Someone posed a question. How can we learn our traditional ways if we live in the city?

I would like to share my personal experience.

My grandfather and grandmother - and great-grandmother (maternal), who I lovingly and respectfully called “Unci” - raised me from early childhood. Each elder exemplified a unique spirituality through, what our indigenous community refers to as, “wolakota.” It means the Lakota people’s sacred way of life. These familial practices distributed positive seeds throughout my youthful life. In later years, these enriching life experiences with my grandparents would reemerge as life-saving, natural medicines and antidotes. These traditions, for example, would eventually heal the hidden damage inflicted in a previous, abusive relationship and convert a once traumatic memory into a brightly illuminated “red road” to emotional health.

My wonderful grandmothers exposed me, through repeated prayer and gentle demonstration, to the sacred use of particular kinds of plants, some for invocation and purification, and others for healing. For example, when one of my Grandmothers’ caught the flu or became ill with something, she would retrieve a small portion of dried sage she had ceremoniously harvested in June, roll it calmly in the palm of her hands, place it in a special container, and release its fragrance with a match. She would “azilya” the entire house, fanning the rising smoke with her free hand, and go from room to room, person to person. I did not entirely realize, at the time, that this simple act of cleansing is one of our oldest ceremonial practices. Generally, my grandmothers would, also, pick and blend different types of plant medicines for one another, their women relatives, or friends.

They, literally, showed me how to walk in prayer. Often, my grandmother and I would walk down the dirt road from our humble home. She would often walk slowly and patiently, with her eyes closed, praying. I would ask her, “Grandma, aren’t you afraid to fall?” She would respond in our Lakota language “I know this road by heart.” This much-remembered statement would return as a living and powerful metaphor later in life.
My grandparents retained the Lakota language as their first and primary language. It is a beautiful language, steeped deep in the sacredness of creation and the dynamic evolution of the natural world and universe. Some of our words came from animals, such as the buffalo and eagle. Other words came from, for example, the sound the wind makes when it blows through a hollow branch.

The first time I left the intimate space of my tribal homeland for a far away non-Native world clustered with walls, I would frequently dream about my grandmothers, my mother, uncles, and others of significance to me. In my dreams, they would speak to and communicate with me in the Lakota way. Invariably, I would wake up, missing them with all my heart, and remember my grandmother’s advice, “You must become successful out there.” I would respond out loud as a granddaughter who wants to make her grandma proud and say, “Grandma, I am going to do things I dreamed about.” In time, I did.

To honor my grandmother’s caring spirit and the inspiration which continues to emanate from our lives and legacy together, I composed a prayer song, in the language she taught me, to encapsulate her meaning to me. It will be remembered in perpetuity by my extended family. Her beautiful voice continues to sustain me through thick and thin.

Songs amplify the deepest feelings in our heart. They express our most profound conviction about our relationship to the Creator, all of creation, and our way of life. We know when a song comes from our heart. It makes you want to cry. Lakota women love to sing in this manner. From the strong-hearted women who preceded me and from those still around me, I’ve come to learn a significant collection of Lakota prayer and honor songs. As a result of this tradition, I have created songs to honor women, families, the spiritual world, and nature. Songs change everything.

They can change a room full of people, change lives. Songs are used in every occasion, event, and ceremony.

When I was 28 years of age, I relocated far away from my tribal homeland with my husband. I am 54 now. We moved across vast territories, across deserts, over mountains, through various states, and lived and worked in different cities. It was inevitable that I became adjusted and use to this lifestyle. It took years of overcoming a ceaseless stream of challenges to adjust to city life and to finally afford increased stability.

Becoming part of this lifestyle was so time consuming, I often forgot or largely neglected my “wolakota” ways. I inevitably suffered from the consequences of living a life where my spiritually was becoming more and more absent and, when considered, was a preoccupation separate from me.

Around this time, I had begun work in the Human Services field. It was here I realized that I must value and maintain my spirituality to be truly effective in the field in which I was most passionate. In the interim, I had experienced some amazing things that happened to people who sought out our organization for services. I witnessed the extraordinary capabilities of the human spirit.

I truly began to see more clearly and understand that the people to whom I and my organization provided service are really human spirits. Parallel to and above our work, our personal lives reflect our own human spirit, service, and – hopefully - commitment.
This is where I, once again, resumed in earnest my journey home, to my Sicangu Lakota people upon the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, to become a scholar of my own culture. Although, I did grow up and lived my young adult years in my tribal community, I had never fully immersed myself in our various ceremonies until my latter years.

To be a scholar of my own culture required sacrifice of time and money well spent. We drove home once or twice a month. My husband and I prepared our children for the journey from the time they were born. They were given innumerable opportunities to spend invaluable time with their paternal grandmother, extended family, medicine men and women, and new found relatives and friends. They participated in ceremonies.

During this time, I came to fully understand that I truly was home when I made new relatives in not just this world, but in the spirit world as well.

This wholistic reconnection allowed me to make a transition into a way of life that fully supported my personal and professional life here in the city and at home.

With the proper guidance, I had respectfully integrated into my life the practices which the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Woman’s brought to our people. I used sacred plants and herbs, tobacco ties, and the proper Lakota songs to help generate health and well-being. I learned at a deeper level to give thanks for everything.

As a Lakota woman, I knew I had to overcome barriers and opposition that prevented me from practicing our way of life. For instance, one of the places where I had worked refused to allow me to use the word ‘healing’ in our marketing material. I was told I couldn’t use this word because I was not a therapist or psychologist. From a cultural standpoint, I disagreed because I know that healing does, indeed, occur through even the most seemingly simple cultural practices, like burning a small sage ball.

I still live and work in the city. It is a different time and space than when I had arrived in this particular city ten years ago. I still make trips home to seek answers to my current questions, answers that empower me to be more helpful within our Indigenous community. I became a knowledge seeker.

In my pursuits, I learned that I could create a safe and sacred space and place, no matter where I am at. I am more capable of sharing indigenous knowledge and cultural practices with other native women. I’ve seen how Indigenous cultural practices and beliefs could positively change an individual’s behavior and health.

Additionally, I practice the ever increasing knowledge of my traditional ways. My reconnection to Unci Maka (Grandmother Earth) and indigenous ceremonies has incrementally expanded my worldview. It has allowed me to effectively be of service to my community.

In this city, some people say it is not possible to bring indigenous tradition and culture within this construction. In some respects, it’s true that there are practices that can’t be performed in a hectic city, that our indigenous ways can only be safely conducted upon tribal or sacred lands.

Regardless, the blood of my grandfathers and grandmothers still runs through my veins. My DNA is from Lakota blood. This is ultimately the most powerful piece of knowledge in my
possession. My great-grandfather, Yellow Cloud, was a warrior in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. Chief Swift Bear was my great-grandfather. We are alive because of the power of their prayers, foresight, vision, and resistance to opposition where they knew they were right. They truly cared for their grandchildren.

To know my history and lineage has strengthened my relationship with the natural world. So I do what my relatives did for generations upon generations. I harvest peji hota (sage), cansasa (red willow), and other plants. Just the act of gathering these sacred plants puts me in touch with them, my culture, and our future as indigenous peoples. The summer and winter harvests restart an ancient rhythm that acknowledges the changing seasons and universal constellations. The acknowledgment of these sacred plants helps to create a multi-generational bridge where a simple act of personal responsibility and well-being assures the continuation of our way of life.

It signifies that I am looking ahead toward specific ceremonies that will take place during the solstices, the new moons within each of the four seasons, and other ceremonies that will take place.

I use sage prolifically all year round, within my tiwahe (family), work, small groups, and large crowds. Peji hota comes from Unci Maka, her gift to us that we may truly live. I never forget that.

I use cansasa in my tobacco ties and sacred pipe. I pray to put anger, guilt and sadness aside, to achieve wicozani (health and well-being), to be truly happy and at peace with myself and others. When I enter a space, I bring this positive energy and share it with others.

When I awaken in the morning, the first thing I do is give wopila (thanks) for everything and ask for help to have health, happiness, and humility, and to have pity and compassion for others. The most important thing is to ask for spiritual help to help others.

I still travel for eight hours down that blacktop highway to my tribal homeland. Sometimes, life becomes difficult and this is when I am thankful I can go home to be rejuvenated, strengthened, and guided by my “wolakota” way of life.

However, for those of us who live in the city, we must remember that sage grows here as well, that the rivers and lakes around us have already been named by our people hundreds of years ago, that the night sky overhead is the same one our people wonder about in our respective homelands, and that the rising sun is the same one that illuminates our face as we offer our prayers each morning.

About the author: Nancy Bordeaux is Sicangu Lakota from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. The roots of her native ways originated along the Little White River valley in the tribal community of Soldier Creek. Ms. Bordeaux is currently Program Director and founder of the Indigenous Women’s Life Net, a domestic violence and sexual assault program at the Minneapolis American Indian Center.