INDIAN RESPECT FOR THE AGED – ADOPTION OF CHILDREN – REVERENCE FOR THE DEAD

"they are remarkable for the particular respect which they pay to old age. In all their meetings, whether public or private, they pay the greatest attention to the observations and advice of the aged. No one will attempt to contradict them, nor interfere, in any manner, or even speak, unless he is especially called upon. 'The aged,' they say, 'have lived through the whole period of our lives, and long before we were born. They have not only all the knowledge which we possess, but a great deal more. We, therefore, must submit our limited views to their experience.'

"In traveling, one of the eldest will always take the lead, unless another is especially appointed for that purpose. If such a one stops to hunt, or in order to stay and encamp at the place for some time, all halt together, all are pleased with the spot, and declare it to be judiciously chosen.

"On every occasion, and in every situation through life, age takes the lead among the Indians. Even little boys, when going on parties of pleasure, were it only to catch butterflies, strictly adhere to this rule, and submit to the direction of the oldest in their company, who is their chief, leader and spokesman. It they are accosted on the way by any person, and are asked whither they are going, or any other question, no one will presume to answer but their *speaker*. The same rule is observed when they are grown uo, and in no case whatever will one of a party, club, of meeting, attempt to assume authority over the leader, or even to set him right if he should mistake the road, or take a wrong course, much less will any one contradict that he says, unless his opinion should be particularly asked. In such a case, and in no other, he will give his advice, but with great modesty and diffidence.

"Indeed, I have had sufficient reason to be convinced that this principle, excellent as it is in itself, is sometimes even carried too far by the Indians, and that not a little inconvenience is occasioned by it. A few instances will make this better understood than any explanation I could give.

"In the year 1765, the great body of Christian Indians, after having remained sixteen months at and near Philadelphia, were permitted to return to their own country, peace having be concluded with the Indian nations, who still continued at war, notwithstanding the pacification between the European powers.

"They resolved to open a path through the wilderness, from the frontier settlements beyond the Blue Mountains, directly to Wyoming, on the Susquehanna. This path they laid off and cut, as they proceeded, two, three or four miles at a time, according to the nature of the ground and the convenience of water, bringing up their baggage by making two or more trips, as they had no horses to carry it. Having arrived at the Great Pine Swamp, then supposed to be about fourteen miles wide, it was found very difficult to cut out a passage, on account of the thickets and of the great number of fallen trees which encumbered it; they were, besides, unacquainted with that part of the country. Several old men, however, took the lead and undertook to be their guides. After a tedious march of near two weeks, attended with much labor, they brought the party across the swamp to the large creek which borders it upon the opposite side. There they found a very steep mountain, through which no passage could be found, either above or below.

"Discouraged at the prospect before them, they saw now no alternative but to return by the same way they had come, and take the route by Fort Allen to Nescopeck, and so up the Susquehanna to Wyoming, a distance of nearly one hundred miles round. In this difficulty it fortunately struck their missionary, Mr. Zeisberger, that a certain Indiana named David, who was one of their party, and had followed them all the way, was acquainted with that part of the country, and might, perhaps be able to point out to them some better and shorter road. He soon found that he was not mistaken, David was perfectly acquainted with the country, and knew a good road through which the party might easily pass; but not having been questioned in the subject, had hitherto kept silent, and followed the rest, though *he knew all the while they were going wrong*.

"A dialogue then took place between him and the missionary:

"ZEISBERGER. – 'David, you are acquainted with this country, perhaps you know a better road and a shorter one than that which we are going to take?'

"DAVID. – 'Yes, I do; there is such a course which we may easily get through, and have a much shorter distance to travel.'

"Z. – 'What, David; we are all going wrong, and you are with us?'

"D. – 'Yes, it is so.'

"Z. – 'And yet you said nothing, and followed with the rest, as if all had been right?'

"D. – 'Yes , the guides are older than I, they took the lead, and never asked me whether I had any knowledge of the country. If they had inquired, I would have told them.

"Z. – 'Will you now tell them?'

"D. – 'No, indeed; unless they ask me. It does not become an Indian to instruct his elders.' "

"At the instigation of Mr. Zeisberger, the question was then asked him, when he immediately told them they must return to a certain spot, six miles back, and then direct their course more the to the northeast, which would bring them to a gap in the mountains, where they could pass through with great ease. They did so, and he followed them, and being now desired to take the lead, he did it, and brought them to the very spot he had described, and from thence led them all the way to Wyoming. This difficult part of the road in the swamp has been since called *David's Path*, and the State road now passes through it.

This anecdote was told me by Mr. Zeisberger himself, whom I have never known to say anything which is not strictly true. I, therefore, give it full credit, the more so, as I have myself witnessed to similar instances.

"The first happened in the year 1791. I had parted by accident from the company I was with, and lost my way in the woods. I had with me an Indian lad about twelve or thirteen years of age, and wished him to take the lead, to which, however, he would not consent. We were a last found by our party, who had gone in search of us. I complained to them of the boy for not doing what I had bidden him; but they answered that he had done right, and 'that it did become a *boy* to walk before a *man*, and be his leader.'

"The second occurrence of the like kind took place in the year 1798. I was on a journey with two young Indians round the head of Lake Erie. Neither of these Indians having ever been in the country we were going to, they received their instructions of others before their departure. The leader, however, having once mistaken the path, we traveled several miles in a wrong direction, until at last I discovered the mistake by our having Owl Creek to out left, when we ought to have had it to our right. I observed this to Christian, the young Indian in the rear, who coincided with me in opinion, I desired to him to run forward to the leader who was far ahead of us, and to bring him back; but the lad answered that *he could not do it*. I asked him the reason. 'It is,' said he, 'because I am younger than he is.' 'Will you then.' Replied I, 'take my message to him, and tell him that I desire him to return to this place, where I will wait for him?' The young man immediately consented, went forward to the leader and brought him back, upon which we took an eastward course through the woods to Owl Creek, and after crossing it fell into out right path."*The same venerable writer also speaks of filial affection and respect among the Indian tribes (and having particular reference to those of the *Lenni Leanpe*), as follows:

"It is a sacred principle among the Indians, and one of those moral and religious truths which they always have before their eyes, that the Great Spirit, who created them and provided for them so abundantly which means of subsistence, made it the duty of parents to maintain and take care of their children until they should be able to provide for themselves, and that having while weak and helpless, received the benefits of maintenance and protection, they have bound to repay them by a similar care of those who are laboring under the infirmities of old age and are no longer able to supply their own wants.

"Thus a strong feeling of gratitude towards their elders, inculcated and cherished from their earliest infancy, is the solid foundation on which rests that respect of old age for which Indians are so remarkable, and it is further supported by the well-founded hope of receiving the like succors and attentions, in their turn, when the heavy hand of time shall have reduced them to the same helpless condition which they now commiserate in others, and seek, by every means in their power, to render more tolerable. Hence, they do not confine themselves to acts of absolute necessity; it is not enough for then that the old are not suffered to starve with hunger or perish with cold, but they must be made, as much as possible, to share in the pleasures of life. It is, indeed, a moving spectacle to see the tender and delicate attentions which, on every occasion, they lavish upon aged and decrepit persons. When going hunting, they will put then on a horse or in a canoe, and take them into the woods to their hunting ground, in order to revive their spirits by making them enjoy the sights of a sport in which they can no longer participate. The place them in particular situations where they are sure that the game they are in pursuit of will pass by, taking proper measures, at the same time to prevent its escape, so that their aged parents and friends may, at last, as our sportsmen call it, *be in at the death*. Nor is this all; the hoary veterans must all enjoy the *honors* of the chase. When the animal thus surrounded is come within reach of their guns, when every possibility of escape is precluded, by the woods all around being set on fire, they all, young and old, fire together, so that it is difficult to say whose ball it was that brought the animal to the ground. But they are never at a loss to decide, and always give it in favor of the oldest men in the party. So, when the young people have discovered a place where the bears have their haunts, or have resorted to for the winter, they frequently take with them, to the spot,

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*Extract from "*History, Manners and Customs of the Indian Nations,"*

such of the old men as are yet able to walk or ride, where they not only have the opportunity of witnessing the sport, but received their full share of the meat and oil.

"At home the ole are as well treated and taken care of as if they were favorite children. They are cherished and even caressed; indulged in health and nursed in sickness; and all their wishes and wants are anticipated. Their company is sought by the young, to whom their conversation is considered an honor. Their advice is asked on all occasions; their words are listened to as oracles, and their occasional garrulity, nay, even the second childhood, often attendant on extreme old age, is never, with Indians, a subject of ridicule or laughter. Respect, gratitude, and love, are too predominate in their minds to permit any degrading idea to mix itself with these truly honorable and generous feelings.

"And yet there have been travelers who have ventured to assert that old people, among the Indians, are not only neglected and suffered to perish for want, but that they are even, when no longer able to take care of themselves, *put out of the way of all trouble*. I am free to declare that among all the Indian nations that I have become acquainted with, if any one should kill an old man or woman, for no other cause than that of having become burdensome to society, it would be considered as an unpardonable crime; the general indignation would be excited, and the murderer instantly to put to death. I cannot conceive any act that would produce such an universal horror and detestation. Such is the veneration which is everywhere felt of old age."

Among the customs, or indeed common laws of the Indians, one of the most remarkable and interesting was the *adoption* of prisoners. The right belonged more particularly to the females than the warriors of the tribes.

It was common for a mother to claim, from among the captives, one whose life should be spared, and who would, by adoption, fill in her household, the place of her son who had fallen in battle.

It was well for the fortunate prisoners, that this election depended more on the voice of the mother than on that of the father, as innumerable lives were thus spared, of those whom the warriors, if left to their own desires, would have immolated. When once adopted, if the captives assumed a cheerful aspect, entered into their mode of life, learned their language, and, in brief, acted as if they actually felt themselves adopted, all hardships was removed, except such as was inseparable to the Indian mode of life.

Although the right was most frequently exercised by mothers the fill the places of their sons who had been slain, yet the privilege of adoption was often extended to female prisoners. The following is a case in point, extracted from Mark Bancroft's account of the surprise and capture of the Gilbert family, near the present site of Weissport, in the year 1780. Speaking of the custom of adopting, he says:

"But if this change of relation operated as an amelioration of condition in the life of the prisoner, it rendered ransom extremely difficult in all cases, and some instances precluded it altogether. Theses difficulties were exemplified in a striking manner in the person of Elizabeth Gilbert.

"This girl, only twelve years of age when captured, was adopted by an Indian family, but afterwards permitted to reside in a white family of the name of Secord, by whom she was treated as a child indeed, and to whom she became so much attached as to call Mrs. Secord by the endearing title of *Mamma*. Her residence, however, in the white family, was a favor granted to the Secords by the Indian (adopted) parents of Elizabeth, who regarded and claimed he as their child.

Mr. Secord, having business at Niagara, took Betsey – as she was called – with him, and there, after long separation, she had the happiness to meet six of her relations, most of whom had been already released and were preparing to set out for Montreal, lingering and yearning for those they seemed destined to leave behind perhaps forever. The sight of their beloved little sister roused every energy to effect her release, which desire was generously seconded by John Secord and Colonel Butler, who, soon after her visit to Niagara, sent for the Indian who claimed Elizabeth, and made overtures for her ransom. At first he that '*he would not sell his own flesh and blood*;' but, attacked through his interests, or, in other words, his necessities, the negotiation succeeded, and her youngest child was among the treasures first restored to the mother at Montreal."

Referring to the Indian custom, Heckewelder, with his usual lenity of judgment towards the savages, says:

"The prisoners are generally adopted by the families of their conquerors in the place of lost or deceased relatives or friends, where they soon become domesticated, and are so kindly treated that they never wish themselves away again. I have seen even white men who, after such adoption, were given up by the Indians in compliance with the stipulations of treaties, take the first opportunity to escape from their own country and return with all possible speed to their Indian homes."

But with all proper deference to the old missionary's statement, we are probably safe in believing that such instances of *white men's* devotion to the delights of Indian life are, to say the very least, *exceedingly rare*.

In their intercourse with the Indians, the white people were thoughtlessly trampling upon their religion, and their sacred rights. They were expected to look meekly on while the grave was robbed of its treasures, and the bones of their fathers were left to bleach upon the field. When exasperated by the cruel disrespect of their conquerors, and driven to deeds of vengeance, there was little appreciation of the motives which influenced them.

It was the Indian custom to bury with the dead their best clothing, and the various implements they had been in the habit of using whilst living. It is was a warrior, they placed his tomahawk by his side, and his knife in his shield; with the hunter, his bow and arrow, and implements for cooking his food; with the woman, their kettle and cooking apparatus, and also food for all. Tobacco was deposited in every grave, for to smoke was an Indian's idea of felicity in the body and out of it, and in this there was not so much difference as there might be, between them and gentlemen of paler hue.

Among the Iroquois, and many other Indian nations, it was the custom to place the dead upon scaffolds built for this purpose, from tree to tree, or within a temporary enclosure, and underneath a fire was kept burning for several days.

They had probably known instances of persons reviving after they were supposed to be dead; and this led to the conclusion, that the spirit sometimes returned to animate the body, after it had once fled. It there were no signs of life for ten days, the fire was extinguished and the body left unmolested, till decomposition had begun to take place, when the remains were buried.

In later years they allowed ten days for the flight of the spirit. Their period of mourning continued while the spirit was wandering; as soon as they believed it entered heaven, they commenced rejoicing, that it has reached where happiness dwells forever. Sometimes a piteous wailing was kept up for a long time, but it was only their own bereavement that they bewailed, as they had no fear about the fate of those who died. Not until they had heard of *Purgatory* from the Jesuits or *endless woe* from the Protestants, did they look upon death with terror, or life as anything but a blessing.

In regard to their burial rites, the words of the poet who has given metrical beauty to their legends, and added his own to their lofty enthusiasm, will suffice:

"Poet and historian have lavished their descriptive skill on the burial rites of Alaric, whose bones repose in the sandy bed of the Busentinus, but not less imposing was the funeral of *Blackbird* the *Omaha* Chief, who was inhumed bestriding his war-horse in a hill sepulchre that overlooks the Missouri."

A tribe has been known to visit the spot which had been, in former times, the burial place of their people, though long deserted, and spend hours in silent meditations; and not till every hope had apparently died in their bosoms, did they leave the sod which covered the dust of any of their kindred to the footsteps of the stranger.