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Memories of chaplan pleasant at Christmas

Christmas is almost here again and it's time to begin the frenzied scramble for shopping, baking, decorating and eating, lots and lots of eating at least, in my family anyway.

Pies and cakes, cookies and puddings until you're sure you are going to burst. And your waistline expands and your sugar spikes you wonder why you are doing this to yourself and why is it that it seems Christmas gives us permission to do it.

Perhaps it is nostalgia. I know for myself, and my siblings it would not be Christmas without the smells of cinnamon and spices. (Really, it is no wonder Columbus sailed the ocean blue for it.)

Poor as our reserves and little road allowance communities were, Christmas was not a time of "poor" because our moms, aunties and nokoms had been trading beaded moccasins, braided and hooked rugs at the general store and all over the countryside to buy the ingredients needed to bake mince pies, fruit cakes and "la puchin" or "poocheen" as some called it. That wonderful steamed pudding that filled our homes and yards with a smell that is beyond description.

"Ayee ki way oot sin ow, we are rich." Our chaplan would say as we watched them wrap the pudding in cheesecloth, put in a tin and hide it somewhere in the root cellar.

La Puchin was the queen of all the food and pastries, and as my irreverent chaplan (great grandmother) called it, "a son of a bitch in a sack" because it was so expensive to make and it also reminded her of her stingy, mean as hell Hudson Bay Company husband. Sounds terrible doesn't it, but our chaplan was an old, old lady and mom or anybody else for that matter, never ever dared correct her. And today as I watched my daughters mix ingredients and put La Puchin on to steam we chuckle as I tell them about the pudding and about the crazy old lady ancestor of whom there are many stories.

Crazy as she was, she was pretty special and we, my cousins and I learned many things from her.

As children she would take us out for a walk in early November to pick Okiniyak, rose hips, so we could dry them and make Christmas decorations and of course tea and jars of rose hip jelly. So, when I remember wandering along the back roads looking for the jewel bright okiniyak which were beautiful against the dazzling snow.

We always picked them up after they had been frozen for a time. This softened the skins and made them sweet.

“Mus kee kee ohi, these are medicine,” she would tell us as we tasted them, and as I learned many years later, rose hips are full of vitamin C,D and E as well as calcium and antioxidants. No wonder no one was ever sick with colds, we drank that tea every day after the first snow. When they were dry, we strung them up with strong thread and hung them on the Christmas tree. Admiring their beauty.

Christmas is a good childhood memory for many people of my generation and good thing too because there was lots of bad ones. Today, as a bit of a crazy old lady, I too, take my great grandchildren out to pick okiniyak in the snow not because they need tea, their moms give them Flintstone vitamin pills. I take them out because I want them to have good stories to pass on to their grandchildren.

Times have changed so much in the past 70 years and I am sure our nokoms and chapans said the same thing. It is sometimes hard to remember good stories when all around us are reminders that the world, our country and our community are sometimes far removed from those simple things.

How do we shut out the news of horrors brought on by climate change, war, fracking, neglect of children and now the realization that the young men and women whom our government sends out to fight wars are killing themselves. Four suicides this past week. No number was given to the overall suicide rates triggered by post-traumatic stress syndrome both in Canada and the war zones around the world.

It is sad that we raise our children to fight wars when we as parents and governments can't give them, in many cases, a good life as children. And that when they

come home we are not able to give them healing and help they need. Having a Remembrance Day ceremony once a year just does not seem like enough. I know I sound like a broken record but we have to give our children more.

As we begin this celebration of mid winter and Christmas let us ask our Creator and all the ancestors who have left us to live in the Spirit world, to bring kindness to this “civilization” that was pounded into our “pagan” world and which we have in most instances adopted. Let us say prayers for our babies and for all those young soldiers and ask for peace and love for all of them and the will and courage for us to change the road we are travelling. Miyo Kichi Muntou Kisikow, Merry Christmas and a kind and gentle New Year, and, thank you for reading me.