

Buffalo Dreaming

Lakota spirituality in the 21st century

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Dedication

This text was made possible by all of those in previous generations who preserved the traditional Lakota teachings despite serious hardship and persecution, to keep their spiritual path alive, pure, and true. I dedicate this work to the teachers and Elders I have been privileged to learn from: Laura Morning Star Wolfe, Gilbert Walking Bull, Sam Moves Camp, Burt Rooks, and Floyd Hand. In this time of reduced access to the traditional Lakota path by non-Natives, I further dedicate it to all those with whom I have been able to share ceremony and time on the Rez.

Mitakuye Oyasin

This text's purpose

In a time when some Lakota Elders are making their traditional practices less open to non-Natives, I have been guided to put these words down to share with those who have a sincere desire to learn more about Lakota spirituality some of the what I have learned when following this path.

I did not write these words to encourage anyone to follow a Lakota spiritual path. I did not write these words to spell out the “best” or “only” way to practice Lakota ceremonies. I did not write these words to attempt to elevate myself to the position of holy man or shaman. I did not write these words to attempt to profit from the suffering of the Lakota people, by selling their spiritual traditions.

I have been guided to write these words to share some of the stories that illustrate the lessons I have learned in my time walking the Red Road. A road that is now less accessible to non-Natives.

I have been guided to document my experiences in the hope that this information can serve others, helping them to build a strong and lasting foundation for their journey, regardless of what spiritual path they are walk.

I have been guided to write these words to help others to connect with the Lakota people, so that they can give back to the Lakota for the spiritual traditions they have preserved through generations of persecution and suffering.

I have put these words down in the hopes that they can help my two-legged brothers and sisters live their lives to the fullest, in brotherhood with all of the Creation.

Mitakuye oyasin

Part 1: Discovering Lakota Spirituality

My introduction to the sweat lodge

When I was a teenager, I spent quite a bit of time very actively searching for a spiritual path, a path that felt meaningful to me. I never had much interest in churches or organized religion. My parents exposed me to Unitarian church as a child, but I didn't get any indoctrination into the dogma of any particular religion. I was fortunate that my parents were supportive of my search, encouraging me and allowing me the freedom to find for my own spiritual path.

During this time of seeking, I read voraciously, everything from ancient Greek philosophy to Zen. The books of Carlos Castaneda had a significant impact on me. I literally read all his books one summer in about a week and a half, doing little more than reading, eating, and sleeping.

The search continued when I went to community college. I took numerous credits of philosophy and religion, far more than was required for my degree program. I also met some pagans and participated in some seasonal ceremonies with them. I could intellectually see there was truth in the majority of what I learned about, from early Western philosophy to Eastern religion. But nothing that I studied felt right for me, and I could not see myself practicing any of these traditions.

In the summer of 1990, a friend of my mother's suggested that I might be interested in participating in a sweat lodge ceremony with some people she knew in the Detroit area. It seemed interesting, so I agreed. This lodge was performed in Sun Bear's Bear Tribe Medicine Society tradition, a hybrid tradition that pulled from several tribes. The Bear Tribe Tradition still serves as a good introduction to Native American spirituality. This lodge was poured by Stonewater (Diane Duggan), one of Sun Bear's apprentices.

I still have vivid memories of that first lodge. I didn't know what to expect, but noticed the heat increasing as the red-hot stones were brought into the lodge and placed in the pit in the center. *Hmmm, it's pretty hot* I thought when the rocks had all been brought in. As the door was closed for the first round, I felt the heat increase further. *Now it's getting hot!* I thought. When the first dipper of water was poured on the stones, I heard the hissing of the steam, and felt the heat intensify further as the steam hit me. I said "Wow!" aloud, and immediately I knew in my core that that was what I'd been searching for.

I continued to sweat in the Bear Tribe Tradition with that group every month for two and a half years, and also took part in ceremonies conducted at their medicine wheel. The group organizing these sweats sponsored a Bear Tribe Medicine Wheel Gathering in the fall of 1992. Sun Bear would be coming to the Gathering, and I was very much looking forward to meeting him and participating in ceremony with him. I assumed that I would apprentice with Sun Bear to learn more about the lodge and other ceremonies.

But Sun Bear passed away in June of 1992, shortly before this Medicine Wheel gathering was scheduled. After Sun Bear's passing, I had the opportunity to participate in a pipe ceremony with one of his personal pipes that had been gifted to Stonewater. This was a powerful experience, the first time I had felt that much spiritual energy from a *chanupa* in ceremony.

At the Michigan Medicine Wheel Gathering, I committed to spend most of my time helping to build the sweat lodges and supporting the sweat lodge ceremonies. There were several elders conducting lodge, including Everett Burch, a Yute, Gilbert Walking Bull, an Oglala Lakota, and Gilbert's wife Morning Star, who is one quarter Cherokee and had lived on Pine Ridge reservation for a number of years before marrying Gilbert.

After the sweat lodge construction was completed, I remember being torn about who to sweat with, Gilbert or Everett. I had heard stories about how hot and intense the Lakota sweats were, and was a bit nervous about Gilbert's lodge. But I felt that I shouldn't pass up the opportunity to experience a Lakota lodge and I decided to sweat with Gilbert.

There were not many people in Gilbert's lodge that night, perhaps half a dozen, while Everett's lodge was very full. The lodges we built were quite large, easily holding twenty people. Gilbert brought in the first six stones, and spent quite a bit of time talking to us about the nature of the ceremony and the *tunka* (stone people.) After the first six stones were brought in and honored, Gilbert called for 44 more stones! Each was glowing red hot. By the time the stones had all been brought in and the door was closed, there was enough light coming from these stones to look around the lodge and see everyone's face in the darkness.

When Gilbert poured this lodge, the heat of the stones was transformed not into steam, but into something much different. It felt as though everyone inside the lodge was being bathed in the breath of creation — the essence given to all things during the birth of the universe. To me, this breath felt like pure joy and love. It was a remarkable lodge, and I was totally blown away at the experience. I was energized and found I had enough energy to help out with several more lodges after my sweat, and I worked well into the night.

After leaving Gilbert's lodge, I knew I had to learn more about Lakota spirituality. I knew I would be going to South Dakota.

First visit to the Rez

(a version of this story appeared in *Wolf Songs*, the *TiOspaye* newsletter)

After the Medicine Wheel gathering, Gilbert and Morning Star returned to Michigan in October of 1992 for a weekend workshop on Lakota spirituality, which I attended. At this workshop, I spoke with them about visiting them on the Pine Ridge Reservation to learn more about Lakota spiritual practices, and arranged to spend a week there in January of 1993.

Looking back now, I have to laugh at myself, and my expectations for that trip. I have found that spending time on the reservation quickly teaches you about letting go of expectations, and this trip certainly did that! Star had cautioned me to bring plenty of warm clothes and to have a plan of what I wanted to do, but be ready to let it go, because that is the way things work out on the Rez. I hoped to be able to take part in multiple sweat lodge ceremonies, and possibly a *yuwipi* (night sing) ceremony.

The flight from Lansing was uneventful. I had been making prayer ties for favorable traveling weather and a safe trip for several months. My faith in the power of the tie prayers greatly eased my nervousness about flying. Upon arrival at Rapid City, the pilot announced the weather, partly sunny with a wind chill of 30 below Fahrenheit! I knew then that it was going to be a challenging experience.

Day-to-day life became the focus for the first few days. Feeding and watering the small herd of cattle that had just arrived at the farm, fixing the barn, loading the truck with boxes of give-away clothes, keeping the fire in the visitor's house burning, and putting up a TV antenna occupied my time. In the evenings, we would watch videos and relax, worn out from the hard work.

Just as it finally seemed that we would have time to perform a sweat lodge ceremony, the well pump stopped working. It took two days and a three hour round trip drive to Rapid City to fix the problem. Believe me, pulling a well in a South Dakota snowstorm is no piece of cake. At this point, I began wondering whether anything was easy on the Rez.

Despite the work involved in day-to-day survival, I had plenty of opportunity to learn more about traditional Lakota ways. Driving with Gilbert was a real treat. He told stories about when he was growing up, and had lots of unusual lore and hilarious stories to share as we traveled. It was also very special to be able to spend time talking one-on-one with Morning Star and Gilbert, getting their individual perspectives on spirituality and reservation life.

On my last night, we held a *chanupa* ceremony. After making the robes and ties and loading the *chanupa*, we turned out the lights and made our prayers. When it was my turn to pray, I felt a tremendous rush of energy as I prayed. After the prayer, we sang songs, and the spiritual presence in the room was tremendous. I was stunned at the energy I felt when the prayers were being said before

smoking the pipe. So much so that Star had to tell me twice that it was my turn to pray. I was so much in awe of the electric energy running up my spine that I didn't want to disturb the feeling by speaking. It was the most powerful *chanupa* ceremony I had experienced to that point.

It was a valuable trip and helped to lay the foundation for my understanding of the Lakota path. I knew that I would return to learn more. I began every morning making prayer ties for the next few months, to become more familiar with the process of making ties, and to start to become more acquainted with the spirits. This was the beginning of my developing a relationship with the Lakota spirits.

Being drawn to pour lodge

I returned to Morning Star and Gilbert's farm in Wanblee in the summer of 1993 to commit to learning more about the Lakota *inipi* (sweat lodge). During the 1993 visit, I had the chance to pour lodge by myself for the first time and started the long learning journey which I continue to this day.

In one lodge that I poured during this visit, I made a mistake while singing the last round of the Four Direction Song. As I was just beginning to learn the sacred songs, I was still struggling with some of them. Though I was alone in the sweat lodge and no one was present outside the lodge, I heard a single laughing "ha!" in the lodge when I made my mistake. It was obvious that there was a spiritual presence, and that my relationship with the spirits was beginning to deepen.

After this trip, the people who had been putting on the Bear Tribe sweat lodge ceremonies took a break from offering sweats, as they were going to be out of state for about 6 months. I wanted very much to continue attending sweat lodge, so I searched out every Lakota style sweat lodge I heard about within about 150 miles. I found quite a few lodges, and tried them all. However, none of these lodges felt right to me, and I would literally be on the ground gasping for breath by the end of the ceremony.

I soon realized that I was going to have to build my own lodge and learn to conduct the *inipi* ceremony if I was going to be able to continue to participate in this ceremony. Looking back now, I know that there was nothing wrong with or incorrect about these other lodges that I attended. Instead, it is clear that I was being guided, firmly and steadily, to complete my training so that I could pour lodge myself.

I finished construction of the first *inipi* lodge at my parents house in early 1994, and committed to pouring lodge for just myself for one year. The year of pouring allows a person to learn the mechanics of the ceremony (how to build the fire, how to work with the stones and water, etc.) and to begin to build a deeper personal relationship with the *tunka*, the sacred stones, and the spirits.

In August of 1994, during a visit to Star and Gilbert's farm, I poured my first lodge with another person inside, Gilbert Walking Bull. I was very nervous to be pouring a lodge for my teacher, but Gilbert was very supportive and helped me to be focused on the ceremony and to remember what I had been taught. The lodge went well, and Gilbert told me afterwards that it was a very good and gentle lodge. Completing this lodge gave me more confidence and reaffirmed the feeling that I was doing something that I was meant to learn.

After completing my year of pouring alone, I went back out to study with Gilbert and Morning Star again for a week or two each summer for the next three years. Since this time, I have had the chance to conduct *inipi* and *chanupa* ceremonies for my family, friends, and community. I have also had the opportunity to spend time with other Lakota elders and teachers, both on and off the Rez.

Non-natives and ceremony

It is understandable that Native Americans are very protective of their spiritual traditions, given the long and continuing history of racism and persecution of Native tribes by *wasichu* (white)

people. In addition to the long and continuing history of broken treaties, racism, and injustice, remember that many Native religious practices and tools were illegal under Federal law until the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) of 1978. Yes, the freedoms guaranteed in the US Constitution didn't fully apply to Native American religions until 1978.

However, despite this history of injustice, the teachers that I have learned from have all been very clear that the sacred pipe was originally brought to the Lakota people so that they could preserve and sustain the sacred pipe and its spiritual tradition, so that all Nations — Red, White, Black, and Yellow — could share in this spiritual path.

Of course, there are definitely a wide range of opinions among the Lakota about sharing these teachings with non-Lakota people. Understandably, some Lakota do resent outsiders learning their traditional spiritual ways, particularly those that seem to profit personally by teaching traditional spirituality to non-Natives. And many of the Elders I have learned from have stated that one can't fully understand the Lakota path without speaking the Lakota language fluently. I have definitely found that knowing enough Lakota vocabulary to understand the songs and prayers said in the Lakota language is very helpful and brings an additional level of understanding to this spiritual path.

On March 8th and 9th of 2003, a Protection of Ceremonies meeting was held on the Cheyenne River Reservation. Lakota, Dakota, Nakota, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe spiritual leaders were present at these meetings. It was decided that Arvol Looking Horse, current keeper of the original Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe, would make a decision on the participation of non-Natives in ceremony. Arvol's full statement is available online (http://www.dlncoalition.org/dln_issues/protection_of_ceremonies.htm).

The decree is that non-Natives are no longer welcome dancing in Sun Dance (*Wi wanyang wacipi*) ceremonies, in participating in Vision Quest (*Hanblechia*) ceremonies, or in conducting Sweat Lodge (*Inipi*) ceremonies.

This decree was made with the intent of protecting the sacred rites of the Lakota Nation from exploitation and abuse, particularly regarding the selling of the spiritual traditions. This is not the first formal attempt by the Lakota to protect their spiritual traditions. For instance, at a summit held in June of 1993, a "declaration of war against exploiters of Lakota spirituality" was declared.

I totally understand and support the need to protect Native American spirituality from misuse, abuse, and exploitation. I firmly believe that these traditions need to be kept true, pure, and free from exploitation and abuse. I always emphasize the sacred nature of the ceremonies, the sacred laws bound to the *chanupa*, and the need to not mix traditions. I have always firmly held that it is never acceptable to charge money for ceremony, as I was taught by my teachers. I have always explained the reasons that women on their Moon Time do not participate in Lakota ceremony, emphasizing that this is not a blood taboo or a put down of women, but instead a recognition of their special power during this natural time of cleaning and purification.

Based on my Vision and my very positive experiences with the Lakota spiritual path, I feel strongly guided to continue to conduct *inipi* and *chanupa* ceremonies. I continue to welcome all people who have a sincere desire to participate in these ceremonies, regardless of their spiritual tradition or race, as I was initially taught. I no longer state that I conduct traditional Lakota ceremonies, though I continue to respect the traditional teachings I have received.

In addition, I continue my ongoing work to support the Lakota people living on Pine Ridge Reservation. As I have been taught, and as I strive to teach others, a significant part of following a Native American spiritual path is supporting the People, both those in your own community and those who have preserved the spiritual traditions throughout many generations of hardship and persecution.

My decision to continue offering ceremony is not in any way made to dishonor those who signed the Protection of Ceremonies document, or to deny that abuses are a problem. I very much respect the elders that I personally know who have signed the statement, and I strongly support the

protection of this spiritual tradition from abuse. But I will not turn away from conducting ceremony to support my community, my *tiospaye* — the people who have found solace and benefit in their own lives from the opportunity to participate in sweat lodge and *chanupa* ceremonies.

My sincere hope is that before anyone judge me and decides whether it is right for me to offer these ceremonies that they will look at my words, my actions, and my heart, not just the color of my skin. I hope that they will see the sincerity in my heart and the support that I have given to my teachers and the Lakota people of their communities.

Even with this Protection of Ceremonies decree, there remain some Lakota prophecies that a time will come when all the races, Red, White, Black, and Yellow, will come together in ceremony. I was privileged to be at Bear Butte in June of 2000 to support in a Vision Quest camp. During that time, Native Americans, African Americans, White Americans, and Asian Americans were all at the Butte performing ceremony. It was a very moving experience.