he is quoted as having replied, “I am all Indian even though some of my ancestors were not Indian. And, if that is not confusing enough, I am all man even though exactly half my ancestors were women.”

Would you ask the Queen of England, “How much English are you?” I wonder how she would respond. Certainly not all of her ancestors were English. I’m not a queen; I’m not even a princess, but I know who I am. I know that identity does not come in parts. A fragmented identity is a violated identity.

Some point out that “Indian” is an identity created by the invaders, by the same ones who now seek to minimize or eliminate Indian identity. Aniyvwiya (Ah-nee-yuh-wee-yah) has always been the preferred self-designation of Chickamauga Cherokees. It can be translated as “Real People” but can also be translated as “Common People” or “Unpretentious, Down-to-Earth, Indigenous People”. Arguably, it could be translated as “Human Beings”, but in Cherokee dictionaries, Aniyvwiya is most usually translated as “Indian”. This may be because the Chickamauga Confederacy was composed of all sorts of people, not just Cherokees but surrounding tribes and refugees from further east, also Scots-Irish and others of European ancestry and African Americans too. So, our grandparents and great grandparents, those not bent on hiding their ancestry, were more apt to say, “Indian” than “Cherokee”.

Reframing Attacks on Indian Identity

In order to say we are sovereign people [having self-determination as peoples] we must first of all know who we are, how we are to carry ourselves in our treatment of our people, our children, our lands and all of the Natural world. We are walking on a sacred path that will lead us into a good and great future if we do these things.

- Sokoieta Widrick (Mohawk)

What can we do with attacks on our indigenous tribal identities? One thing we can do is to re-frame them, seeing or understanding them as tests. We are the Seventh Generation of which the ancestors spoke, saying that in the Seventh Generation, the people would come back to their own. But, it doesn't happen without a struggle, nothing was ever gained without some conflict. Is your identity worth the fight?

Using humor to disarm, we can confront attackers, letting them know, firmly yet gracefully and politely, that attacks on identity violate boundaries or personal space. We can and must establish and defend those boundaries, even, and maybe especially within our own extended families. And, if need be, when respect is not reciprocated and attacks on identity continue, we may choose to distance ourselves, to shake the dust off our moccasins, so to speak, to turn our backs and walk away, all the while remembering and endeavoring to be victors rather than a victims.