**Millie Benjamin Becoming a Woman**

I want to remember the things that my mother taught me and what she taught my daughters. One of our people’s important traditions concerns what has to be done and what can’t be done when young women reach puberty.

I’ll tell you first how they did it a long time ago. When a young woman reached puberty, she was put in a wigwam away from the village with the door facing away from the village, and she had to stay there for the duration of her menstrual cycle. She had to fast every morning. Her grandmother would come out midday and give her a drink of water and bring her something to eat.

When the young girl was ready to come back to her village, the old ladies would make a path for her back to her wigwam. They laid cedar boughs on the ground like a carpet. They did this because it’s our belief a girl has strong spiritual powers the first year she becomes a young woman, so her feet were not allowed to touch the ground.

Then all the young woman’s namesakes were invited for a feast. Namesakes are sort of like godparents, except we have more of them – maybe eight or nine or ten namesakes. These people would welcome the girl back as a young woman. An elderly man was asked to come and speak. And then the young woman was instructed about what she could and could not do.

Now I’ll go to the present day. I lived in Minneapolis when my oldest daughter reached puberty. My mother, who lived in the duplex upstairs, said my daughter had to be separated from the family for a few days. So my daughter went upstairs to stay with gramma, and gramma made her fast every morning and then fed her at noon.

When the four days were over, we invited all of my daughter’s namesakes to come for the ceremony.  My mother instructed me to ask an old gentleman from Mille Lacs, who lived about six blocks from us, to speak at the ceremony. He said, “You don’t know how happy I am this is still being practiced.”

Of course, there were no cedar boughs to make a path for my daughter, so my mom used throw rugs. We made food for all of my daughter’s namesakes who came to the feast, gave them tobacco, and thanked them for being there for her on this important day.

The old gentleman told my daughter that she would have strong spiritual powers during her first year of being a woman, and there are things she wouldn’t be allowed to do, such as touch young, growing things like babies or plants or anybody’s hair. She was instructed to use her own dish every month during her time, because it is our belief that others, especially men and boys, could get headaches by eating out of her dish. And she was instructed that for the first year, she should not eat any fresh game, berries, fish or anything that grows until we held a ceremony where this food was prepared and fed to her by someone else.

My daughter was also instructed that she could not step over anything a child or man could put over their head. Even today, if there is a child’s toy on the floor, my daughters will pick it up or unconsciously move it out of the way with their foot – they won’t step over it.

All of these “dos and don’ts” are a way of learning self-discipline. I think self-discipline is very important, so I try to keep this and other traditions alive the way our old women practiced them at Mille Lacs.