

Buffalo Dreaming

Part 2 — Foundations of Lakota spirituality

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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 2: Foundations of Lakota spirituality

On the Rez — Reservation life

Most of my reservation experience is from Pine Ridge Reservation in western South Dakota. This is the reservation where the Oglala Lakota were settled. Crazy Horse and Red Cloud were both famous Oglala Lakota. Badlands National Park is very close to Pine Ridge, and there are some incredible Badlands formations on the Rez which rival those in the Park.

There is a great deal of poverty today on Pine Ridge. In many ways, it is a Third World country. Shannon County makes up a large part of Pine Ridge Reservation and is generally considered the poorest county in the US. Unemployment on the Rez is very high (80%+) and alcoholism is a significant problem, even though alcohol is illegal on the Rez. Lack of infrastructure and opportunity often makes life very difficult, particularly in the more remote areas.

Mismanagement of Indian funds remains a significant problem still with the Bureau of Indian Affairs maintaining an incredibly poor accounting system keeping track of land lease payments. In essence, nonpayment of lease fees equates to a continuation of the history of land theft. Outright land theft from the Lakota continued into the 1940s. A large chunk of Pine Ridge Rez was taken over by the Federal Government during WWII for a bombing range. It was never returned. (I joke with people on the Rez that this is where the illegal uranium mining is done, for the secret government UFO refueling stations.)

There is a specialness to spending time on the Rez. It often seems that even simple things are hard to accomplish there. And the difficulty of life may end up pushing your buttons, bringing up emotions and issues that you would just as soon not deal with.

Despite all the hardships of Reservation life, I have always found the Lakota people I have met to be very generous. A good sense of humor is also a common trait, and probably an essential part of living in such hardship. There is definitely a sacredness to the land. You can feel the energy shift when you cross the White River and enter Pine Ridge Rez.

I cry almost every time I leave the Badlands area on my way home from the Rez. On some level, I know in my heart that I used to call this place home, and in some sense, it still is.

I have been taught that an important part of following the path of Lakota spirituality is giving back to the Lakota people. Understanding something about life on the Rez and the history of the treatment of Native Americans gives an important perspective into the history of this spiritual path. Many generations of people suffered tremendous hardships practicing their spirituality through times of persecution. Remember that until the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) of 1978, many Native American religious practices and ceremonial objects were illegal, the First Amendment right to freedom of religion notwithstanding.

I had helped in the clothing distribution project organized by *TiOspaye* on just about every trip to the Rez, and found delivering donated goods to needy families to be an amazing experience. I will never forget the smiles and excitement of the children when dropping off donations.

The traditional way — traditional teaching and the oral tradition

Teaching via oral tradition is very different from what most of us brought up in typical Western culture are used to. Think back to your schooling (from elementary through college) and the amount of note taking and writing that you did. Do you find yourself wanting a handout when talking about spirituality with a teacher, or trying to scribble down notes like mad? We are taught to use the written word as a means of remembering and learning.

In oral culture, learning is very different. Listening, watching, and repetition are key elements. A story may be told in fragments, out of order, over many days, months, or even years! Young people growing up this way may seem to learn almost by osmosis. A child who sees her elders involved in ceremony regularly, over many years, will not need much additional instruction when

the time comes that she is asked to perform a duty. “Make the robes and ties for the lodge tonight” doesn’t involve repeatedly asking for the number and color to be repeated, nor the desire to write instructions down. It can just be done, based on a lifetime of watching.

It is very difficult to drop into a culture of oral tradition for a week at a time and get a lot of learning done quickly. (Particularly when dealing with a *heyoka* teacher.) Many times I have wished that I could take a student aside and “debrief” them when I see their confusion when learning from an Elder. You can almost see the wheels turning in their brains: *That story didn’t make any sense. What is he talking about? Did I do something wrong?*

The story might, in fact, not make any sense until you have been around the Elder long enough to hear all the distinct parts told. And it may take a lot of time to be around long enough to hear it all. The key is to listen, and listen attentively and try to put questions out of your mind.

Almost every traditional Lakota Elder I have spent time with has said at one time or another “I was taught in The Traditional Way.” This can be confusing to students, as every Elder’s “Traditional Way” can be distinctly different, yet also correct. I have come to understand that what an Elder means when speaking of The Traditional Way is “This is the way that I was taught by my Elders.” It’s not that they are saying this is the “right way” or the only way, it is a statement that they are confirming how they were taught, and by implication the way their teachers were taught, and their teachers before them. Thus, it is the basis for their traditional oral teaching.

Extending this to my teaching, I was fortunate to have learned initially from Gilbert Walking Bull and Laura Morning Star Wolfe (formerly Morning Star Walking Bull). Gilbert is an Oglala Lakota man, while Star is Caucasian and part Cherokee and had previously studied a range of eastern philosophy and body work, before being “hooked” by the Lakota spiritual path and moving to Pine Ridge Reservation.

It was invaluable to sit and talk with Morning Star after spending time with Gilbert and other Lakota Elders, as she was able to translate and “de-oralize” much of the teachings, and greatly enhance my understanding. Thus, my Traditional Way of teaching includes debriefing and translating the Lakota spiritual concepts to make them easier to grasp for Western people. And it includes writing things down to help those brought up in the Western world make sense of it all.

Practicality and spirituality

The level of symbolism in Native American spirituality runs deep, infinitely deep. And there is both a practical and spiritual side to a great many of the elements of Lakota spirituality.

For instance, the songs sung in an *inipi* (sweat lodge) ceremony have ceremonial and spiritual functions such as calling in the spirits, prayer, or healing. They also serve to help people focus on and regulate their breathing, oxygenating their bodies and drawing in heated air.

Or consider the phrase *mitakuye oyasin* that is commonly used in Lakota ceremony. The literal translation means “all my relations.” The connotation of the phrase, however, is much, much greater. It means “I acknowledge my relation to everything in the creation.” Everything. Stones, plants, people, animals, the earth, and the stars. Everything. A very important and weighty concept.

In addition to being used in ceremony to acknowledge our link to all of creation, and to encourage participants to incorporate this understanding internally, the phrase *mitakuye oyasin* serves to let others know when you are finished with prayer, have entered a sweat lodge, are done drinking a dipper of water, etc.

I will try to cover both the practical and the spiritual nature of the topics that I cover in this book.

Humor and mistakes

I have found that one of the essential characteristics of the Lakota people is their sense of humor. I have always found in my dealings with traditional people on the Rez that they are generous and quick to share a joke and laugh, regardless of their personal situation.

There is definitely a place for humor in this spiritual path. A moment of laughter can serve as a way to lighten the mood and refresh the spirit, even in ceremony. Try to keep a good humor, particularly when you make mistakes or fumble a bit, in stead of worrying. Sometimes it's better to laugh than cry in despair.

If you make a mistake or an error, even in ceremony, it can be wiser to laugh at yourself and move on, instead of worrying and dwelling on your mistake. As long as our hearts are humble, our intentions are sincere, and we learn from our mistakes, there is no need for shame or guilt from our mistakes.

On patience

One of the most valuable lessons that Morning Star shared with me was patience. "Go slowly" she said to me on multiple occasions over the years. She was encouraging me to be cautious and purposeful, not rushing into things I was not ready for. Commitment is taken *very* seriously by the Lakota, and their spiritual path is not something to take lightly or to play with carelessly.

I would suggest that those new to the path of Lakota spirituality take the guidance to "go slow" very seriously. Don't rush into things, or you are apt to find yourself making spiritual commitments that you may not fully be ready for or understand the significance of.

American society, especially, is very fast paced and seems to speed up every year. But there are no shortcuts in the Lakota spiritual path. Patience and practice will help you to develop your ties to the Lakota spirits and deepen your understanding of the ceremonies and their symbolism. There is no way to speed up the development of these relationships with the spirits or the understanding of the spiritual path.

Don't look at participation in ceremony as another check mark on your list of spiritual accomplishments. This is a lifelong spiritual path, not a boy scout or girl scout merit badge to qualify for! If you find yourself anxious, particularly around ceremony, take time to breathe deeply and ground yourself. Smudging may also help to you to slow down and become more centered.

Tobacco (*Can'li*)

Tobacco (*Nicotiana* spp.) is one of the most important sacred plants to the Lakota. *Nicotiana rustica* is a North American native species which was used ceremonially by a wide range of Native Americans long before the New World was "discovered" by Europeans. This species is not the same as the commercially grown tobacco used for cigarettes and cigars (*Nicotiana tabacum*).

For ceremonial use, it is important to use tobacco without a flavorings or additives, which are commonly found in pipe tobacco. Cigarette tobacco, therefore, should be used instead of pipe tobacco. For commercial tobacco, I personally prefer American Spirit, as it is additive free (and until recently, was independently owned and not a part of the Big American Tobacco industry.) Top and Bugler are also acceptable to use.

It is important to recognize and honor the sacredness of tobacco. This is a very powerful and sacred plant, and it can be harmful and addictive if misused or abused. When smoked in ceremony, the tobacco in a pipe mixture is healing and in no way harmful.

See **Appendix 3** for sources for *Nicotiana rustica* and other tobacco seeds and information.

Moon Time, the menstrual cycle

There are often misunderstandings about the Lakota view on women being involved with ceremony during their menstrual period, or moon time. The Lakota teach that ceremonial energy is clockwise energy, linked to the sun cycle. The female menstrual cycle involves anti-clockwise energy, and is linked to the lunar cycle.

During a woman's menstrual cycle when she is actively bleeding, she is going through a very powerful, natural cleansing and rejuvenating ceremony. Women are experiencing such a powerful, natural ceremony during their moon time that they don't need to participate in ceremony. In fact,

their own energy can counteract the ceremonial energy, and overpower the ceremony! I have seen this happen even during the Sun Dance ceremony, where the presence of a moon woman can cause the dancers to lose their energy and be unable to keep up their dancing.

Traditionally, during their periods, Lakota women would live in a Moon Camp a short distance away from the main living area of the tribe. Here they are able to relax and meditate, fully participating in their own natural ceremony. They are provided for by other members of the tribe, and generally have their meals brought to them first, before others eat. Having seen a Moon Camp in action and been involved in supporting the women on their moon time, I can say that this understanding of this feminine cycle is very empowering, and not only to women.

Thus, the Lakota prohibition of menstruating women in ceremony isn't a blood taboo or a chauvinistic put down to women in any way. It simply recognizes the incredible power of women's role in creating life, and actually seeks to honor this cycle.

Those conducting traditional Lakota ceremony have a responsibility to ask if women on moon time, and to explain the reason that they must inquire. I always try to make sure that everyone understands the importance and full nature of the reason that menstruating women do not participate in ceremony in the Lakota tradition. Twenty-four hours after the menstrual bleeding stops, women can again participate in ceremony.

Smudging

Smudging is the process of burning certain sacred herbs and fanning the smoke over an area or an individual. Smudging helps to purify an area and make it more comfortable for spirit beings to be present in. It removes human and animal odor, which may be unpleasant to the spirits of the Lakota path. In effect, smudging can be used to define the boundaries of a ceremonial space.

Smudging also can help individuals to become centered and ground their energy, in preparation for ceremony. As you begin working with the various smudging herbs, you may begin to associate their scents with ceremony and a slightly altered state of mind. For instance, I feel very comforted, safe, and grounded whenever I smell burning sweetgrass.

Smudging may be done by burning loose herbs in an abalone shell or other container, or by burning bundled herbs, as a sage wand or a sweetgrass braid. The smoke from the herbs may also be fanned using feathers (often hawk or eagle) and sometimes the entire wing of a raptor.

Three different plants are most commonly used in smudging: white sage, sweetgrass, and cedar. I include the Latin or scientific names of the plants that I mention, to help in determining the exact plant species used. Common names can vary significantly from region to region, so using the scientific name is the most specific way to refer to a particular plant.

White sage, *Artemisia ludoviciana* (not to be confused with culinary garden sage, *Salvia officinalis*) is probably the most common smudging herb. White sage is primarily used to drive off negative energy. It is often used before smudging with other herbs, and is a good general smudge. California White Sage, *Salvia apiana* (a true sage, related to culinary garden sage) is also sometimes used in smudging, and is an acceptable substitute for white sage. Its scent is similar, though more pungent, than white sage.

Sweetgrass, *Hierochloa odorata*, is used to draw in positive energy. It is often used after smudging with white sage, and is commonly used in pipe ceremonies when smudging the stem and bowl of the *chanupa* and each pinch of pipe mix as the pipe is loaded.

Cedar for smudging can be from a few different species of woody plants. Generally, forms with flattened leaves (the so called "flat cedars") are preferred. White cedar (American arborvitae), *Thuja occidentalis*, is commonly used. Eastern Red Cedar, *Juniperus virginiana* may also be used. Cedar is commonly used to honor the first few stones brought into a sweat lodge. It can also be used as a general smudge, though it can be difficult to keep lit. Scattering some cedar leaves on burning coals or a hot woodstove surface can also be a good way to smudge with this herb.

One more comment about scents and smudging to note is that sometimes during ceremony you may catch the odor of a smudge herb, or the scent of something which has not been used as a smudge in the ceremony. I have found that particularly in the sweat lodge, the presence of certain spirits may be indicated by specific scents, like sweetgrass or sandalwood.

If you have the opportunity to harvest your own herbs for smudging, always take the time to make a prayer and offer some tobacco in thanks for the give-away of the plants that you are harvesting. Ask that you be guided in using the plants you harvest in a sacred way, for the good of your community and all your relations, and that the plants you are harvesting continue to flourish and grow. Never harvest indiscriminately. Always leave a significant portion of a wild population of any smudging herb unharvested, to ensure that the plants can continue to survive in the area.

Mitakuye Oyasin

The phrase *mitakuye oyasin* is commonly used in Lakota ceremony. It is said when entering the sweat lodge, when finished with prayer in ceremony, when done drinking water between rounds in the sweat lodge, etc.

The literal translation of *mitakuye oyasin* means “all my relations.” The connotation of the phrase, however, is much, much greater. It means “I acknowledge my relation to everything in the creation.” Everything. Stones, plants, people, animals, the earth, and the stars. Everything. A very important and weighty concept.

The *Hochoka* or altar

The Lakota spiritual path has a common foundation, but every practitioner will do things somewhat differently, based on their teachings, their experiences, and their personal Visions. Thus, there is an individual component to Lakota spirituality, and you may find that every ceremony is conducted somewhat differently.

The altar or *hochoka* is central to the various ceremonies of the Lakota path. It is an important foundation for how the ceremony is set up structurally. Generally the altar encompasses such things as the number and color of prayer ties and robes used; how the robes and ties are placed; the specific animal powers associated with the directions; the songs sung in a ceremony; how many stones are honored and in what pattern they are placed when brought into the sweat lodge; and so forth.

The differences in altars is one of the reasons that reading books on Lakota spirituality can be confusing regarding things like the colors of the medicine wheel and directions. It is not that certain authors are “wrong”, but that different altars are being addressed.

One learning from an Elder may be guided to adopt the Elder’s altar when learning from them. This can be a valuable experience, as one gains insight into a spiritual person’s altar. But remember that the instruction you receive about the altar used by one individual may not apply fully, or at all, to another individual’s altar. When interacting with a new teacher, it is best to watch closely to see how their altar differs from the one you are used to. There can often be significant differences.

I will discuss a standard, beginning altar as I was taught by my teachers. Remember that this is not the only or “best” altar. It is the altar that I used when building my foundation in Lakota spirituality.

Direction	Color	Direction name
West	Black	<i>Wiyokbeyata</i>
North	Red	<i>Waziyata</i>
East	Yellow	<i>Wiyobeumpata</i>
South	White	<i>Edogavata</i>
The Heavens	Blue	<i>Wanblee oyatewa</i>

		(Eagle Nation) and <i>Wanblee gleshka</i> (spotted eagle)
The Earth	Green	<i>Maka Unchi</i> (Grandmother Earth)

It is good to work with a basic altar to gain understanding and experience with it. As one works with an altar, one can begin to form a relationship with it, gaining further understanding of the deep symbolism that accompanies it. Later chapters will go into more detail on specific ceremonies, based on this altar.

Even with this basic altar, the animal powers that represent the four directions can vary greatly. Black Elk's vision, described in several books, had horses of various colors representing the directions.

The Medicine Wheel

The medicine wheel is commonly represented as a circle with an equal-armed cross in the center, so the circle is divided into four quadrants. The "Red Road" runs north/south in the medicine wheel. This is the path of spirituality, and many Native American teachers speak of walking the Red Road as synonymous with practicing Native American spirituality.

The colors of the directions are often incorporated into the medicine wheel, black in the west, red in the north, yellow in the east, and white in the south for the most common Lakota interpretation. Other tribes may use different colors for the directions, and even different Lakota teachers may use somewhat different colors, according to their own personal visions. See the *Hochoka (Altar)* section for more information on the colors and altars.

The symbolism of the medicine wheel is very deep. The medicine wheel is represented in the cycle of the day, the cycle of the seasons, the life of an individual. The human brain is divided by a membrane between the two hemispheres, and another membrane runs perpendicularly to this first membrane, thus the human brain itself is structurally similar to a three-dimensional medicine wheel.

Wakan Tanka and the *Tunkashilas*

In the Lakota tradition, *Wakan Tanka* is the term for the Creator. *Wakan Tanka* is usually translated as "Great Spirit". A better connotative translation, however, would be "The Great Mystery" or "The Great Unknowable."

Many Lakota prayers are made to *Tunkashila* (Grandfather). This can be a generic term for helper spirits in general, or it can refer to a personification of *Wakan Tanka*. Many people use the two terms almost interchangeably. Think of the *tunkashilas* as intermediaries who can carry prayers made in ceremony to the Heavens, where they will be heard and therefore answered.

Some elders teach that there are 606 spirits, 101 for each of the 6 directions. This is the reason that many elders instruct those on Vision Quest to make a string of 606 prayer ties to surround their altars.

I have been taught that the difference between spirits and ghosts is that spirits have never taken on human form, while ghosts have. Both spirits and ghosts can be helpers in ceremony.

Wakinyan, the Thunder Beings

The energy of the *Wakinyan* or Thunder Beings is considered one of the most powerful in the spiritual realm. Those who dream or have visions of Thunder Beings may be drawn to the *Heyoka* path, that of the Sacred Clown (a somewhat difficult concept to explain, which I will attempt later).

The power of the *Wakinyan* is pure, raw, and powerfully transformative. It is the power of destruction that leads to creation. Science teaches us that lightning fixes atmospheric nitrogen (N₂)

into a form that plants can use. It also cleanses the atmosphere of impurities. Yet lightning can also start fires, destroy trees, and kill. It is neither good nor bad, positive nor negative. It simply is. It's not to be feared, but should be respected.

I have always had a fondness for thunderstorms and lightning, and enjoy watching them, in awe of the raw power. On my first visit to Bear Butte in the Black Hills of South Dakota, I actually saw *Wakinyan* with my own eyes. A storm was rolling in as we arrived at the Vision Quest camp that I would be helping support (two friends were there to do vision quest on the Butte). Although the sky was still blue, a narrow, white cloud formation formed over one of the sheer chimney wall on the east side of the Butte. It formed an oval outline, and inside the oval, a large white bird shape formed. The bird shape morphed and moved to the west until it looked like a pupil in the oval outline. As the pupil formed in the eye, I knew that I would see a lightning strike, and soon after this thought a bolt of lightning shot from this odd cloud formation, followed almost immediately by a very strong rumble of thunder. I was awed and almost giddy with joy to see such an amazing sight. I was drawn to sketch what I had seen, in the hopes that I could capture some of the majesty of the event.

Heyoka, the sacred clowns

Heyoka energy is some of the strongest and most difficult to explain in the Lakota tradition. It is linked to the *Wakinyan*, the Thunder Beings, and those who dream or have visions of thunder and lightning may be drawn to the *Heyoka* path. *Heyoka* are the sacred clowns of the Lakota, working with trickster energy, doing things so strangely that they shake up the consciousness of the community, allowing the people to laugh and also learn. The energy they work with is backwards (anti-clockwise), whereas most Lakota ceremonies use clockwise energy.

One of the most important lessons that the *heyoka* teach is that the spiritual path is not about dogma. Thus, when they do things “wrong” in ceremony, they are still right. This is a difficult thing to understand, and can be challenging for a student studying with a *heyoka* teacher.

Those who work with *heyoka* energy do things very differently from the typical Lakota practices. They often do things backwards, the opposite of the “normal” way. A *heyoka* person who conducts sweat lodge ceremonies often uses an east door lodge, whereas Lakota lodges typically have west door lodges. *Heyoka* individuals may come to a ceremony in the summer bundled up in winter clothes complaining of the cold, and do the opposite in the winter.

Heyoka teachers can be difficult and challenging to work with, particularly for people new to a Native American path. They can be very good at pushing your emotional buttons as a teaching tool, shaking you up to break you out of your way of thinking and help you see new things. Obviously, this can be quite difficult on the student.

My first Lakota teacher, Gilbert Walking Bull, did have some connection to *heyoka* energy, as do I. For this reason, I usually pour in an east door lodge.

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate something of the nature of *heyoka* teachers is to describe the account of a sweat lodge I got to participate in with Lakota elder Floyd “Looks for Buffalo” Hand in May of 1999. (For more information on Floyd Hand, see his book *Learning Journey On The Red Road*.) Floyd is probably one of the most *heyoka* individuals currently living.

Floyd was in Lansing for a few days speaking at the local Unitarian and Unity churches about Lakota spirituality. I was unable to attend his talks, having other commitments. I came up to Lansing on Saturday afternoon to conduct a sweat lodge ceremony that night. When I was driving up, I had a strong feeling that Floyd would be pouring lodge, but that there would be enough people that I would also have an opportunity to pour.

Sure enough, as I arrived, my friend and firekeeper David told me that Floyd would be coming over to conduct lodge, and had invited people from his speaking events. I knew it would be an interesting night.

We didn't know how Floyd would want the altar set. We had set up the altar with a forked "milky way" staff on the altar, hung with prayer flags in the 6 colors, and cloth tied to staffs in each of the 4 directions.

We had 28 stones in the fire, and started the fire about 2 hours before the people were supposed to arrive. The fire caught quickly, and we took this as a sign that it would be a strong lodge.

Floyd arrived after dark and looked over the setup. He asked whether it was an east or a west door lodge. When he heard it was an east door lodge, he said "good" and told us that lodges east of the Mississippi should face east, and that those west of the Mississippi should face west. He also asked how many "grandmas" were in the fire, and whether we had a deep rock pit in the lodge. We told him that 28 stones were in the fire, and the rock pit was deep. He seemed pleased by the number of rocks, and indicated it would be a hot lodge.

Floyd went to change, and asked us about what we had for the altar: cedar or sage, did we have a *chanupa*, and so forth. We said that we had both cedar and sage, and had not yet loaded the *chanupa*. He said we would use cedar on the altar, and he would sing the Pipefilling song while David filled his pipe.

Since the lodge would hold only about 11 people, we split the group into two, so Floyd could pour two lodges. But instead of two lodges with four rounds, Floyd poured two lodges with one round each. He told everyone "the spirits leave when the door is opened."

When ready for the lodge, Floyd had the women line up on the south side of the altar and the men behind them. Everyone was smudged before going in, and Floyd spend some time speaking and praying before we entered the lodge. He said that he was *Heyoka*, and that the spirits had given him "a hole in his head" so he could communicate with them. He spoke about the power and responsibility of prayer – that you get what you ask for.

I carried stones, and seven were honored – lifted off the pitchfork with antlers (done "in the old way"), placed in the rock pit, and touched with the *chanupa*.

Another six stones were brought into the lodge after the seven were honored. While these stones came in, Floyd sang. As soon as the rocks were brought in, the *chanupa* was passed in and smoked. I was very surprised to see the pipe lit so early, and it brought a big grin to my face. Then the door was closed and the prayer and singing began.

Floyd had the woman helper sitting immediately west of him offer the first prayer. She was instructed to pray in the traditional way, recognizing the creation and praying for all the moving things. I, as the firekeeper, prayed next, and also did the full thanking prayer, recognizing the creation and praying for the self last. I did this mainly as a demonstration of the proper "template" as I was taught.

Since not everyone would fit in the lodge at once, after the first lodge, everyone but Floyd exited – going out the way they came in (anti-clockwise) instead of circling around past Floyd. The rocks were not removed.

There was some confusion when people went back in, as to whether this was just the second round. Floyd again repeated that "the spirits leave when the doors are opened." Only the helpers (firekeeper, woman assistant, and the person placing the stones) were to remain in both lodges. And after everyone had gone in, there was not room for me, so I remained outside.

I spoke with some people who sweat in the first lodge while the second lodge was going on. I told them about the nature of *heyoka*, the power of the sacred clowns, and working with the anticlockwise energy flow. Several of these people had been recently to Peru, where they worked with and learned from local shamans. In the southern hemisphere, the natural energy flow is anti-clockwise, so that is how the shamans there work. At the start of the first lodge, Floyd had whistled a bit of a song that the people who had been to Peru recognized. It was the same tune of a song that a Peruvian shaman had sung! It's interesting that apparently traditional Lakota *heyoka* and the Peruvian shamans are in touch with the same type of energy.

Since Floyd did not want all the rocks for the second lodge, I poured a third lodge. There were seven or eight stones left in the fire. I wasn't entirely sure how to do the lodge, but decided to play it by ear. I realized that I could help to ground people who chose to come in, and help spin the energy back in a clockwise direction.

During the lodge, I took time to talk about *Heyoka*, and how it differed from other Lakota lodges. I explained the meaning of *Mitakue Oyasin*. The energy was a bit chaotic at first, but things had settled down by the end of the fourth round.

It would have been nice to have more time to interact and talk with the people who came, both before and after the lodge, as there were quite a few new people. Floyd is very *heyoka*, and is capable of "blowing people away" as Star put it. I was glad to have the time to talk to those outside during the second lodge.

Being mindful

It is important to be mindful and focused during ceremony and when preparing for ceremony. Allowing yourself to be distracted or letting your mind be focused elsewhere drains energy from you and can lead to mistakes, sometimes dangerous ones.

I am not the first person to be taught this lesson by a rattlesnake (for instance, see *The Dancing Healers* by Carl A. Hammerschlag). During my second time pipe fasting on Eagle Nest Butte, I was walking on top of the butte, looking for a suitable place to make my prayers and smoke my *chanupa*. I was not focused on the present and walking sacredly with my *chanupa*. Instead, I was distracted and focused on the future and making my prayers.

My foot kicked something, and I immediately froze, my full attention back in the present, when I heard the buzzing of a rattlesnake. There is something very primal about this sound, and even if you are not familiar with snakes, you know instantly what it is. In my unfocused walking, my foot had actually gently kicked a prairie rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis viridis*) that was crossing the path ahead of me. After the contact, the snake curled up defensively and began rattling.

I backed up slowly until the snake stopped its rattling. I felt a rush of energy (and undoubtedly adrenaline) and I began talking to the snake, apologizing for kicking it and saying that I was thankful for its gentle lesson and for not biting me. I moved slowly forward as I talked, to find the snake's comfort zone. It would rattle when I got too close. At the edge of the snake's safe zone I squatted down to continue the conversation closer to its level. I told it that I wished it no harm, and prayed that its needs for food and warmth be met so that it could flourish.

After a few minutes, I thanked the rattlesnake again for its gentle lesson, and continued walking, much more mindful of what I was doing. I realized that I could easily have died on the butte had that snake bitten me, and I felt very joyful to be alive.

During my prayers at the west end of the Butte, I tearfully expressed my joy and thankfulness for my life, and for the gentle teaching I had received.

Money, ego, and ceremony

Traditionally, an elder performing a ceremony is gifted by those that take part in the ceremony. This is especially true if someone specifically asks a spiritual person to conduct ceremony for them. The gift is offered from the heart, and is not necessarily something expensive, though it can be, particularly after a successful healing ceremony. Tobacco or other items used in ceremony are common gifts. Money can also be gifted, though care should always be taken regarding money and ceremony.

Money is a form of energy, developed initially to facilitate the exchange of goods. Essentially it is a form of barter. Money only has the value that we give to it, it has no inherent value in itself. There is a risk in focusing on accumulating money as an end in itself, rather than a means to acquire the things that we need to live our lives in a humble, sacred manner.

There is a large difference between freely offering a gift to someone conducting ceremony, and putting a price tag on a ceremony or spiritual ritual. Exchanging ceremony for money is a dangerous practice that should always be avoided. Even attempting to use a “suggested donation” or a required “love offering” for those participating in ceremony can backfire.

It does take energy to put on a ceremony, and there is some financial cost to acquire the supplies needed. However, whenever money is exchanged for ceremony, there is a risk that money can become a primary purpose of walking a spiritual path, an expectation, even subconsciously, of why someone is conducting ceremony. Falling into this trap will cause a spiritual person to falter on their path.

Instead of expecting participants in ceremony to contribute money, it is far better to encourage people to contribute what is needed to put on the ceremony. For instance, bringing a stone, some cloth, some wood, or tobacco to a sweat lodge ceremony. This approach spreads out the burden of materially supporting the ceremony and helps to more fully involve the people in the full aspect of the ceremony. If someone wants to contribute some money to cover gas or other expenses, this is fine, as long as it is coming from the heart and is not expected.

One other possibility related to money and ceremony is to put out a hat or blanket for anyone who feels guided to, to put a donation on, and to gift whatever is collected to a non-profit organization working to help Native peoples. I have had very good response to this in the past.

Another risk for those walking a spiritual path, particularly when starting to feel a connection with spiritual energy, is the trap of Ego. Remember that someone conducting ceremony does not cause healing to occur or prayers to be answered. Instead, a spiritual person serves to facilitate the work of the spirits and the Creator, opening the door to the spirit world a crack. This allows the spirits to enter the physical world where they can provide healing, guidance, and sometimes even work miracles.

Do not allow yourself to think that you are the one doing the healing or working the miracles! When I feel my Ego trying to accept responsibility for things that happen in ceremony, I always take time to remember my role in conducting ceremony. I picture myself as a doorstop holding open the door to the spirit world. I do this not to put myself down, but to remain humble and remember that true power comes from the Creator.

Another potential Ego trap is using ceremony as a way to get close to a person that you have an attraction to. This, too, is a dangerous path to walk. When conducting ceremony, you need to focus on creating a sacred space to honestly and fully support those in ceremony with you, so they can pray and receive the healing that they need. Conducting ceremony based on a desire to manipulate people weakens the power of the ceremony and is dangerous.

Teachers and pedestals

I have found it helpful to check my intuition when dealing with teachers of Native spirituality. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, there are people out there who are untrustworthy, manipulative, and even abusive on this spiritual path. Trust your inner wisdom and intuition. If you are drawn to something, without quite knowing why, it can be good to trust your intuition and follow through. Similarly, if something doesn't quite sit right with you, this may be an indication to again trust your intuition.

The challenge is learning to understand when hesitance about someone or something comes from your Ego (and therefore may be best ignored), and when it comes from your Heart, and should be looked at as intuitive guidance.

It is very typical that students tend to elevate their teachers and look up to them. It's quite easy to place teachers on a pedestal and think that they have no faults. This is particularly true with one's first teachers. But all of us are human, and we all have human failings. We can stumble on the path that we walk, even if the path is a spiritual one, a path of healing. It is a valuable, but often difficult, lesson for a student to learn that our teachers are human. Learning this lesson can also

allow you to begin to take on more responsibility for yourself on your spiritual path, and help allow you to work with a spiritual teacher more as a peer, not as “The Teacher.”

My best teaching on not putting my teachers on a pedestal took place in September of 1996. I had planned another trip to visit Star and Gilbert at the *TiOspaye* farm in Wanblee, South Dakota. I wanted to go a little later in the year, after the flurry of activity of summer, so that there would be fewer people there and I could get more time with Star and Gilbert one-on-one. Once again, my expectations were not to come about on this trip.

As I was loading my car, I got a call from Morning Star. She was in Rapid City and told me that she and Gilbert were breaking up, that Gilbert had become violent, and she had fled the farm. I was stunned. Star said that she would understand if I didn't want to come out, but thought that I could be helpful. She said there was a lot of anger and frustration in the aftermath of the breakup, and she hoped that I could help to be a grounding influence. I agreed to come out to see what I could do.

I don't intend to go into a lot of detail on the interpersonal issues during this trip, to respect the privacy of everyone involved. Suffice it to say that trying to mediate (without getting in the middle) after a breakup of two of your spiritual teachers is a difficult task. I was very fortunate to be able to spend time with another Lakota elder, Sam Moves Camp, and participate in lodge with him during this time. If it weren't for Sam's *inipi* ceremonies, I feel certain I would not have been able to stay grounded during this trying time.

I didn't leave the Rez on good terms with Gilbert, and didn't know where he was for six years after that visit. In 2002, I found that he had settled in the Black Hills and was able to visit him and re-establish a relationship with him. I also kept up communication with Morning Star, who is still living on Pine Ridge Reservation helping the Lakota people as best she can.

It was difficult for me losing a teacher in this manner, but I eventually came to understand that it was a very valuable experience. I hadn't fully realized how valuable a blessing going through this difficult time was until I had reconnected with both Star and Gilbert years later. (See **Christmas in Hisle** story.)

I learned that I could take on the primary responsibility for my own continued spiritual growth. I didn't need to apprentice with anyone or follow just one teacher any longer. I had received a good foundation in Lakota spirituality which would allow me to study with multiple teachers as time went on, without being bound to any one. This was an empowering realization brought about by a difficult lesson.

Seeking power

True spiritual power comes from the Creator, *Wakan Tanka*. It is true that there are spiritual people, holy people, *wichasha wakan*, who can work with the spirits, bring spiritual messages to the people, and facilitate miracles in their ceremonies. But do not forget that it is the spirits themselves, the *tunkashilas*, that are responsible for the healing that takes place in ceremony.

There are no shortcuts on a spiritual path. You cannot speed up the process of forming a personal relationship with the spirits and the Powers in the six directions.

If you feel drawn to a Native American spiritual path, it is good to assess your expectations and intentions. Why do you choose to participate in Native ceremony? What do you hope to gain? What is your level of commitment to the path? Are you seeking to gain personal understanding and connectedness in your life, or are you looking for something else?

I have seen people motivated to seek personal power, even if they do so because of a sincere desire to help other people, become frustrated. This is particularly true when they are in a hurry and impatient with their spiritual growth. This is usually most vividly demonstrated when people rush into committing to *hanblechia* (vision quest) before they are ready and before they fully understand the nature of this very powerful ceremony.

My advice is the same that Morning Star told me when I was first learning about Lakota spirituality: “Go slow.” Build a strong foundation of understanding and grow from there. If you are called to serve your people as a healer or pipe carrier, you will know how to proceed when the time is right. Don’t seek out such responsibility before understanding the full nature of these commitments.

A path of suffering

Early on in my learning from Morning Star, she told me that the Lakota spiritual path was a path of suffering. She affirmed that it is not an easy path to walk, and is full of challenges and lessons that can be difficult to accept at times. I gained a level of understanding of what she meant during my first pipe fast on Eagle Nest Butte, but I would not fully understand how true this statement is until many years later.

Personal sacrifice made for the good of other people is a common element in Lakota ceremonies. This is very evident in one of the most powerful Lakota ceremonies, the Sun Dance. In the Sun Dance, individual dancers make very difficult personal sacrifices for the good of all the people. They go without food and water, dance to exhaustion, and may even give flesh offerings, literally giving of their own bodies so that the people can prosper. They take personal responsibility to undergo suffering in this ceremony, so that the rest of the people do not have to. This is a very significant and powerful commitment.

Other ceremonies, including the *hanblechia* and *inipi*, have an aspect of suffering for the good of the people. In sweat lodge, participants may suffer some from the heat and intensity of the ceremony, but they do so in order to purify themselves and send their voices in prayer for the good of their people. In *hanblechia*, a Vision Quester goes without food and water for an extended period, to gain insight that can be brought back to the people.

I have found that people will come and go from your life as you walk the path of Lakota spirituality. Sometimes friends will turn their backs on you, or they will turn away from the Red Road. Marriages can fail because one partner does not accept or understand their spouse’s commitment to this spiritual path. This was the case with my own marriage.

Yet despite the times of suffering, great comfort can come to those who practice Lakota spirituality with a sincere heart. Always remember that although people may let you down, you can always find comfort in the foundations of ceremony, and remember that the sacred pipe will never let you down. Consider your *chanupa* your best friend, someone who will always be there for you, always ready to help you send your deepest prayers to the creator.

I have found great comfort during times of personal stress, challenge, and suffering by turning to my *chanupa* for ceremony and prayer.

The community around ceremony

It takes quite a bit of energy and effort (and usually sweat!) to conduct ceremony. For an *inipi* ceremony, the steps involved include: gathering stones and wood for the fire, building the fire (including placing and honoring the stones), tending the fire while the stones heat (which generally takes two hours), preparing the lodge (tidying up of the area, adjusting blankets on the lodge as needed, removing stones from previous lodge, burning prayer robes and ties from the previous lodge), preparing the altar (making robes and ties for inside and outside the lodge), filling the water bucket, loading the *chanupa*, and carrying the stones into the lodge. All this takes place before a single dipper of water is poured in the ceremony! In addition, it is very helpful to have someone outside the lodge serve as the door keeper, opening and closing the door between rounds and passing items from the altar to those inside the lodge as needed (for instance, the *chanupa* when it is time to smoke it.)

When I was learning to pour lodge, I took care of all these task by myself for every lodge. This makes me all the more appreciative of having people assist with the ceremony and help take

care of the assorted tasks that are necessary. If everyone pitches in a little bit, it helps to bond the participants to the ceremony and it also make it easier to get everything ready for the ceremony.

Ideally, there are helpers who are experienced enough that they will take care of tasks without being asked. This takes quite a bit of development, however. Never be afraid to ask what you can do to help and to learn how to take care of these various tasks.