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## **The Lesson of Kimberly's Bear**

by Judy Fort Brenneman

I only heard the story once, but I keep coming back to it. It's a simple story on the surface. In the hands – or voice – of a less gifted storyteller, I might have tossed it off as a standard interpretive glimpse into a culture not my own, or a tale for kids.

I realized it wasn't either of those when Kimberly asked us what the story meant, and my answer was different from everybody else's. They said the story was about relaxing, noticing and valuing the natural world. I thought the story was about the bear, and about fear.

Kimberly Cunningham-Summerfield, of Tsalagi descent and raised in a traditional Mewuk home, is a Park Ranger Interpreter at Yosemite National Park and past-Vice Chair of CINP. She told the story at a 2005 NIW session on interpreting Native American cultures in ways that remind people that Native Americans are here, now, an active part of modern society.

It's Kimberly's story and I won't write it down; she's a marvelous storyteller and to fix her words with my ink would be disrespectful and would change the story into something else. I'll write enough so you'll understand its impact on me, and why I think it's important.

The story – told in present tense to reinforce that it's about contemporary people – is about Kimberly's family on a day when everybody is having a lousy time. Kimberly shakes her head in disbelief at all the lousy things that have happened. Nothing has gone right, nothing is going right. They're chugging home down a long, two-lane canyon highway. Everybody's in a lousy mood.

They spy something in the distant brush, stop the car, and get out to watch. The something is a bear.

Kimberly's description of the bear is exquisitely detailed and physically accurate. The bear crosses the river toward them, disappears into the brush, and re-emerges, eating wild grapes. The family reaches in and eats some, too. Eventually the bear heads back across the river, walking majestically – until one of his front paws slips off a stepping stone and plop! splash! plunges into the cold water. His paw is soaked; he looks like a king who's stepped in a mudhole. The family, ordinary folks, gape in surprise and hold their breath, knowing the king's reaction could go either way – heads have rolled for less – but today, the bear shakes his paw deliberately, sighs, and looks back over his shoulder as if to say, "Well, what can you do?" He shifts his shoulders as if settling royal robes into place and, head held high enough to be elegant but not so high as to be arrogant, continues confidently across the river and disappears into the brush.

I am caught by Kimberly's decision to use a bear as the central figure in the story.

She could have picked any large animal – a bull moose or elk – or a bird, a raven, perhaps. The lesson of "slow down pay attention" would work with almost any critter.

She chose a bear – or perhaps, Bear chose her. This results in a story that has greater potential for multiple meanings and a more profound metaphor.

Because bears are dangerous.

Kimberly's story reminds me to pay attention to the miracle of nature. It also tells me danger is involved: some gifts come wrapped in bone-chilling, heart-cutting fear.

For most of my life, bears were only in books, cartoons, and the National Park Service fire prevention campaign. For most of my life, I never felt fear. I was a tough kid, and I grew up to be a tough adult. I was forty-eight before I felt afraid, truly afraid. It was December 26, 2002, and my son had just been diagnosed with cancer.

It took me a long time to recognize that's what I felt: not anger, the long claws of the bear, not fury, its roar; nor the sharp teeth of rage that would rend this enemy from my cub. It was fear, and I felt powerless. It took me as long to recover from the fear as it took my son to recover from cancer. I'm not "cured" of fear, but I have begun to understand its importance.

If I'd heard Kimberly's story before December 2002, my reaction would have been different. I would have noted the bear in passing, a humorous element but not the central character. The idea that eating wild grapes with a bear might be a metaphor for sitting with fear until it revealed itself to be a normal, necessary part of life would never have occurred to me.

I am filled with the recent memory of fear: some days, I am nothing but a skin sack so bloated with fear that all the hairs on my arms and legs and body extend like cactus spines and porcupine quills, skin ready to rupture if the bear simply looks at me.

The bear approaches, and I know: those claws could rake my chest and expose my heart. That mouth could loose a roar and rupture my soul. Those yellow teeth could shred my existence into less than nothingness.

But Kimberly and her family sit with the bear, and they eat wild grapes. If they can sit, so can I. In most definitions of interpretation, including NAI's, we emphasize the meanings inherent in the resources. I think interpretation opens the way as much, maybe more, for the meanings people bring to the resources. Kimberly's purpose in telling the story – to reinforce that American Indians are active members of today's society – is fulfilled either way. What we take away from the story depends on what we bring to the story at the moment of telling.

Powerful stories stay with us to reveal new meanings long after we return home. Since hearing Kimberly's story, I've begun paying attention to the bears in my life.

For as long as I've been a writer, I've had days when I've fallen into a lousy mood, one that claims no one's paying attention, nothing will ever change, and nobody cares. Recently, I realized that this is Kimberly's bear.

There is risk and fear and sometimes danger in writing, and that's the bear, a snorting, lumbering, long-clawed predator whose approach is terrifying – I could keep driving. His approach is exhilarating – a real bear! – I can stop, quietly open the door, and observe.

The bear settles in to eat wild grapes on my side of the river. He is closer and so more dangerous, but ignoring me. I am wary but finally willing to eat wild grapes and discover that it's okay; we are as safe as

it is possible to be and still be in the world. To run screaming from the bear means running from the grapes, too. To run screaming *at* the bear would be foolish. Something inside me shifts as I eat wild grapes; fear of the bear is being replaced by cautious awe and grudging respect, and a sense that the feeling is mutual. My pen is poised beside the paper.

The bear, walking regally, slips and ruins the effect; not perfect majesty after all, and he knows it. The same thing happens to me every time I take myself too seriously, every time I listen more to the fear than to anything else.

Well, what can you do? I dip the nib of my pen into wild grape juice, and I write, despite and because of the fear, thanks to Kimberly's bear.

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