**Jim Clark Language Is a Brick Wall**

To me, language is a great big brick wall that you can’t get over.  If you can’t understand what other people are saying, you can’t really know what they’re doing.

I’ve said before how important language is to keeping our Ojibwe traditions alive.  Our prayers cannot be translated.  Our teachings cannot be translated.  Speaking our language is more than a way of communicating – it’s a way of life, of keeping our identity.

We were given our language by the Creator to use, as other people were given their languages to use.  We believe that we have to carry on our traditions in the Ojibwe language.

Some people say that we are losing our language.  But to me, we are giving it away, because some people who learned English want to use English more than Ojibwe.  So, the people down in the cities, away from the reservation, are more for learning English than the Anishinaabe way.

Fortunately, now the Mille Lacs Band and other bands are teaching the Ojibwe language in their schools.  It’s hard to teach the language with so much English around and hard to learn it.  I’m proud of the people who are learning or relearning Ojibwe.  It’s not easy; any language is complicated.  (English certainly was complicated for me as a boy.)

We still use our Indian names, too.  Mine is Nawigiizis, which means the center of the moon.  All of my kids have Indian names.  There was a guy on the corner the other day and I asked him, “What is your name?”  He said, “Owanee Gahbow” just as plain as can be.  But when you ask some people, “What is your Indian name?” they know they have one, but they don’t know how to say it.

I go back to where I grew up, and I ask people there if anybody is still using this word or that word, and they don’t know.  We used to have names for all the different places, and I go back and ask them in Ojibwe about this place or that place, and nobody knows.  We run into that language barrier again, because some of the older people are gone now.  They were the ones who always insisted that we use the language.  My grandmother would say, “You have to talk to the Creator in that language; that’s why he gave it to you.”

And that brick wall:  non-Indians want us to explain some things that we do, and we can’t.  It just won’t work, because there are things we can say in Ojibwe that you can’t translate into English, or things in English that you can’t translate into Ojibwe.

Of course, I can’t teach Ojibwe through a short newspaper column.  You can’t hear what it sounds like, which is crucial to learning.  But maybe I have given you a little idea of why it is so special.