

Inipi, the Sweat Lodge
Nine Months of Lakota Ceremony
by Tony

The first sweat

The sweats were held outdoors, on the guide's land. That first fall (late September through early December) I remember there were about 35 people total in that lodge. It was a co-ed lodge, and the ratio of men to women was about equal. It started with people arriving and gathering around the fire, which had been going for hours, heating the stones. By the time we arrived, the 50-60 volcanic stones had been sitting in softwood for 2 hours, and then hardwood for another hour. You could see them inside the fire pit, glowing red. People changed into loose wraps, or swim trunks, grabbed a towel, and gathered around the fire. The ritual began around 6 o'clock. On that first September night, it was still warm, but it was strange being out barefoot on the grass in the evening, with only swim trunks and towel. Right before I came out, someone reminded me to take off my ring and earring. Not only were metals a bad idea, but one was to shed all decoration -- to enter the lodge as naked as practicality would allow. I remembered thinking -- "Am I really going to do this?"

All Lakota rituals are accompanied by songs. Once people gathered, they began to sing the invocation song that comes with the loading of the pipe. While the people were singing, the leader of the lodge would hold aloft a pinch of tobacco (red willow bark actually) and call forth one of the universal forces (the Four Directions, the Universe above, the Earth below) to enter and manifest within that tobacco. It was then placed into the pipe and the next force was called. Having been given only a cursory introduction to the songs, I tried to "fake-it-till-ya-make-it" like a bad choir student. I knew what the songs meant, but it was difficult to follow along. After the pipe was loaded, the people lined up single file, and -- with another song -- made a winding path into the lodge. At the mouth of the lodge, I found myself down on my bare knees, crawling into what felt like a warm, wet cave with cedar shavings on the floor. It was actually a squarish-round tent made of thick, bent willow branches, tied together with lots of sturdy cotton string, and covered with many thick blankets and tarps. The whole structure was probably 5 feet high at its tallest point and about 10 feet in diameter. Inside it smelled of steam, and cedar and the humans around me.

With 35 people on the inside, everyone was packed in in two concentric circles, cross-legged with our knees pulled up. Someone kindly suggested that, it being my first sweat, I should sit towards the back and let someone else sit in the inner ring, since this was closer to the stones. Then the stones were brought in from the fire pit on a pitchfork, and brought inside the lodge using antlers. They ranged in size from honey-dew melons to large footballs, and each glowed red hot. The first round started with a traditional 14 rocks, which were arranged in a particular pattern, so as to form the base of an eventually larger pile. When the door flap was closed, I could still see the rocks glowing in front of me, but I couldn't see the roof of the lodge. We were in complete darkness, packed in like sardines. Even at 5 feet away, I could feel the stones radiate heat on my face. Good Horse

Nation opened the season with a prayer, and threw aromatic cedar over the rocks. Each tiny bit of cedar winked red as it hit, like a hundred stars flaring and going out. And then the drums sounded and we began the sweat.

As soon as water was poured on the rocks, it exploded violently into steam. I could hear the sound of it even over 35 people singing at the tops of their lungs. The water also took any remaining light from the rocks, leaving me in total darkness. Afraid, lost in the dark, and not knowing the words, I tried to focus on just breathing rather than making an attempt to fake singing. The air around me got hotter and hotter, and my throat began to tighten up in pain every time it inhaled another gulp of superheated steam. It reminded me of trying to drink tea too quickly. My body began to rebel. When my throat sent out the pain signal, my lungs would stop inhaling, and I couldn't get in a full breath. I tried slowing my breathing down, drawing out the inhale as long as possible. I tried taking rapid shallow breaths. Nothing was working: I still wasn't getting enough oxygen. My trusted autonomic processes began to fail.

My extremities started going numb first- my feet and hands. I knew that there was a safe-word I could cry out, and they would stop, to lift the flap and roll me out. But this was my first time in the lodge, and my very first round, and I told myself I'd rather ride this out than interrupt their ritual with my fear and discomfort. I had agreed to the risk and I would take it.

"I'm going to fall over"

The numbness crept up my arms and legs. No matter how I tried, I couldn't get enough air. At some point, I realized that I was about to lose muscular control of my legs and torso, and I remember saying, "I'm going to fall over" out loud. I had come to the lodge to make peace with the process of fall; with the leaves dying on the trees, with everything around me turning towards decay. And here I was -- my own body slipping away from me, rapidly feeling my consciousness fading towards a faint, falling over into the ground, losing control, facing my own fear of death. The people around me made room for me, and let me fall over. They were smart and knew that the air was much cooler those 3 feet down at ground level. They touched my head and quietly encouraged me to hang in there. As long as they could hear me breathing, they let me lie there and didn't disturb me. The ritual went on around me.

Having my body and my mind taken away from me like that by lack of oxygen was an amazing experience. At no other time in my life was I so keenly aware that I was intimately interwoven with this world. And then -- as I lay there, numb and half-conscious -- I began to breathe again and felt life returning to me. I felt my rubbery limbs fill with blood, and felt my senses awaken. I felt myself dragged back to life by the life force within me -- my heaving lungs, my beating heart, my autonomic nervous system. I lay there, alive, in the dark, listening to the others singing around me and feeling my being pulsate with life. Finally, just as the round was ending, I gathered enough strength to sit back up and poke my head into the steamy air above. I felt as though I had survived my own fears, and passed some internal rite of passage.

The flap was opened, about 17 more stones were brought in, and then the flap was closed again. On the second round, I focused on singing as much as I could. Fortunately for me, many Lakota songs have long extended notes where one vowel is held and repeated to a certain rhythm. So, even if I didn't know all the words, I could at least sing along without throwing off the other singers. This, I found, was the secret to staying oxygenated in the sweat lodge. When you are singing, you take in a quick breath that fills your lungs and then let it out over the course of about 5-6 seconds. This extended exhale allows the throat to cool down enough so that the next breath won't cause a choke reflex. Also, singing from the diaphragm will help one to extend the exhale even further, and to give the notes more resonance.

Once I figured out the singing/breathing trick, I was able to sit upright through all the singing of the second round. This was the prayer round, the longest of the four. After singing several songs, we went around the circle one by one and everyone put something forth -- a prayer for the new season, a statement of personal intent, or perhaps just their current pains and troubles, which they had brought here to overcome. As you can imagine, with 35 people in the lodge this took quite a long time. Every time someone finished their prayer, Good Horse Nation would throw another bit of water on the rocks to raise those prayers upwards, and the lodge got hotter and hotter.

When my turn came, my reasons for coming to the lodge just came out of me without any thought or hesitation. The sheer mental and physical effort of enduring the heat and keeping my body oxygenated had stripped me of all self-consciousness, all pretense, all thoughts of "Gosh, am I going to sound silly?" I said that I had come here to make peace with the process of fall, with the seasonal dying of things, to let go of my sadness and learn to experience this aspect of life in a different way. I remember Good Horse Nation acknowledged my prayer with a simple "O-ho!" which was a customary call-and-response in the lodge. But the way he said it in the dark -- respectfully and with reverence for the major task I had set myself -- made me feel very welcomed. I had expected to be treated as some sort of green-horn, and here I felt genuine respect.

By the end of the prayer round, we were all wilted and drained. Many had dropped down to a one-elbow reclining position in order to try to get to the cooler air near the ground. When the flap was lifted, one could almost taste the new oxygen as it rushed in. We regained some of our strength as new red rocks were brought in- about 21 of them this time. The third round was the shortest, but also the hottest and most intense round. Once the flap was closed, we began singing at the top of our lungs and Good Horse Nation kept throwing water on the stones again and again. I strained to focus all my thought and energy on the singing, but I could still feel the hot air burning my forehead and eyelids. It felt like a bathtub of boiling water had somehow been levitated upside-down over my head and was slowly being lowered over my face. With the heat and all the energy of the singing coursing through me, I could no longer tell if my nerves were processing hot or cold, pleasure or pain. I was riding that very edge of consciousness where all I knew was the sound of our voices, the beat of the drum, the feeling of elation, and the need to draw the hot air inside me so that I might do it all again. It was our yell of celebration -- our cry of joyous survival.

After the third round, the pipe was brought into the lodge. After it was lit, it was passed from person to person and everyone took a single deep draw. Just so you know, the red willow bark (kinick kinick in Lakota) had no psychoactive properties. Its power lay completely in its symbolic attributes. Here inside this pipe were all the forces of the universe -- Death (West/Fall), Silence (North/Winter), Birth (East/Spring), Life (South/Summer), the Universe above, the Earth Mother below -- all of these had entered the tobacco, and now I was drawing their essence into me and through me. After the pipe was passed around, a single gourd ewer was brought in and everyone took a little sip of water. The water was ceremonial and one was only supposed to take a little sip -- not several giant gulps. There was a little prayer one was supposed to focus on while taking one's sip,

"Water is medicine
Water is sacred
Water is life."

Having just inhaled and exhaled the smoke which symbolized the whole Universe, I now tasted the tiny sip of water, and felt it pouring down my throat and into me. I could feel my body's water all over me as sweat. I could feel it slowly coursing out of every pore. My hair and my swimsuit were drenched in it. I thought of how much of a permeable membrane my whole body was -- a funnel through which water, food, and energy are poured and sifted, and transformed into life. I thanked the Universe for the water, and for the pleasure of being so intimately tied and woven to it.

The flap was closed for the fourth and final time and we began singing the songs to send all the universal forces home. To thank them for coming with us into the lodge, and releasing them back into the universe. We sang of our hardships and our joys. And then, when it was all over, we all yelled together the Lakota version of "Amen"- the universal saying which ends almost any sacred speech "Ho Mitakuye Oyasin"- meaning "We Are All Related." With this, the flap was thrown open and people crawled back out of the lodge and made their way into the dark and stars of that September evening. Though I had completely lost track of time, I later found out that more than 4 hours had passed. Outside the lodge, many people simply sprawled out on the moist grass, savoring the cool air. Others gathered and stood around the fire. One or two people actually got out the hose, and were dousing themselves with cold water. I just sat on the grass and tried to collect myself.

Afterwards, even though it was about 10pm in the evening, we would always go into Good Horse Nation's house to have a pot-luck and debrief the experience. The lodge members had brought many tasty home-made dishes, and -- of course -- all food and drink tasted better after what we'd just survived. It felt like a joy simply to be alive. When we'd filled our plates and cups, we sat in a circle in a large room, and passed a talking stick around. At times, Good Horse Nation would put a question forward for everyone to answer, and other times, it was just a chance for everyone to talk about what they'd experienced in the lodge. As I heard people talking, my last fears and suspicions that I'd

joined some sort of tooty-fruity New Age cult began to wane. Here were real people talking about their experiences in a very open way. They had no need to indoctrinate me into anything, nor to convince me that I should follow any kind of teacher or guru. Though Good Horse Nation was always respected as the leader of the lodge, he was still also a man, and showed himself to be as fallible, humorous, and irreverent as any of us.

In the circle, people talked about their lives, their fears, their hopes and struggles. Though we certainly showed compassion and concern for each other, it was generally acknowledged that a person's work was their own. We were not here to solve each other's problems, but to provide the caring environment where everyone could explore the sacred in the ways they needed to, so they could find their own solutions and create their own change. When the talking stick had come full circle back to Good Horse Nation, he had everyone join hands and close their eyes, and said one prayer. With one last Ho Mitakuye Oyasin we broke the circle and ended the evening. Everyone was tired and giddy, and we made our way to our cars, and drove home.