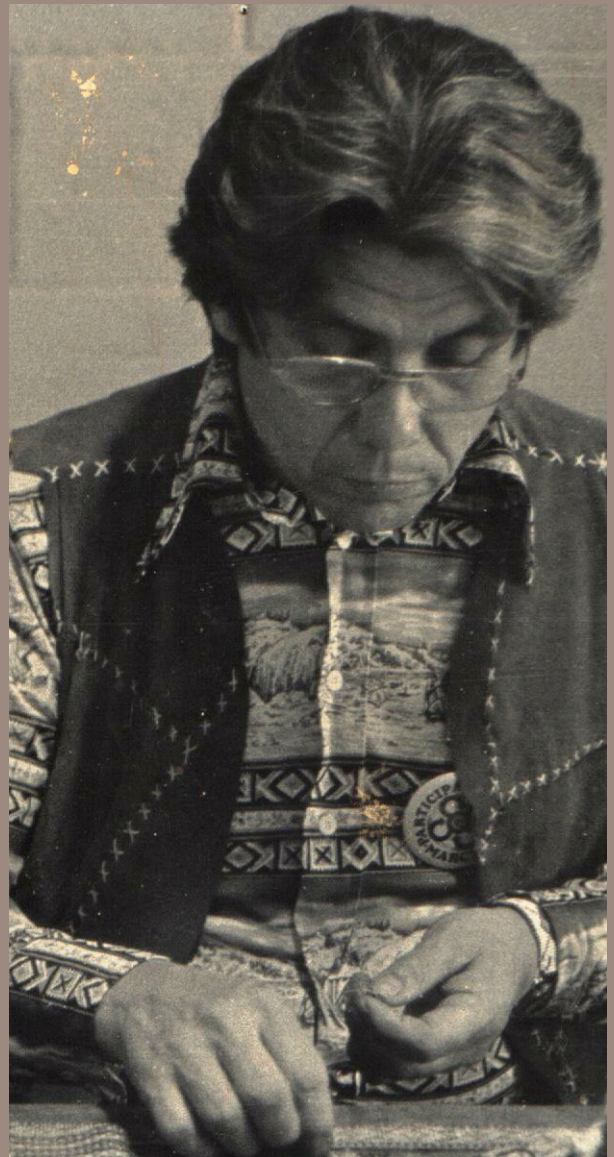




My first experience with Racism

When I was a child of 11, my family moved to L'Anse, Michigan, which is in Michigan's Upper Peninsula on part of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Reservation. Since my father, siblings and I are enrolled members of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, we became part of the larger native community on the Keweenaw Bay reservation.

Until we moved to the reservation, I had never experienced prejudice or racial stereotyping, primarily because I had blond hair and blue eyes, which doesn't fit the Native American Stereotype of black hair, brown eyes and chiseled features.



My father teaching beading, circa 1976



Does he have a job???

After I moved to the reservation I experienced many episodes of racial stereotyping, but one of the most telling experiences was when I was 17 and had taken a job at the local senior citizen's center.

One afternoon I was handing out bingo cards to about 10 elderly ladies, when one of them, which we'll call Vera, asked, "Christina, is that Native American man your mother is married to, your real father?"

I remember experiencing a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach, but answered yes to the question anyway.

Vera sat there in silence, chewing on the inside of her lip, and finally, she looked at me and asked, "Does your dad work?"

When I hesitated, because I was embarrassed by her question, she prompted again, "Does he have a job?"



My father, circa 1966

“Is that Native American man your mother’s married to your REAL father?”

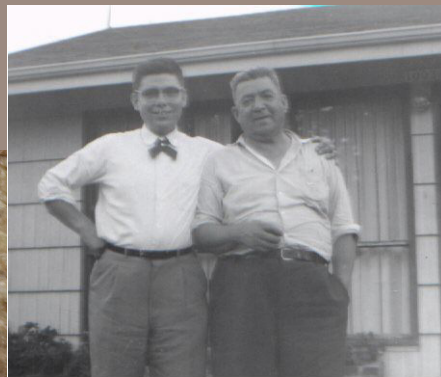
By then I had gathered my composure and answered that he did, indeed, have a job. My father was an addictions counselor at the New Day Treatment Center.

Vera paused yet again...and then asked, “Is he educated?” as if she couldn’t fathom that possibility either.

At that point, it was clear to me that that Vera could not imagine a Native American as anything other than the stereotype in her head.

Native American STEREOTYPES

***drunk, lazy, don’t
work, get government
checks, don’t pay taxes,
uneducated, poor...***



*My father and grandfather
circa 1961*



“You know, she’s part Indian!”

In the days and weeks that followed, I often heard Vera whispering to her friends, “You know, she’s part Indian, but you’d never know it.”

Her explanation for my difference was that I had a White mother, which for her meant a GOOD mother, which was some form of redemption for my “Indianness.”

I can’t tell you how angry, and ashamed it used to make me when I’d hear her say those things. At the time I could not understand why she didn’t see my father like she saw herself... a person who had parents, who went to school, who had his own children, who worked and lived and loved and hurt just like she did. I’m still not entirely sure, 30 years later, why she couldn’t.

Vera couldn’t imagine my father as someone’s child



My father and his parents, 1938

*My father
1942*

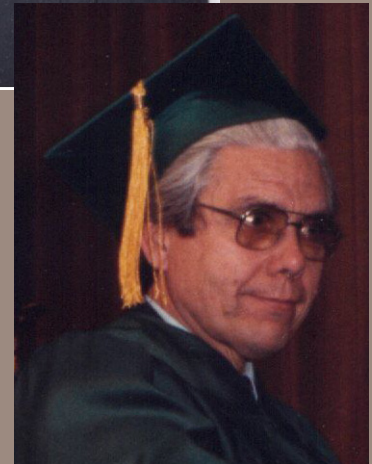
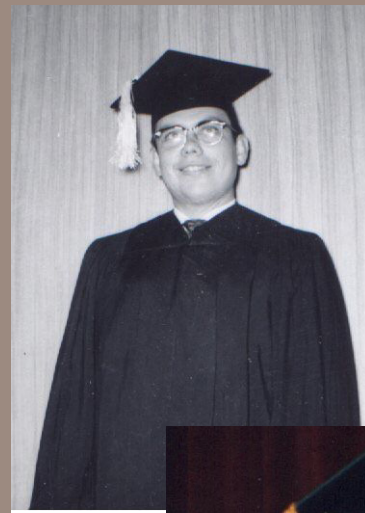


Stereotypes are rigid and unmoving

I suppose part of the reason Vera couldn't switch gears and see my father as someone like her is that stereotypes are rigid and unmoving. They are what I call "short cuts" for the mind. We see something and rather than thinking about it our brains categorize what we see in less time then it takes to make a slam-dunk with a basketball.

Vera, who was in her 70s at the time, was very comfortable with her stereotypes, until she met me. I observed how hard it was for her to understand how she could like me, since I was part native. I think she struggled with that, which is why she continued to occasionally ask me questions about my parents.

Vera could not imagine my father as an educated person, even though he achieved a B.A. in theology in 1961 and a B.S. in social work in 1986



Was she trying to change her perceptions?

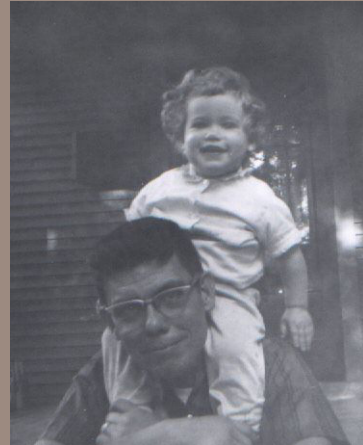
Vera's questions always made me feel as if she was trying to solve some sort of puzzle. Was she waiting to hear that her beliefs about Native Americans were true? Or, was she trying to change her perceptions about us?

I do know this much, Vera continued to whisper about me and my family to her friends, but she always treated me well. In fact, she always looked at me as though my kindness to her was very unexpected, although welcomed.

Vera also continued to ask me questions that were often quite pointedly racist. She used phrases like, "those Indians" and "those kind of people," when talking to me about native issues in our town.

By using those phrases, I think it was Vera's way of including me as part of her group, where I wasn't one of "those people," which interestingly also excluded me from belonging to the Native American group.

Vera Could not imagine my father as a loving father or grandfather



My father and me, 1963

My daughter, Lauchette and my father, 1989



What would I have wished for Vera?

At 17, I didn't have the social awareness, maturity and skills to have a real discussion with Vera about race or stereotypes. With that said, I do believe that I gave Vera things to think about. My kindness to her, no matter what she said to me, caused her to think about how she viewed me, my family and other native people.

I believe this, because Vera continued to ask me questions about my family--especially about my father--and she always looked as if she were working out what I said and trying to make it "fit" somehow.

I really wish that Vera would have gotten to know my father, which may have challenged her thinking further.

Ironically, we did attend the same church and eventually my father did preach on a few Sunday's when the regular pastor wasn't there.

Unfortunately, by then I had moved on to another job and wasn't there to see if her interaction with me, and later my father, made a real difference in her life. I would have wished that for her.

I wish that Vera could have seen that my parents were just like her.



My parents, October 2010



My parent's 50th wedding anniversary