

Potawatomi Children's Book Author Kaitlin Curtice
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Winter's Gifts¹

Randy Kritkauský: Greetings, or may I say Bozho in Potawatomi, to those joining us for today's Indigenous Perspectives show. I'm Randy Kritkauský, an enrolled Potawatomi tribal member, and the co-host of Indigenous Perspectives.

Carolyn Schmidt: And I'm Carolyn Schmidt, the other co-host. For our Land Acknowledgment, we recognize Vermont where we are, as part of N'dakinna, the unceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people, who for centuries have lived on the lands now included in present-day northern New England and southeastern Canada.

Randy: We also acknowledge that this is the unceded land of our other-than-human kin - the winged ones, the rooted ones, the four-legged ones and the mountains and rivers who have been present on Turtle Island and have been partners and

¹ *Winter's Gifts: An Indigenous Celebration of Nature*. Written by Kaitlin Curtice, illustrated by Gloria Felix. Convergent Books, 2023.

caretakers for countless millennia. They were here before the arrival of any of the two-legged. Before the Indigenous peoples who came over the Beringian land bridge from Asia more than 15,000 years ago, and before the European two-legged who arrived more recently.

Carolyn: For today's show, we welcome Potawatomi author, story-teller and poet Kaitlin Curtice. Kaitlin writes and speaks on the intersections of spirituality and identity, and how that shifts throughout our lives. Kaitlin considers herself an "inter-spiritual advocate", and she participates in conversations on topics such as colonialism in faith communities, and the importance of inter-faith relationships. Her most recent book is *Winter's Gifts - An Indigenous Celebration of Nature*. Kaitlin, we are very glad to have you on our show.

Kaitlin Curtice: Bozho! Thank you so much for having me.

Carolyn: Let's start off by discussing *Winter's Gifts*. This is the children's book just published as the first of a four-part series on the seasons. Can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to tell this story this particular way?

Kaitlin: Yes, so this is my first children's series. I've written three adult nonfiction books and I've always wanted to write a children's book. And the seasons - obviously as Indigenous people, we follow the seasons, we live by the seasons, but many people all around the world do. And so when this series came up - to do a four-part series - I was so excited to figure out how to do this in a way that connected to my identity a bit, connected to a Potawatomi story. Because there aren't a lot of children's books that have Potawatomi kids in them and especially that have the Potawatomi language and especially that have the southern dialect that we speak in Oklahoma. And so I was just really excited to find a way to celebrate that.

But at the same, I wanted it to feel universal enough that any kid, any adult, could read it and get something from it, sort of have that experience of a mirror, of seeing themselves in this story. And so writing about - the first book is about the winter solstice. So many different cultures celebrate the changing of the seasons like this. And so I wanted it to feel like a book that could bring us into that.

And subversively, it's a bit of decolonization because we [*the general public in the U.S.*] celebrate things like the holidays, but we don't often talk about nature and

Mother Earth and how we should be in sort of community and communion with Mother Earth as she shifts throughout the seasons of the year. So I wanted kids to have a tool to have that conversation with the adults in their lives, and with their friends. And so *Winter's Gifts* is Dani - the story of Dani - who is a young girl in her family. And simply it's full of questions. It has a conflict in it. There's a dream in each of the books. And so dreaming is really important in our culture.

And so Dani has this beautiful dream that inspires her and it's just full of sort of magic. I just wanted it to feel - I want each book to really feel and embody that season. And so *Winter's Gifts* was just a joy to write. And I wrote it in Vermont, when we were living in Vermont! So I literally was sitting in front of my blazing wood stove and there was snow everywhere. So it was the perfect place to write a winter book. And I wrote it in an afternoon and sent it to my editor. It was just one of those moments where it all came together and I knew exactly what I wanted to say, and Dani is sort of me as a kid and my own kids and just experiencing that.

Randy: So I suspected that there was a bit of an autobiographical strain in this. It comes through very comfortably. One of the issues that you raised is this whole question of reconnecting with the child within, the child within ourselves. Can you elaborate a little bit on that? Because that could be misunderstood by some people as, oh, it's just a kid's story.

Kaitin: Yes. Yes. I got an email a few weeks ago from a 74-year-old woman who said she bought it [*Winter's Gifts*] for one of her grandkids, but that she sat by herself and had a cup of tea and lit a candle and read it for herself. And that meant so much to me because I am very curious at heart; I'm very childlike in a lot of ways, even as an adult, and I'm also trying to practice that more all the time. And I think that it's healthy for us as adults to practice childlike curiosity and engaging back with our child selves.

I have often told people, yes, this is a children's book, but adults can read it. It can be a book of self-care for any adult as well. And I think a lot of children's books actually play that role for us as adults. I mean, I can't tell you the number of times I've just started crying while reading a children's book to my own kids, but that it touched me so deeply and there were messages sort of hidden in it for me. I mean, that happens all the time with children's literature, which is why it can be so powerful.

And I wanted these books to sort of be the same. So I hope that it's a resource for people to connect to the child within them.

Randy: So can you elaborate a little bit on what aspects of “the child within” connect? I mean for me, empathy, which is a response that little kids have to creepy crawly things and flying things, is something we lose as adults, but what other characteristics of being childlike are you trying to cultivate with the book?

Kaitin: Yes, well, that's a great question. I think that playfulness and presence and even mindfulness are all things that we embody as kids and sort of gets drilled out of us as we become adults. You're told to - I have a poem that I wrote about this and how we kind of are told to trade our curiosity for a checkbook. And it's like that moment of, okay, you've had your fun; you - you've been curious, you've gotten to play, but now it's time for you to grow up. And I think that in our society, we've all dealt with that in one way or another.

And as adults we struggle to find our way back. We're so overwhelmed with anxiety and with stress and all the things that are a part of adulthood. And I think that Dani is this beautiful representation of playfulness and facing your fears by staying connected to Mother Earth and staying connected to the people who love you. That happens to be her family, but it could be anyone. It could be her - it's her dog Sam, her Husky. It's the oak tree in her front yard. She has these beings that keep her tethered to who she is. And I think that we all learned that.

Carolyn: And I also felt - you mentioned that there is a conflict. And I know when I started the book, I was wondering, is it going to be everybody just happily happy around the fire and happy with the winter? And obviously the conflict develops. And one thing I thought that was really well done about it is that, again, as an adult, we learn so much to guard ourselves and not take risks. And then here's Dani taking risks, and then having to deal with first attempt flops. She feels bad; where does she go from there? And she perseveres; she connects in some ways, not every way. I'm trying not to give away the whole story, but I thought that to me that was a good reminder of the importance of take the risk, reach out.

Kaitlin: I love that. I did an event at my son's elementary school last week and I read the book to these kids - kindergarten through second grade, and then third and fourth graders - and I wondered how they would resonate with this problem of showing someone who you are, or a belief that you hold really dear, like Dani and

her relationship to Mother Earth in winter. And having sort of a rejection by some people and then asking how she can get through that and then finding the people that do support her. And so that whole conflict, I was wondering how these kids were interpreting it. And at the very end there was a Q and A, and one little girl raised her hand and she said, "So are you ever scared to share about your culture?" And I said, yes, I am. I'm scared a lot. It can be really scary to share parts of who you are and feel like people might not love you for that. And it was just so profound and it showed me that she was connecting something there. I've seen my own kids struggle with being Potawatomi; I've struggled with it. And do we let go of who we are or do we keep going? And that's a hard question.

Randy: So is there an event or a mentor that you can look back on and say, that was a critical moment in my life when somebody said, "Go for it. It's okay to be Potawatomi; it's okay to look at nature this way." ?

Kaitin: I think that I've had moments where - you know, those visceral moments - where Creator or my ancestors were visiting and reminding me of who I am. I actually think the most constant person for me is my husband, my partner Travis, who is not Indigenous and has always just kept me going and has reminded me that my journey in this matters. And I think that that has meant a lot to me as a mother, as a writer, to have - and now my whole family, my kids and all of us, but - to have someone who I know will hold all of it with me, all the questions, all the difficult parts of colonialism that we still struggle with today, all of the beauty of culture and learning who we are. He's always been really supportive of me and I'm really grateful for that.

Randy: I love your answer. We did a whole show on marriages that are one person, Indigenous, and the other not -

Carolyn: - yes, we called it "mixed marriages" -

Randy: - and Carolyn and I have the discussion that you just mentioned many, many times where I'm actually the person saying, "oh my gosh, if I tell people about that, they're going to think I'm a little odd." And Carolyn kind of rolls her eyes and says, "Randy, you've got to get over it. Embrace it, go with it." So this is not what I think the mainstream understands about being Indigenous in the world today; that we depend on support systems, which very often come from surprising places like our non-Indigenous partners. I'm so happy you expressed that thought.

Carolyn: This is also a great segue to a topic I've been hoping that we could discuss, which is the importance of Indigenous characters in popular culture generally. You've written - it was a lovely essay you wrote about the power of Indigenous representation discussing a cartoon series on PBS, Molly of Denali. She's an Alaskan Native. Can you explain why watching this movie with your children meant so much to you?



"Molly's family goes on an epic river trip to a traditional Gwich'in village to celebrate their late Grandma Catherine. Getting there won't be easy. Molly will need to listen to the land and connect with her culture to get them there safely."²

Kaitlin: Oh my goodness. Again, I just cried almost every episode of that show. We'd be sitting there and I'm just weeping and my kids are like, "Why are you crying?" and I'm trying to explain to them. There was an episode I think where Molly gets to - I think she gets to play her grandfather's drum. And there some just beautiful simple moment that if you're not Indigenous, you might not really understand the power of that.

² Episodes of the PBS series "Molly from Denali" are available on YouTube. One example is "Wise Raven and Old Crow" - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AyofCHUlj8>. Another example is "Seal Dance" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOAtLR3d8RE> "When an approaching storm forces Molly, Grandpa Nat, and Mom to make an impromptu landing on the Aleutian island of Atka, Molly makes a new friend who teaches her about Unangax dances and together they learn how to perform a traditional Seal Dance. / Unangax Dance Group (Interstitial): A group of kids on Atka Island, Alaska describe and perform an Unangax traditional dance. They explain how their people used historical texts to revitalize the traditional dances their ancestors created long ago".

Or just that as Indigenous people *[in today's world]* , we don't take any of that for granted - the things that we get to learn. Or just even learning bits and pieces of the Potawatomi language through our tribal online program. I don't live in Oklahoma, but I can access that *[language program]*, and that's such a gift. I am so, so grateful to live in a time that we have access to these things from far away and access that my grandparents didn't have.

And so that means so much to me. And seeing that show up on TV or in books is incredibly moving and overwhelming, honestly.



"Spirit Rangers" image³

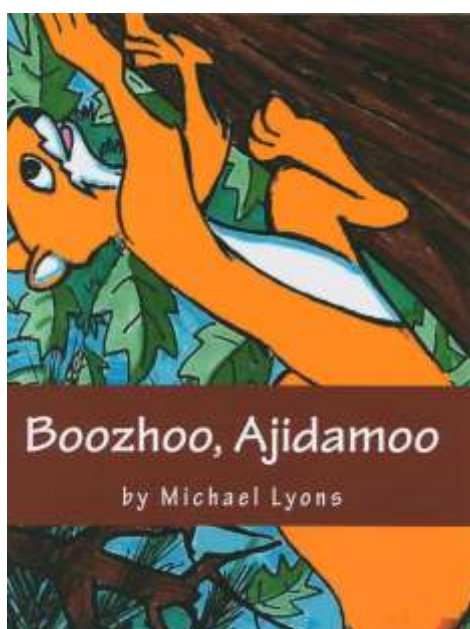
Like the "Spirit Rangers" - there's a new children's cartoon on Netflix that has Indigenous characters and is written and produced by Indigenous people. There's "Rutherford Falls," which was a show that had a few seasons that was just incredible, and many other shows. So we're - things are still not as they should be, but we are progressing and we are creating. And I think that that - and people are recognizing - it's a problem that our voices have been absent from a lot of these spaces, and I'm really grateful for that *[increased visibility of Indigenous characters today]*.

Also, it's hard to sort of be one of the firsts, to be one of the people who has to carry the weight of that, to put Potawatomi words in a book and to have a publishing

³ <https://dnm.nflximg.net/api/v6/BvVbc2Wxr2w6QuoANoSpJKEIWjQ/AAAAQdhAQEwG5IZ4VYAN9ndBNdjOeRRXz-JJhewmZWXXQvaXCYPWosnMk-qniG1jUhTO4OVrIMlvcLy3O4m71MqRGk70ooizRZG45C4spY0-x1UHuY4sl6bFx1Bbmt4aynTZnzPeJrS7OiZMilXcfb-t-qp.jpg?r=78e>

house that obviously doesn't have Potawatomi people. They're not - they don't know what that is. And so there's so many steps that we have to take to get through this. And I'm sure it's the same in media and making movies and films. If you want to include Indigenous language, if you want to do all of that, it's going to take so much work and conflict, I'm sure, and curiosity and care in that process. And I feel the same in publishing: that even with a supportive publishing team, there's still just so much work to be done, but I'm really grateful to be a part of that movement and that work.

Carolyn: Well, an important part I think also is that *Winter's Gifts* - it's a real mainstream publisher⁴ that has picked it up. And I know I found a number of years ago, there are a number of really nicely done children's books in Potawatomi, like *Boozhoo, Ajidamoo*⁵ - Hello, Squirrel - and a number of others, but those were sort of smaller publications, independent houses - really important, but not the range of the audience, not as accessible.



Boozhoo, Ajidamoo⁶

Randy: What do you think is going on out there that has suddenly changed the interest of the country and the world so that instead of trying to erase us - as they

⁴ Convergent Books, the publisher of *Winter's Gifts*, is a division of Random House.

⁵ Carolyn mis-spoke here; *Boozhoo, Ajidamoo* is in Ojibwe, not Potawatomi. The languages are related; both are Anishinaabe languages. The Ojibwe, Potawatomi and Odawa are closely related culturally, historically and linguistically, as the Council of Three Fires.

⁶ *Boozhoo, Ajidamoo* by Michael Lyons; CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (2014)

did for 500 years - suddenly some of them, a growing number, seem to be embracing us?

Kaitlin: Yes, I think there's a few different things that are happening. I think that the visibility of things like Standing Rock and some of the protest movements and justice movements and climate movements that are happening around the world are bringing attention to that. And then I also think, ironically enough, that people are searching for answers and searching for spiritual answers, searching for climate answers. They're searching for political answers; they're searching for missing pieces.

I think that some people are interested in figuring out what's missing from history, what's missing from these spaces. And in the United States, we have not had the full conversation yet. It's been in little bits and pieces all throughout history, but we have never reckoned with who we are as a nation and our history. And I think that there are people who are interested in that and compassionate toward it and want to be part of that. And I think that those people are the ones fighting for our voices to be heard and for our books to be read. And so there's a beautiful solidarity that I feel in that.

Randy: Do you ever feel that it's a burden? I mean, sometimes I feel like I'm a life preserver in an ocean and the ship is going down and everybody's coming over wanting to clinging onto my life preserver basically saying, "Gee, we really messed up the planet now. Can you guys fix it?"

Kaitlin: Oh, for sure.

Randy: Do you ever feel that the burden is a little overwhelming?

Kaitlin: Yes, absolutely. And the dangers of appropriation and the dangers of these different things that can happen without us realizing it. And so I think that - in a lot of my work, I use words and I do public speaking. And in many, many of the spaces I'm in, I'm usually the only Indigenous one, unless it's an Indigenous event. And so I'm always sort of prepared for that. You know we kind of - we walk with a thick skin or whatever; we have a shell because there is a level of protection we have to hold for ourselves and our cultures and who we are. But also it's such an honor. So at the same time I think that's a liminal space attention that I live with often.

Carolyn: And in the just little bit of time we have left in this first segment, could you pick up on the concept of liminal space? I know you've thought a lot about this. You have your whole *Liminality Journal*⁷. Could you open that up and then we can continue that later?

Kaitlin: Yes. In my book that came out in March, *Living Resistance*⁸, I wrote a whole chapter on liminality because I was recognizing that liminal space, these overlapping spaces, these sort of gray areas, the nuance, the complexities of who we are, that shows up in many of our lives. People who are - especially for people who are mixed, mixed race, mixed culture, mixed ethnicity, or people that walk in different sort of spaces and have to inhabit that - we have felt that so viscerally and it can actually be such a gift. It can be hard. Again, it's like a burden, difficult, but a beautiful gift as well. And I think liminality is just that. So I write about it a lot. And yes, the *Liminality Journal* is a space to just explore that through poetry and words, and I just can't really get away from it. It's just a part of who I am.

Randy: We're going to pick up that theme after a break because it's worthy of a whole segment in and of itself.

Carolyn: Okay, everybody stay tuned. We'll be back in a minute. This is Indigenous Perspectives.

Segment Two

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives. We're talking with Kaitlin Curtice about the idea of liminality.

Randy: So Kaitlin, you raised this concept, which we have only come across recently. I'd been aware of the idea, but I never heard the term. And it's a very big and important concept in religious studies and in anthropology. And just for listeners who might be unfamiliar with it, it has something to do historically with the idea of rites of passage where people or whole societies go through a transition and before they get to the other side and complete the transition, and is the term that is used.

⁷ <https://kaitlincurtice.substack.com/> The Liminality Journal.

⁸ Kaitlin B. Curtice: *Living Resistance: An Indigenous Vision for Seeking Wholeness Every Day*. Brazos Press, 2023.

Carolyn: Or the concept in nature is, you're on the edge between two different biological systems. So that's where it's very, very fertile, but also changing.

Randy: So run with the idea for a moment. Describe how it has played out for you inhabiting this betwixt and between liminal space, and where are you in it now?

Kaitlin: Yes. I love this term, and I don't know when I came across it, but you're right, it's like when you hear this term and you hear it being described, you know what it feels like. But you may not have had the word for it. I think that a lot of people have had that experience, and it's such a beautiful term.

One of the most maybe helpful ways that I've described it is in my book, *Living Resistance*. I talked about having a birthday party when I was 14 at my house. And I invited a bunch of my school friends, and then I invited a bunch of my youth group friends from church, and I thought they would all just sort of come together and become really close friends around me. So I assumed. And that did not happen! There was this segregation for sure, and a few of the people knew each other and were friends, but I was just wandering around feeling really uncomfortable. I wanted to make sure everyone else was comfortable.

And I realized that I was inhabiting - I inhabited these two worlds basically, and I had people I loved and cherished in both. And I felt pulled in both. And so that was when I was young, and I realized it later when I was writing my book, oh, that's an example of the liminality that I felt. Being Potawatomi, growing up Potawatomi. And then my parents divorced when I was nine. And so there was this shift in my life as a young kid where my dad left and moved back to Oklahoma and we were in Missouri. And so then a few years later, my mom got remarried; my stepdad was a Southern Baptist pastor. So this shifting in me, and identity and religious identity and faith identity and so many different things.

What does it mean to be who I am? What does it mean to be a 12-year-old girl, whatever? What does it mean to be part of the purity movement in the Southern Baptist Church⁹? There were so many things I went through that I wasn't

⁹ The "purity movement" in the Southern Baptist Convention is a focus of their "True Love Waits" program, founded in 1993. This movement teaches that sexual abstinence – including avoidance of any thoughts about sex - before marriage is vital for the success of that marriage, and focuses on encouraging girls/young women to take an abstinence pledge, symbolized by a "purity ring". The basic beliefs are that women should be submissive to men in all aspects of life, and that

recognizing as traumatic until later on. And I think that a lot of our experiences and trauma are those very visceral places we can't always name or make sense of until later.

And again, that both of the ways you were describing liminal space, that it is this very uncomfortable place, this place of tension, but what did you say? It's fertile. And that's so true. And I have seen others describe it in a very similar way that it can be so painful, but it can be so fertile, once we're recognizing what that is and what it can teach us about ourselves.

Randy: In my book, I have a photograph of a statue in England of Alice Through the Looking Glass, and it's the bronze statue of Alice, and it's a piece of plexiglass. And Alice is stuck literally between two worlds. And I have looked at that so many times and said, "Yes, that is me; that is today." One moment I'm connected in a very deep fashion to Mother Nature, and in the other minute my rational scientific brain kicks in and is questioning the experience I just had. So you've obviously had that experience with the two faith or religious traditions that you've grown up in. Sometimes being in that liminal space makes us a bridge. How do you see yourself as a bridge between those two worlds?

Kaitlin: Yes, I mean, that's been my entire career so far as an author; I speak in a lot of churches, a lot of progressive churches who are trying to be more welcoming or trying to make sense of things that have happened. And that doesn't mean they're always doing the work correctly, but I know that people are trying. And then with Indigenous folks, I just don't know that people understand how complex the journey with specifically Christianity is. It's very - my grandma was a Southern Baptist secretary and was very loyal to her faith and hardly ever talked about being Potawatomi because a lot of our grandparents and great-grandparents, that was literally beaten out of them, they were told to not embrace who they are. So many of us were left with that silence.

women's clothing or behavior are the cause of men's sexual thoughts and deeds. Survivors of sexual abuse have identified not only individual male predators but also the "purity movement" and culture of blaming the woman, as sources of their trauma and suffering as adults. The current leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention has pledged to investigate allegations of sexual abuse and to cooperate with federal authorities, but affirms its teachings about the subordination of women, and that no sexual activity or thoughts should take place outside heterosexual marriage.

And so the journey with Christianity specifically, in the United States for Indigenous people, is very complex. And it's very diverse. I mean, there's so many different beliefs.

There's so many different ways that even the person of Jesus has understood. We have Native folks who talk about decolonization, who are trying to challenge the status quo of colonized Christianity in America. There are also really conservative Indigenous people. There's all sorts of diversity in it, and it's so complex.

And so that's the difficult space for me, as that I'm fully aware that I can be seen as "too Christian" or "not Christian enough," or "too Pagan" or "not Pagan enough," or all the labels. And I write in my new book, in *Living Resistance*, that I live on the periphery of Christianity, and that's where I find myself today. And again, I'm right on the edge kind of looking in, but also happy to be on the outside a little, but also a part of it, but also not. And so there is this widening, and for me personally, this expansiveness that I found when I began to understand who we are as Potawatomi people spiritually. That has given me a lot of freedom in my spiritual life that I didn't grow up with as a kid; I just didn't know about it. And that's meant a lot to me.

Randy: I've been fascinated with the great Lakota medicine man, Black Elk, who some people say converted to Christianity; other biographers who are a bit more subtle and nuanced, say *[he]* embraced and combined Christianity with being a medicine man. And I think this is the living example of how one can create something new by combining two traditions that, as you said, many people view as very much in conflict.

Kaitlin: And even the term Christian makes me cringe. So we're in a time where the labels aren't fitting because we're in so much conflict and identity conflict about who we are and as a nation, as people, politically, religiously in every way. So the labels aren't fitting right now. And I think that that's what I'm struggling with, and that is a liminal space in and of itself, is that we're sort of just floating. And that's okay.

Carolyn: We'll pick this up in our next segment. Stay tuned.

Segment Three

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives. We're picking up the concept of liminality and the challenge of participating in many different traditions. And, Kaitlin Curtice, you have an article that among other things, encourages people to "trade fear for curiosity." That's your term. And here's a quotation:

"I grew up in a denomination that thrives on fear and othering, but I began to step out of that fear. I found such a depth of beauty and began to understand that curiosity is a gift we give ourselves and each other so that we can be open to the unlearning and the learning that is in store for us as we widen."¹⁰

And you've also said, quote, "For many of us institutional church spaces often felt like spiritual prisons."

So can you comment on the creative tension between being a member of an institutional religious community and exploring on your own?

Kaitlin: Yes, so I actually have a series on the Liminality journal I've been writing called "After Church". And it's for me and many other people who have left institutional church spaces for one reason or another and are trying to redefine what that is. Because I grew up not only being a part of institutional Christianity, but being in leadership positions from a young age. I mean, I embraced them, but also they were put upon me and I have always been a small group leader, worship leader, just leading all these things. And in a way it was an unhealthy amount of pressure for someone, but it was pastor's kid, all the things.

And so I took it all on as my badge of honor becoming this, like, people pleasing young woman. And it just became who I was. But it was also really problematic in a lot of ways. And that does not mean - I always say this - it doesn't mean that my particular experiences - there were so many people who loved me well in the church spaces I grew up in - but we were still a part of some really toxic beliefs and values and practices, and I have to deal with that even as an adult now.

And so getting out of some of those spaces that are so othering in so many ways has

¹⁰ "After Church, Widening" The Liminality Journal, November 13, 2023.
<https://kaitlincurtice.substack.com/p/after-church-widening>

been really important. And it's really difficult. It involves a lot of grief, it involves a lot of anger, it involves a lot of fear.

But there is this moment that happens. I remember when I first started learning about the Desert Fathers and the Desert Mothers in sort of the mystic Christian space. I had never learned about that growing up. And I found Richard Rohr's work in the Center for Action and Contemplation¹¹, which is a wonderful organization in New Mexico and has been doing really incredible work for a long time. But I didn't grow up with any of that kind of stuff. And for me, that was one of my first moments of expansion of, wow, there's actually so much outside of the beliefs I was told, and the control that happened over my beliefs, growing up, that even within Christianity itself, there is this expansiveness that's available to me. That was so freeing.

And I think that over the years I've just sort of continued with that, and continued to find communities and spaces that welcome me as I am and evolve with me. And we just ask questions together. So when we leave those spaces that are so bound by fear and othering, it can actually be a huge relief when we finally step away because that expansiveness allows us to be curious again,

Carolyn: What were some of the specific elements or events that helped you connect or reconnect with your Potawatomi traditions and beliefs?

Kaitlin: I remember one very specific moment was [*when*] we were living in this really tiny apartment in Atlanta, and I had discovered that there was a prayer that we pray in Potawatomi. And I didn't grow up - my family doesn't speak Potawatomi; I didn't really even know we had our own language, that just didn't really dawn on me until later. And listening to Justin Neely, our language director, saying this prayer, I automatically just started crying. And I felt something inside of myself that I never felt before because I had only learned to pray in English, and I had only learned to pray very specific Southern Baptist ways of praying. So there was this expansiveness that I did not know was there, even in that very simple thing. That was one moment.

And then having children forces you to sort of ask big questions about your own life and what are they going to learn? And I realized that there was so much I didn't learn because of the trauma inflicted upon Potawatomi people throughout history.

¹¹ <https://cac.org/>

And I wanted to be - not just better informed, but to embody it in a way that I wasn't taught to embody it as a kid. And so I want my kids to know what it means to connect with Mother Earth, to protest, to know history, to stand up for who they are, just like Dani in *Winter's Gifts*, to ask those questions and not be afraid to share those things, to have a relationship with Mother Earth and to value the friends that hold that with them. So I've had so many experiences, but yes that's a few things that sort of shifted for me, I think.

Carolyn: It's interesting. I mean, this is very moving and very multifaceted. And also I picked up on your mention of Justin Neely because he's been the keystone for the Citizen Potawatomi Nation's work on really reviving and carrying forward and developing all the teaching of the Potawatomi language. So I wanted to ask both you and Randy: you are both tribal members of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation¹². It's known as the largest and also the most assimilated of the ten Potawatomi Nations, often called Bands, in the U.S. and Canada. So to what extent have you developed your identity focusing on being members of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation?

Kaitlin: Hmm. You want to go first, Randy?

Randy: No, go ahead!

Kaitlin: This has been - I was born in Oklahoma, so I grew up living between Oklahoma and New Mexico until I was seven or eight years old. So Oklahoma still feels bits and pieces of home to me, but I was very young. And New Mexico still feels like bits and pieces of home to me. And learning our language and just what I've learned so far through the online program, our language carries our culture. And I don't know how else to describe that, but it is so beautiful because you can learn a word like Chemokmankik - it's the word, our word, for America. And it means, loosely translates to, "The Land of the Long Butchering Knives". And it speaks so viscerally to the violence that descended upon us, that formed the institution of America, as we call it today. Not Turtle Island itself, not the land, not Mother Earth, but the institution that was forced upon us.

I didn't learn about the Potawatomi Trail of Death growing up. That was something I learned in adulthood. I didn't know that we weren't originally from Oklahoma. So I

¹² The Citizen Potawatomi Nation's headquarters are in Shawnee, Oklahoma. Their website is <https://www.potawatomi.org/>

think there are a lot of hard conversations that we have to have about assimilation and our faith and however we identify and what our words mean to us and what it means to - I want to keep returning back to the Great Lakes¹³. I want to take my kids to the Great Lakes. I want them to see the diversity of what it means to be Potawatomi, our gatherings that happen all over the place. And so that's a whole journey that I'm - I'm going on.

Randy: For me, my experience is a little different. I didn't even grow up near our tribal headquarters location now. I've spent my life here in the Northeast; family members have visited Shawnee [*Oklahoma*]; but my title of my book is *Without Reservation*. It's a bit of a pun, but it means without being within the reservation, and I have struggled, being disconnected directly from a community of others, and have found that very often I have to explore and understand things on my own. And if I were living in a reservation, I would have elders to refer to.

Kaitlin: Right.

Randy: On the other hand, I'm not caught up in the politics and some of the more traditional aspects of our culture, which I might find a little bit constraining, just as you found your experience with the church. So this tribe that we belong to really is a bridge between the Indigenous world and the mainstream world. Yes, we are amongst the most assimilated tribes, but I think that gives us opportunities. I want to pick up that theme in our next segment.

Carolyn: We'll be back in a minute.

Segment Four

Carolyn: Welcome back to the final segment of this edition of Indigenous Perspectives, talking with Kaitlin Curtice. And we're going to pick it right up with the whole idea of challenges of combining assimilation and connecting with really important things in your roots.

¹³ The Great Lakes are the traditional territory of the Potawatomi people. The great majority of Potawatomi were forced off their land during the 19th century, split into different bands, migrated and resettled in different parts of the U.S. and Canada. An exception is the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, who negotiated successfully to remain on part of their Great Lakes territory. Their website is <https://www.pokagonband-nsn.gov/>

Randy: So Kaitlin, you've been very eloquently unpacking and making accessible this notion and experience of liminality. And we've been focusing pretty much on the relationship between different religious traditions. But your child's book actually touches on the same issue, because it's an attempt to put people, young people and older readers, into that space where they can reconnect with the natural world which our mainstream culture has taught us to "other" and depersonalize. And you do it really brilliantly and really subtly. Can you talk about that theme of liminality and reconnecting with nature?

Kaitlin: Yes. So when I did this series, one of the main things that was really important for me is to help children and adults who read this book, even if it's in a subtle way, recognize that our relationship is to Mother Earth as a being, as a person. And even the creatures around us. That this idea of kinship that we hold is that means we're in relationship with each other, with ourselves, with every being, including Mother Earth herself. So Grandfather Sun and Grandmother Moon, who we know in our Potawatomi culture - but in sort of mainstream American western culture, especially in Christianity, that's not part of our vocabulary growing up. And so I want to challenge Christian readers because I want them to see this relationship differently. And I've been challenging that in all of my books ever since I started writing. I've been trying to help people break through to this.

You have a relationship with Mother Earth; that relationship is connected to colonialism, it's connected to assimilation, it's connected to everything that we are as humans, all the struggles we have in our world today. So much of that is connected to how our relationship to Mother Earth has been severed through colonization, again and again throughout the world. And so if I can sort of subversively put that in a children's book, in a children's series about the different seasons, that for me is an act of decolonization. And I hope that it's in a way that's gentle and inviting.

A lot of my work is to name these hard truths, but to do it in a way that is invitational. I want people to join me in this work, not feel like I'm bullying them into it, because that doesn't work. It has to be through solidarity and care. And I hope that my children's series allows for some of that, and that any kid of any religion could read it, of any culture could read it and just say, "Wow, that's really beautiful. I want to learn how to do that better too."

Randy: You've mentioned several times that our language is the key to understanding our culture. And we've said this on previous shows, but it's really hard for listeners to get it. Our language has many, many animate nouns. So Tree isn't the tree; Sun isn't the sun; it's Mother Sun or Father Bear or whatever. That relationship is not just a quaint, interesting manner of speaking *[that]* Indigenous people engage in. It really expresses our sense of deep connectivity. We really do feel that they are our kin.

Carolyn emphasized in notes for this program that you have a suggestion about practicing embodiment, and I'd like to explore that because for me, connecting with nature is in a sense, trusting my body and my senses to allow me to reconnect, taste, feel, sense, walk barefoot on the moss instead of in shoes. Can you run with this idea of practicing embodiment, reconnecting being part of crossing through liminal space?

Kaitlin: Yes, I'm someone who lives with anxiety and struggles with a lot of this. I mean, a lot of my personal life trauma is connected to how at an early age I became disembodied. I sort of dissociated and allowed things to live up here, but to not enter into my body. And as an adult, that's a lot of my own healing work is trying to do that.

And a way that I've started doing in the last year and a half with my family is that we've started rock climbing together. And so in a gym it's different. But when we go outside and we are going to these rocks and we're sort of asking permission to be there, and we're engaging with these elders, these rock elders that we meet, or the trees or the waters that we see, and thanking them for allowing us to be there and asking what that relationship is, that's been something for me that has been really a form of healing and embodiment, because when you're climbing, you get completely out of your head and into your body, because you're in a fight or flight mode. Honestly, it can be scary.

So you have to feel your way through it. You have to feel it in your body. And that has been any sort of movement and connecting ourselves back to the land. Or even a form of embodiment in our minds, that makes its way to our hearts, is re-imagining our relationship to Mother Earth, reexamining it and letting it become an actual relationship. I think *[this]* could heal a lot of us on an individual and collective level if we did it honestly and were consistent and let it be a long-term way of living.

Randy: Well, opening up to the awe of climbing a rock face is, as you said, it is sometimes a little frightening, but it's also a perfect metaphor for your character and the religious transitions we were talking about, which is we suddenly find ourselves engaging something that is awesome. And awesome has these two sides. One is "wow," and the other is "what's happening to me.?!". And your book takes the reader so gently through that transition. And your protagonist manages to drag two people ever so slowly and gently and maybe even initially unwittingly across that liminal space. I really think it's a remarkable accomplishment.

Carolyn: I want to say also another thing. One of the sort of underlying messages in *Winter's Gifts* is that - I mean, Dani refers to the Creator pretty clearly. You could easily read that as God, or Allah, whatever your term is for a supreme really important creative being. And then you see Grandfather Sun and Grandmother Moon, all these other personalities in the natural world as part of and additions to, not competitors with, the Creator. I think that's a really, really thoughtful balance that you've achieved.

Randy: So Caitlin, we're coming to the end of the show. Why don't you try to wrap up the message that you're working on delivering to the mainstream, but also to Indigenous people because a lot of us who are Indigenous haven't gone through that space.

Kaitlin: Yes. I think that people, when they read my books, they think that I'm at a certain level: she must go camping all the time and live outside. And there are these expectations people have of us as Indigenous people. And I always tell people, I didn't grow up camping. I didn't grow up hunting. I didn't grow up doing these Indigenous things!

This has been a journey for me of healing myself and healing so many aspects of the trauma and the colonization that has taken over so much of our history in our lives. And I hope that simple things like a children's book like this, and these stories and Dani's story, can help people to unlock - to name - some of that trauma - and to make sense of it and to also heal it. And we heal it in so many different ways. But one of the best ways we can do that is to recognize our relationship to Mother Earth and to allow ourselves to just go on that journey whatever it looks like for us on our own and with community, it's so important. No matter how old we are. It's so important.

Carolyn: Well, thank you so much, Kaitlin. So everybody, we want to thank today's guest, Kaitlin Curtis for her reflections and insights on all these issues. Kaitlin, we've really appreciated having you on our show. Migwetch.

Kaitlin: Thank you.

Randy: Migwetch. I hope this broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots and Mother Earth and your ancestral roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, we encourage you to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna, our animate kin, and perhaps even that of your ancestors and others who have walked on. Allow yourself to touch their presence, capture that moment and hold onto it.

Carolyn: And if you wish, write to Randy. Let him know about your experiences or with any questions or suggestions you have for these shows. Randy can be reached at his email, randykritkausky@hushmail.com or through his website, which is www.randykritkausky.com

Migwetch to all.

Randy: Migwetch.

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