

READING

Words Matter

How does it feel to be called by a name you did not choose for yourself? Over time, people have used a long list of names for the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, but those words have rarely been what they would call themselves.

The power and meaning of labels comes not only from the choice of words but also from how those words are said. Niin, an Anishinaabe woman of both Cree and Ojibway descent, talked in an interview about the first time in her childhood when someone called her an “Indian.”

I’m not sure whether I was in grade one or in grade two; actually I think it was in kindergarten, because my Mom was home at that time. I remember being outside for recess. You know, everyone was running around, playing in the middle of the field. All of a sudden I stopped because I realized that a few of the kids who were in my classroom had formed a circle around me. They were going around and around the circle and I realized I was in the middle of this circle. I was trying to figure out what the heck is going on here? They were saying something and I started listening to them. They were saying “Indian, Indian, Indian.” And I was like what? I really didn’t understand myself, first and foremost, as an “Indian.” Right in the middle of when they were doing that, the bell rang and everybody just turned toward the door and started walking in. I remember looking down on the ground wondering, what are they talking about Indian, Indian, Indian? I don’t even know how that circle formed in the first place. I didn’t catch it. It just seemed all of a sudden they were all around me and I just stopped, looking at them all. The bell rang right away. I just remember putting my head down, walking, looking at the grass, I was really thinking about, what was that all about? I didn’t even remember it by the time we got to the door. Except for when I got home I asked my Mom.

I remember when I went home, my mother was standing at the counter. She was baking something or other but she was working at the counter and I just walked up to her and I was watching what she was doing. I remember my chin barely touched the counter and I was watching her. I said, “Mom, what am I?” And she looked down at me and said really fast, “Were people asking you what you were?” I said, “Yes, they were calling me Indian.” She said, “Tell them you’re Canadian.” I couldn’t really figure out why she was sounding so stern and kind of angry. I just thought okay and I turned around but I remember that afternoon really clearly. I think why it stuck in my mind so much is because they were in a

circle ridiculing me. And I don't even know. I didn't even take offence because I didn't know what they were doing. Even though they were calling me Indian, I was still going yeah, so what? So it always puzzled me about why, why they were calling me Indian. And because I didn't really feel any different from them, even though I knew my skin was darker, my hair was brown, and I had a shinier face. I really didn't feel any different from them or feel I was different from them.

I just felt we were all just kids. I think that's when I started learning that there were different kinds of people. I knew that there were different kinds of people by just looking and seeing like different looking people but not people who are different from one another.¹

¹ Mary Young, *Pimatisiwin: Walking in a Good Way, a Narrative Inquiry into Language as Identity* (Manitoba: The Prolific Group, 2005), 47–48. Reproduced by permission from Pemmican Publishers.

Connection Questions

1. What do you think the word Indian meant to the kids in Niin's class? What factors might have shaped her classmates' understanding of the word?
2. Why do you think Niin's mother told Niin she was Canadian? What did she want Niin to understand about herself?
3. Considering the rest of the story, what might Niin's mother have wanted Niin's classmates to learn?
4. Do you have a memory of becoming aware of differences? If so, what was it?