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# The Story of Akecheta; The Proud Squirrel

It is time to tell my story. My name is Akecheta, and I am a squirrel. I live in a large, comfortable tree in southern Ontario, accompanied by my loving wife and benevolent children. I suppose you could say that I am a remarkably lucky squirrel to be so healthy and happy alongside my family. Although my family and I presently enjoy great fortune, life was not so easy before.

To whoever may be reading this, I do not wish to gain your sympathy and compassion for telling my story, but rather wish to educate you on the importance of allowing someone to be themselves, no matter how different they may be from yourself. No matter the color of one's skin or the nature of one's belief, it is critical to the goodness of our world that we learn to let others be who they wish to be. So while I work up the courage to tell you my horrific story, please remember the moral of my account.

About five years ago, the ecosystem in southern Ontario lacked resources for some species of animals, most prominently raccoons. Due to squirrels' superior speed and agility, we were out-working the raccoons in gathering food and other resources. Many of the raccoons were becoming hungry and uncomfortable, thus making them desperate for comfortability and opulence. On a cold night, after putting my children to bed and kissing my wife goodnight, I could not help but possess the feeling that I was being watched. After hours of scanning the area around my family's tree, I drifted off to sleep, despite the nagging feeling of insecurity I had. It turns out the instinct I had was accurate, as that night I was abducted by a pack of raccoons.

While in the raccoons' possession, I was made to gather resources and food for the ruthlessly cruel animals who had taken me from my home and beloved family. I was made to appear as a raccoon, as they would paint my face with black stripes and attempt to communicate with me in their language. I was made to feel worthless for having the biological identity of a squirrel, and was told that my ways of living were evil and wrong, and that I must live as a raccoon from now on. Oh, how degraded I felt! I would often cry myself to sleep in the cold, wet corner of the bush they would make me sleep in. I longed to see my beautiful children smiling up at me, feel the embrace of my wife, and enjoy the love and support of my great father, the man who taught me all of the proud values of being a squirrel.

Once the raccoons had acquired enough resources to survive the winter, they sent me home to my tree. At first, I was delighted to see my family again, but despite my initial relief and rejuvenated happiness, I soon learned that returning to my prior life would not be so easy, as I had lost all of my previously obtained squirrel instincts. I had lost the ability to speak my family's language, as well as now lacked the ability to protect my family from the dangerous

elements of our ecosystem. I began to drift apart from my family, as I felt I could no longer be of use to my children. I had also lost the once burning spark of love between my wife and me. My father, who had taught me how to be a proud and productive squirrel, now looked at me with shame and frustration as he could see I was not capable of teaching my children what he once taught me.

I fought tirelessly to regain the bond I once had with my cherished family, despite failing to do so. After months of dealing with the sadness and hopelessness that had consumed my family, I decided it was time to leave the tree and go to the city of Toronto. I could no longer look down at the defeated faces of my children, or the disappointed look on my elderly father's aging face. I could no longer withstand the loveless, broken marriage I had with my once elegant and wonderfully supportive wife.

Upon reaching the city, I found myself just as lost as I was before. Running away did not ease the pain, but rather put it on hold, as I at least did not have to watch my family suffer. I had no place to live, and I had lost all of my once natural squirrel instincts, thus preventing me from being able to gather food and resources. Much to my dismay, I found that the only way I could survive was by digging through peoples' garbage cans alongside the city raccoons.

The city raccoons were even more cruel and ruthless than the ones who had abducted me. They would physically and emotionally abuse me by kicking and punching me around as well as reminding me of how worthless I am for possessing a squirrel identity. Looking back on these times, I cannot believe I remained in their company, although I now realize that in order to have maintained my safety and physiological needs, I had sacrificed by social, self-esteem and self-actualization needs as an individual.

After months upon months of being treated no better than the very garbage I was picking from, I decided that I should put my miserable life to an end. I planned to hurl myself off of the Scarborough Bridge and plunge to my brutal, yet seemingly merciful death, later that night.

That night, I was on my way to the bridge, each step coming closer and closer to my rightful death, when I came across an old, wise looking squirrel, whom I now know to be Apenimon. Apenimon could see the sadness and defeat on my face. Despite Apenimon's seemingly kind and peaceful nature, I anticipated the old squirrel to taunt and curse at me; much like the raccoons would do to me on a daily basis. Despite my anticipations, the cruelty never came from the old squirrel. Instead, Apenimon showed me great sympathy and care, to which I recognize today as a blessing sent from the creator.

Through his great wisdom, my now cherished friend Apenimon guided me back to happiness. Apenimon showed me who I really am; a proud squirrel who deserves to have pride and happiness for his identity. Through his wonderful friendship and benevolent efforts, Apenimon brought me back to my prior self. Because of his remarkable efforts towards the regaining of my true self, I am now back to living the way I was before; a happy squirrel alongside his beloved family.

After returning home to my tree, I never saw my old friend, Apenimon again, although when I look up into the sky that our glorious creator constructed, I can sense the heroic spirit of the man who saved my life.

While my story ended happily, many individuals who have been treated the way I was cannot say the same. It is absolutely crucial to the goodness of our world that we respect and love one another, regardless of our identities. Individuals are constantly being discriminated against for their identities, thus causing millions of cases of depression, substance abuse, familial conflict, and for some, even suicide. This must be put to an end. If you plan to take anything from my life story, please let it be the importance of kindness and respect to everyone, regardless of who they may be.

~~~This fictional story was written in the memory of all of the Indigenous people who were made to suffer through the Indian Act and residential schools, as well as those indirectly impacted by the repercussions of the previously mentioned tragedies. These tragedies *cannot* happen again. It is critical to the peace of our world that the present generations of people as well as the generations to come recognize the importance of not only treating FNMI peoples properly, but the importance of treating *everyone* fairly and with respect.

~~~ Through Akecheta's perseverance, I wish to show those who are having a hard time that there is always a way to regain happiness and peace, even if it does not seem possible.

~~~After reading this story, think about what *you can do* to help restore peace and dignity within FNMI culture as well as within all individuals who have been scarred by the inhumane actions of others.

~~~Nelson Mandela once said:

“Let there be justice for all.

Let there be peace for all.

Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all.

Let each know that for each body, the mind and the soul have been freed to fulfill themselves.”