

Shingebiss Redeemed

Stephen Spitalny

Many of you are probably familiar with the story called *Shingebiss*, with the central characters a brave little brown duck, and his nemesis, the North Wind. I have loved that story ever since first reading it in *My Book House* (first published 1930) and it has been a regular in my kindergarten stories year after year. The story has gone on to great popularity among other Waldorf early childhood storytelling folks and has become a beloved winter tale. It was also included in *Winter*, from the Wynstones Press series put together by Margret Meyerkort.

The story awakened some questions for me, and after many conversations with colleagues, I came to realize that I wasn't the only one who wondered about its authenticity. Among my own questions, I wondered about those four great logs that *Shingebiss* had, and I wondered if the song *Shingebiss* sings and its translation were true to the original. It was to my great delight that one day in a bookstore I discovered a picture book entitled *Shingebiss: An Ojibwe Legend* retold by Nancy Van Laan (published by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1997). Upon opening the book and seeing an illustration of a green duck in its pages my relationship with *Shingebiss* immediately changed. I knew that if *Shingebiss* wasn't a brown duck, then there could be some other fundamental differences as well, and I hoped that I would find clarity about the things I had been wondering about.

The Ojibwe people, also known as Chippewa, lived in the Great Lakes region of North America. They had a close relationship with the world of nature and learned practical lessons of survival from the workings of nature all around them. "*Shingebiss*" is a traditional Ojibwe teaching story of how a merganser duck, also called the diving bird or the diver, overcomes the harshness of winter. *Shingebiss* is an archetypal spirit teacher, and this story has been passed down for many generations from the "way-back time." (Incidentally, there are many kinds and colors of merganser duck, including green, brown and multi-colored.)

Though this story comes from the oral tradition

of the Ojibwe, *Shingebiss* has a long literary history as well. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow included *Shingebiss* in *The Song of Hiawatha* (Book 2) written in 1855. And while Longfellow took liberties with traditional names and storylines, one sees that this story has been around for hundreds of years. In Longfellow's version, when Kabibonokka (Winter Maker) heaps the snow in drifts around his lodge;

*Shingebis, the diver, feared not,
Shingebis, the diver, cared not;
Four great logs had he for firewood,
One for each moon of the winter,
And for food the fishes served him.
By his blazing fire he sat there,
Warm and merry, eating, laughing. . .*

I would guess that Olive Beaupre Miller, who collected and wrote *My Book House*, adapted her version from Longfellow. Many lines from *The Song of Hiawatha* are echoed in Miller's version.

The Van Laan book mentions that an elder of the Grand Portage Chippewa Band in Michigan advised the author on her written version of this traditional tale, helping to keep the story true to its ancient beginnings. Just like other true fairy tales, no human being made this story. It was received as a living teaching story and passed on person-to-person over generations. Within the images of this story profound wisdom can be discovered. True fairy tales show in imaginative pictures various aspects of an individual human being. *Shingebiss* and *Winter Maker* are parts of each one of us.

Shingebiss is a cheerful, resourceful, and brave character who perseveres in the face of a fierce and powerful foe. He has the capacity for patient waiting. He stands face to face with his own possible death and does not fear. Nor does he battle, but simply lives his life with courage and wits. In this story, *Shingebiss* is not helped by others; it is only through his own striving that he survives. And in the end his seeming foe is embraced as friend and fellow. The little duck is without arrogance; he

merely bases his actions in recognition of the place of each individual in the world. Then they stand as true equals. Shingebiss has a princely quality of patience and uprightness that carries him through his challenges. This little green duck has very Christ-like qualities, visible even in the healing green with which he is depicted in this book. He is at peace with himself, and meets the world also in peace.

The Van Laan story begins by explaining how Shingebiss gets his fish in summer and fall. Then we learn that Shingebiss has four great logs, one for each of the long, cold winter months. For me, this image was a great gift, answering a long-held question for me about the significance of those logs. The duck's nemesis is named Winter Maker, and it is he who sends the cold, north wind and snow to harass Shingebiss. In Ms. Van Laan's version, the traditional song is translated differently from Olive Beaupre Miller's version, with words more literally translated from the original:

*Ka-neej, ka-neej,
Bee-in, bee-in,
Bon-in, bon-in,
Ok-ee, ok-ee,
Ka-weya, ka-weya!*

The Van Laan translation:

*Friend, friend,
Come in, come in
Sit with me or leave me alone
You are still my fellow man;
Never can you do me in.*

And here, the Miller translation:

*North Wind, North Wind so fierce in feature
You are still my fellow creature.
Blow your worst, you can't freeze me.
I fear you not and so I'm free.*

Four tests for Shingebiss are portrayed in the story, four different challenges created by Winter Maker. First there are the high drifts of snow, then ice coating the snow. Next Shingebiss is trapped by ice under the water and finally the icy cold Winter Maker comes into the home of Shingebiss. The final challenge is at Shingebiss' very own home fire, his hearth (heart). This final test is his spirit initiation. This story shows an example of looking

at oneself without fear, and then accepting what one finds. It is only then that one is open to one's own future. Shingebiss embraces the gifts he has been given, and uses them wisely.

Shingebiss literally means *diving bird*. He is a being who goes from the airy world into the watery world of spirit, and back again. Like the frog in other stories, he is at home in both worlds. He can bring the wisdom of spirit into the physical world. "He is a very singular being," says the story. Shingebiss is an individuality who knows himself. Perhaps in him can be seen the workings of the consciousness soul. It hearkens to a voice crying in the wilderness, telling of the new path for those who have ears to hear.

There are many possibilities for interpretation, yet it is clear that there is great truth and wisdom in this story. One must digest the story for oneself and allow the images to speak their meaning within. There is no "one and only way" to listen to what this story speaks. It speaks in its own way to each person who experiences it. Joan Almon once said in a lecture, "Fairy tales don't like to be pigeon-holed. They are beings who want to be heard." So we must have the ears to hear what is said.

Nancy Van Laan ends her retelling thus: "Just as this story, this sacred adizookan, teaches, those who follow the ways of Shingebiss will always have plenty of fish to eat, no matter how hard the great wind of Winter Maker blows."

This is a wonderful story for the young child, rich with images of challenges met and overcome. Children who carry this story in their souls have been given a gift that can help them through their own challenging times, even if they are not consciously remembering Shingebiss. He lives in their "dream consciousness," cheerfully, patiently, and persistently doing what is needed.

This book is a treasure. Along with the story, there is a glossary of Ojibwe words in the book, and a short, informative introduction. I encourage you to check to see if your local library or bookstore has a copy. Thanks to Nancy Van Laan for taking this well-loved story back to its traditional form. And thanks to little green duck Shingebiss for showing the way through challenging times.

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