

The Sacred Sweat Lodge

Several months ago my teacher and friend, Clyde Hall, asked me to write an essay regarding Sweat Lodge. I thought this request unusual as the Ladle for Pouring Lodge has recently come to me through my teacher Carolyn Sanders. As I write this essay, I do so in humility and with the hope to convey the message of one who is continuing to learn to work with lodge in a sacred and honored way.

Carolyn Sanders, of the Utah Community, has held a Lodge in her yard for over twenty-years. Bear Boy, who passed away in August of 2004, taught Carolyn how to pour and work with medicine. Not only has Bear Boy taught Carolyn how to Pour Lodge and to work with medicine in a Sacred Way, but we have had the privilege of having many Elders come to our Lodge and encourage, teach and mentor us on these things, teachers such as Clyde Hall, Lanie Thom and those who have never been introduced to the Naraya: A Dance For all People community.

Approximately nine years ago I made an offering to Carolyn Sanders and presented her with tobacco, a blanket and other gifts and asked her to consider teaching me to pour lodge. When she accepted this offering her initial requirement was for me to attend every lodge for one year. After that year, if I still felt called to pour Lodge I was to approach her and reconfirm my commitment. For one year I participated in every Lodge that Carolyn poured.

For the next eight years, Carolyn had me chop wood, carry water, care for the land and build fire. She taught me how to build a lodge, honor the willows, the earth, the water and each person who entered the lodge. Throughout the years, I often wondered when I was going to learn to "pour" To sit in the "place" of Lodge Pourer and perform the Sacred Rite.

Little did I realize at the time that I was learning how to serve the people and that often serving the people, in an honored way, does not always require you to be seen or observed, but that you learn to carry sacred things in a good way and do as you're taught and told by your Elders.

What I will offer is my perspective about Sweat Lodge. I offer this with the awareness that each and every Lodge is different and unique in accordance to those who are attending and in accordance to those who are pouring and taking care of the Sacred Things. In my instance, I learned to pour Lodge through Carolyn Sanders, who learned from Bear Boy.

The foundation of what we do in the Lodge comes from a Ute tradition, history and background. What Bear Boy taught us is a reflection of how he was taught by his Elders, family and teachers. The way I move around the Lodge, the way I honor the Lodge is reflective of that tradition. What I have learned is that every Lodge Pourer approaches lodge from their own tradition, history and background. You may find someone pouring from the East or someone pouring from the West. They may move around the Medicine Wheel in a way that is unique to their teachings.

Whenever I am in a Lodge that is unfamiliar to me, I am quick to be observant and to be as teachable as possible in order to learn and understand the honored things and the way of the person who is carrying those things at that time. I never enter someone else's Lodge and presume that because I have Sweat for so many years, that I know what I am doing in that particular lodge.

When one comes to Sweat Lodge, they should come prayerfully and in consideration of their own needs and the needs of others. This requires the assistance of a Fire Keeper who comes several hours before Lodge to

prepare the fire, set the fire, supervise the Fire, and to make sure that things are initiated in a good way with the Lodge. The Lodge Pourer spends time, before the Lodge, in meditation, preparing Prayer Ties and generally preparing to do the work for the people. Because of the effort and time that these individuals put into a Lodge, it is a good thing to remember them in your prayers. It is also good to come with Sacred Offerings. Offerings can be anything from the Heart. Traditional offerings of Tobacco and Red Cloth are a standard, but offerings can exceed these things.

In this day and age it takes considerable resources and offerings can be of a nature to support these resources and honor those who have worked in behalf of those who are participating in the lodge.

If you are requesting a lodge it is important to honor that request with an offering that is reflective of the request. They are presented to the Lodge Pourer and to the Fire Keeper so the work and effort they have put towards the Lodge is honored. I also consider it an aspect of the intentions of the person making the request; the offering reflects the prayers of the person requesting and participating in the lodge and often sits on the altar during the lodge.

Sweat Lodge is an act of Purification. It is a place of worship, healing, prayers, songs and it is a place where we are real with ourselves and with others. We seek a level of honesty that will encourage us to a higher sense of self. Within Lodge, I have seen people healed of disease; Drug Addicts put down addictions; Alcoholics put down the bottle. I have seen Agnostics have faith and I have seen strong men humbled to tears. Lodge is a very hot place and I often think that our struggles are not about where we sit in Lodge, but where we stand in our life.

I think about Lodge as a place of purification, worship, and of honoring the Spirits and Ancestors. Lodge helps me understand the Sacred Wheel and the importance of balance in my life.

The demographics of Lodge are not very complicated. The Lodge is an Igloo shaped hut. Willows are used for the framework. Gates are established in each of the four directions and then the Lodge is sealed off with blankets, sleeping bags and tradition- ally animal hides so that when inside the Lodge it is completely dark inside. When we sit in the dark we are all the same!

Outside of the Lodge there is a Heart Line. This is the line between the fire that cooks the rocks (referred to as ancestors), to the door of the Lodge. In our tradition it is prohibited to cross the Heart Line so as not to disturb the flow of energy from the fire to the inside of the lodge.

When we walk around the lodge we move with the circle in a clockwise manner. It is believed that the Hear Line is the conduit of the energy that comes into the Lodge. In the way we have been taught it would be inappropriate to cross the Heart Line unless you are the Fire Keeper tending to the stones.

The Fire Keeper sets the Fire. This is done in a ceremonial way, making offerings to the Four Directions to establish a place where the Stones will rest and the fire will be built. The Fire Keeper approaches the fire with great reverence, setting the tone with their intent and their focus for the entire Lodge. Once the fire is set, the stones are cooked for several hours so they are appropriately heated for the Lodge.

The Rocks are placed into the center of the Sweat Lodge once the participants are seated. These Rocks are then honored with Tobacco and

Sweet Grass as prayers are said to welcome them into the Lodge. As prayers are said we ask the Ancestors to help us in what we are doing. Water is poured on the stones and the steam blesses the people.

In our Lodge, we conduct four rounds. The first round is the round of the East. This is the round in which we honor the medicine of the Eagle and the Spotted Deer as well as the other ancestors that sit in the East. It is the place of New Beginnings, Birth and Infancy. It is the place where we seek out purification and in which we pray for ourselves. We cleanse ourselves and offer prayer, asking Creator and the Ancestors to help us to become better people and to move our lives forward in a good and honorable way.

Once the round to the East is complete, we move to the round of the South, the place of "Bonatsi" or Beloved Mouse. It is, at times, the place of Coyote. It is the place of childhood. This is where we pray for our loved ones. We pray for our families, our friends, our colleagues, our fellow dancers and our Elders. This is the place where we ask the Creator to help those whom we love.

Once the round of the South is complete, we move to the round of the West. This is the round of "TuWada" or the Bear. It is also the place of the Wolf and the Thunder Beings. This is the place where our ancestors go when they have crossed over so that their souls and spirits can be washed by the family of Wolves that will tend to them. This is the place where we pray for our Enemies (often we are our own worse enemy; therefore it would be appropriate to pray for ourselves in this place).

The place of the West is also a place of Introspection where we go deep within the cave of our Soul and look within to ask the Creator for healing and change in our lives. This is the round in which we seek the upgrading

of our lives, upgrading the physical, the spiritual, the social and the emotional.

The round of the North is the round of the Buffalo, the round of gratitude and wisdom. It is the place where we go to bring a conclusion to these things. The Buffalo is often the spirit associated with abundance and spirituality, not only temporal abundance, but spiritual as well. This is the place where we conclude the Lodge.

Before we exit the lodge the ancestors are thanked and dismissed with gratitude as they go and take our prayers to a place where they can be answered. The stones that have sat in the middle of the Lodge, that have offered their lives to us, that have released their steam to nurture us and to help us grow, are notified that we have completed the Lodge and we depart as new creatures.

When we leave the Lodge, we have an option. Those things that we have left behind can stay there, with the stones, or we can choose to pick them up and take them with us. If I go to Lodge because I want to learn to let go of my anger and accept growth and happiness, it is my choice. I can either leave the anger with the Ancestors or I can pick it up again when I leave lodge.

For me, Sweat Lodge is one of the most important rituals and acts of ceremony that I participate in on a regular basis. In Lodge is where the most important things in life become apparent. I believe in the power of the Sweat Lodge because I have witnessed this power in the lives of those who have participated and in my own life.

I cannot think of one participant who approached Lodge with a good heart, who didn't walk away with a powerful experience. I find Lodge an

opportunity to cleanse my Soul and start my walk with my fellow man in a good and honored way.

As I stated earlier, everyone approaches Lodge in a different way. I hope by sharing your next experience in lodge is enhanced.