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My Dad's unbelievable story; untold by him. As told by Connie Paul.

There is an Okanagan teaching from my great grandmother, my grandmother Dirty lake. "Granddaughter, do not stand over your child and cry, your tears will fall down her chubby cheeks and she will not know why she is crying."

This story belongs to my dad. I struggled whether or not to share this with you. Not because it is unbelievable but because it has to deal with my dad's personal dignity. He was a well-known political speaker, advocate, teacher. He would not want to be seen as having any weakness.

So I went for a long hike, walked in the cold fresh air, here in Nanaimo; amongst the great cedars, the eagles, and the rocks. Can I take his story? Is his story mine to share? "Will it be okay dad, to tell your story?"

And as I watched the stream, grow into a river my question was answered. My dad's story runs through me. His experiences affect me; affect my brothers and my sister today. All of us fear the dentist. He was a boy, sent to an Indian Residential School. It was the law. There was no choice. It was done; as the river flows.

Then many years later, this boy became a man. That man had 3 sons and 2 daughters. We will forever remember him with tenderness when we think about how he clacked his teeth. I remember the smell and taste of denture paste. There was never a question of why, it was as the river flows.

Then one day, I happen to be with my dad. He had a specialist appointment out at UBC, a dental surgeon referral. I happened to be out of school that day. Had lunch with my dad and if it wasn't for skipping out of school I would never have known. That of course is a different story.

The dental office was sterile; documents on the walls, the room had one formal family picture. The man in his suit came in and spoke.

"Mr. Paul, I have reviewed your dental images." He had a look of almost sadness that reached his eyes, and my dad became stiff. His arms began to fold, he pushed his glasses up. Then he leaned forward. "I did not come here for that. I do not need any pity." My dad looked at me. My dad's body language telling me to pay attention to what he was saying. "I am here to find out if there is anything that you can do to help."

"Mr. Paul, no disrespect, but I need to take the dental history of what happened to you. This will assist in the medical management of your care. It is just that I recognized that there has been significant trauma and scarring along your gums. Can you tell me to the best of your knowledge what happened? My dad studied the man across the desk, wearing his suit, tie and polished shoes with his white walled office with one family picture. I looked at him, sized him up. Would I tell him or would I avoid telling him? It was a fair question.

My dad decided to tell him. "First, I want you to know that I do not want pity. I do not want any emotional looks. I will tell you what happened. I was brought to Kuper Island Indian residential school. I was eleven when it happened. A dentist come in examined my mouth, then later I was brought into another room.

My ankles were buckled, then my arms, then my chest, then my forehead. It was a damn good thing because when they opened my mouth, every single tooth was pulled in one sitting. Nothing was given for freezing. My face swelled, my eyes swelled, and God bless my sister Cecelia, she gave me water. Weeks passed and my mouth got rotten.

I was taken back to that chair. There was no fight left in me; I was too weak. And the dentist pinched off all the rotten gums. I remember becoming so skinny, but I lived. I survived.

My dad looked at me" Stop that, stop that crying now. You have nothing to cry about." I held back my grief, anger, my questions. I wiped the tears from my face. And my dad went back to his story.

"Today, I have never been able to eat solid food; all my food has to be soft. No matter how much polident paste I use inside my dentures I cannot chew anything hard or even semi hard. If I try my gums break down and then I'm on an even softer diet. "

It was a sudden realization, that's right; everything he ate was mashed, soft, without body.

To my knowledge, this surgeon corrected this for my dad. And during the last 10 years of his life he was able to enjoy foods that he could chew. He never did talk to me about what happened to him. He never talked about pain. He taught us that trauma can cause you to be either resilient or weak. You make your own choice. You make your own luck.

People have to heal with dignity or they will not heal at all. It's been 20 years since my dad is gone but the river still runs through us.