



Video Story Transcript

I WANTED TO BE AN INDIAN

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMLBwWCrvPg>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Jo Radner and this is an excerpt from a long story called “Braving the Middle Ground.” When I was a child, I wanted to be an Indian. I practiced being silent in the woods of western Maine.

I knew there'd been Indians there 'cause my Uncle Bob found arrowheads in his cow pasture but somehow they had disappeared. And now we were there. My grandmother told me that my English ancestors had founded several towns in Massachusetts and New Hampshire and Maine. I was proud. I thought we'd been here since 1635. But then when I studied history, I realized what it meant to found all those towns. My ancestors had been among the first people to take the Indians' land, to cut down the forests, to fence the fields, to feel entitled to destroy the way of life of native people.

And then when they studied my own family history later on, I found more things I didn't want to know. Some of my ancestors had been members of Rogers' Rangers, the special forces of the 18th century British army trained to use Indian woodcraft against the Indians. Indian killers! I'd heard about their famous 1759 raid on the Abenaki mission village of St. Francis in Quebec.

The heroic story! A select troop slogged 150 miles through untracked wilderness. Nine days wading in icy waters in a spruce bog to carry off a dawn raid that destroyed the village of St. Francis, from which the French and Indians had launched so many raids on New England.

And then my Abenaki friends told me the not so heroic stories. Most of the people that Rogers' Rangers killed in St. Francis were women and children. One ranger was walking past an Indian baby lying on the ground. Major Rogers told him to kill it. “I can't!” he said.

And Rogers snarled, "Next will be lice!" and crushed the child's head! My ancestors were Rogers' Rangers. I was relieved when I discovered that my most direct Ranger ancestors John and Stephen Farrington had been too young to go on that raid. The story of John Farrington, my great-great-great-grand uncle haunts me.

When he was a 10 year old boy, tall and strong working in a field, a party of Abenakis burst out of the woods, captured him and carried him off quickly toward Canada. When they stopped on the way, they dressed John in Abenaki clothing. They painted his body and then to finish the ritual, one of the young Indians took a finger full of red paint and told John to stick out his tongue so he could paint a stripe on it.

John obeyed. But when the Indian put his finger in his mouth, John bit it and he wouldn't let go. And the Abenakis were startled and then they burst out laughing. They said, "He'll be a good Indian!"

And they took him to St. Francis. He was adopted by an Indian family. They treated him kindly; he grew up playing games and hunting with the Indian boys.

He lived for eight years as an Abenaki. In that time, he married a daughter of a chieftain. I don't know anything about his wife. I know nothing about children. But I do know that he wanted to leave; he tried twice! The first time, his own wife apprehended him as he was walking out of the village dressed as an Indian woman selling baskets.

The second time he was in Quebec City (which had fallen to the English) serving as interpreter to a party of Abenakis. And then he jumped into the middle of a troop of English soldiers and said he wanted to go back to New England. They argued; a merchant ransomed him. He stayed for eight months in Quebec working off his ransom. Went back to New Hampshire and joined the Rangers. He never fully lost contact. Family memoirs say that for the years, Abenakis from St. Francis came to visit him in New England. But he changed from Indian husband to Indian fighter. And I think that it was because of the stories that he heard when he was a young child in his own English family.

You know, it's all in who gets to tell the stories and what stories they choose to tell. John's ancestors had been treated kindly by Indians but his family didn't tell those stories. The stories he heard were about how savages had murdered his great grandfather, had abducted his great aunt, had slaughtered four of her first six children. And when he was a toddler, his mother had held him up to see the massacred bodies of his uncle's! A family memoir says, "It would seem only natural that in later years, John became a terror to the Indians far and near." Only natural?

There is an Abenaki legend about a cannibal monster with an icy heart who comes to devour a small family but the mother of the family welcomes him as if he is her father. She washes him and dresses him. She and her husband tell him family stories. They treat him like a beloved relative and the monster sits surly for three days.

And then... he drinks a kettle of boiling grease. It melts his icy heart. It purges all the evil he's done and after that, he lives with the family and takes care of them. I wish my family had been able to live kindly and peaceably. I wish history had taken a different turn. John Farrington was an Indian fighter all his life. But in some sense he was still an Abenaki. His son Samuel wrote that in his last years, John's early Indian life came back to him and he would take his blanket out into the woods without shelter and lie quietly for the night.

Do I still want to be an Indian? No. I want to learn to live well with my whole history, to recognize the monstrosities and the kindnesses that lie behind me. To make family of all kinds, to melt my own icy heart!