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## Journey of Discovery

Marissa Joly BFA

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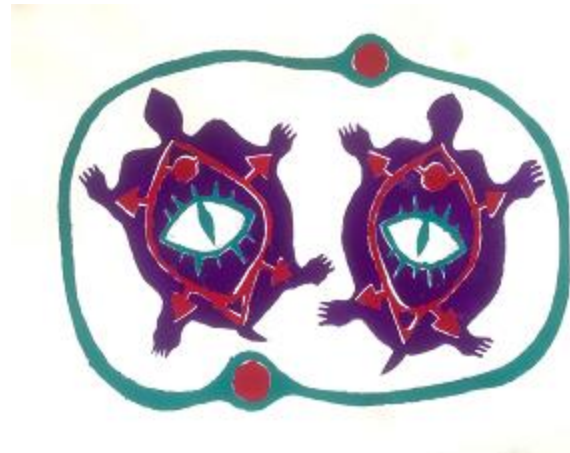
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## Journey of Discovery

April 21, 2021

Marissa Joly



Original art by Marissa Joly. Mikjikj Turtle. Joly explores traditional Native American styles of art making to represent the spiritual relationship and interconnectedness that we all share with every living being.

Growing up as a mixed indigenous person, questioning my identity has been a constant. On my father's side there is Filipino and French, on my mother's side there is French, Irish, and Mi'kmaq. I grew up in Auburn, Maine primarily living with my mother and her parents; my grandmother being born and raised on the Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation reserve in Quebec, Canada and she moved to the United States back in the 1950's. I grew up traveling to the reservation every summer for the annual powwow and to visit family. Not growing up on the reservation and coming from various ethnic backgrounds, I struggled with feeling that I wasn't 'native enough' to identify as so. I've always been proud that my Mi'kmaq heritage has been a constant presence in my life even though there is so much about the culture that I still don't know. Only within the last few years has it really been a catalyst for how I move forward in my life and through my journey with discovering myself.

This month marks three years since my mother's unexpected death from cancer and other complications. I had a strong relationship with my mother so it definitely hit hard losing her so young, at the age of 20, and I can honestly say that my Native culture and spirituality has helped me tremendously through my healing journey as well as taught me many life lessons that I will carry with me. My path got steered in the right direction in becoming more aware and grateful of my heritage and ancestry. As a child I was brought up into Catholicism, but never truly felt a connection with it. In my late teens I got curious about spirituality and today, it has driven me to continue exploring my identity through art making stemming from my culture.

As a child I was always excited when we would learn about Native American history but it would also sadden me that it was for only one to two class sessions throughout the year as well as learning from my family the parts of Native American history that they

don't teach you. I'm so grateful for finding out I was eligible for the Native American tuition waiver because otherwise college would have been a very difficult decision for me but now I'm the first one in my immediate family to be achieving a Bachelor's degree! I love the region of Southern Maine but I knew there wasn't a huge presence of Native resources at USM but I was determined to find some. It was disappointing to find out that the previous Native student group had fizzled out and there wasn't really a person or a place to go to for connections. It wasn't until I got an email from the Student Diversity Center inviting Native students to a pizza party where about three of us attended. This opened the door that has led me here today.

It's been a rough go of it trying to get a more permanent community presence for Native students at USM and establishing the Native American Student Alliance within the last 4-5 years but the work is well worth it so that future Native students can have a safe place to go to for assistance with anything they may need. I've met wonderful people especially from participating in the Wabanaki Language courses that we fought so hard to get offered at USM. Language is the heart of our culture that holds so many stories of our ancestors and the foundation of this land we reside on to this day and it is important for its preservation. The work that Wabanaki REACH and the Capacity Building Center for Tribes does truly has been an inspiration to me in the push for decolonization and reconciliation of Native peoples in Maine. I always feel so at home and supported when connecting with other Native people. I feel there is a deep ancestral connection along with shared trauma that runs through all of our veins invoking empathy; showing the relationship that we have with each other and all living things around us.