

NATIVE WISDOM:

Going South: A Lakota story

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Lakota

On a day like no other, a red sun set upon a sweat lodge ceremony which was ending. An old Lakota holy man stepped outside of a humble sweat lodge. This frail looking grandfather, who appeared to be in his eighties, looked upward and seemed to speak from a distant age and time. His earnest prayer brought tears to the eyes of some people. He spoke: "Tunkasila, I stand before you today, a man full of age. I will be going South soon. I have lived as you asked. My life has been full of hardships." Then the old holy man began singing a vision song of his youth, "A friend is coming from the clouds. The clouds are my home. The Thunder Beings have given me a bow." Overhead, a thunderhead loomed. Meanwhile, preparations were under way for the holy man's next ceremony, a healing Yuwipi ceremony for an elderly grandmother.

At the holy man's house, friends and relatives readied the living room for a Yuwipi, which means "to bind or tie up." It is among one of our sacred Lakota ceremonies. The old holy man's helpers bound his hands and legs securely with sinew beneath a Lakota star quilt made especially for this ceremony. With his hands tied behind his back, the old holy man was lying in the center and in the spirit world. The people earnestly prayed for Wakan Tanka to have pity upon their vulnerable Interpreter, the old holy man.

As the room was darkened, the ceremony began with a prayer. The holy man's helpers started singing to a perfect Lakota heartbeat that reverberated from the drum. It was a powerful calling song, which the Tunkasilas had given the old holy man long ago in a vision. As the spirits entered, one appeared as a large blue orb, while another, bright as the sun, moved around the room- Wakan Tanka, the Great Mystery. Bright flashes of light flickered and filled the room. They were Iktomi (spider) spirits. Sounds of hundreds of high pitched voices which could not possibly be human,

became present. From all directions, the Iktomi spirits rushed in, whispering into people's ears. Some voices were faintly understood while others were a mystery. The Iktomis joked, laughed and spoke of the future as a little boy was overheard asking his mother, "Who is that talking in my ear?" She replied, "Shh shh, It is your Grandfather speaking."

Before the second song began, there



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was silence. A muffled voice said, "Speak now, the spirits are listening." The people made their requests, mostly in Lakota. Some were praying as the second song began. Then a sound of footsteps was heard as sparks came up from the floor. Loud flapping sounds came from beneath us, perhaps a giant unseen bird. A wind picked up as the old holy man sang as if unbound. The people prayed intently for the healing of their loved one. An energy suddenly filled the room and something huge came in. The grandmother later described her healing as "An electric energy like lightning and a humming sound passed through me from my left side. I felt as if a 100 lb. weight was lifted from my back!"

All of a sudden, the Presence was overwhelming and a voice, an ancient spirit,

was so audible that even a deaf person could hear. The old holy man interpreted as the spirit spoke a strange language, hanbloglaka, the vision language. Even the most experienced spiritual people who have walked the Red Road all their lives could not understand hanbloglaka. A flash of lightning struck from the ground up. Once again, it seemed as if the universe was silent but the silence was as loud as thunder.

The old holy man's voice became clearly audible as he spoke of the news. The spirits were thanked in a song, dancing as they left, content with the offerings of food and other items. The door opened by itself, footsteps from the unseen spirits were heard leaving. A ball of tobacco ties (offerings) which surrounded the perimeter of the Hocoka, the sacred circle, was mysteriously rolled neatly into a ball and placed upon the altar in the center.

The old holy man, now unbound, sat smiling, knowing that the ceremony was a success. He was welcomed back to the living and spoke softly. The people were all happy. That day, our Red People sat together, though from different reservations, different tribes, all united to support a grandmother who needed healing. There was much laughing and rejoicing for another healing had taken place, reinforcing the people's faith in Wakan Tanka and the Red Road. After all these centuries, Wakan Tanka never forgot his Red People.

I sit years later, now an elder myself, my memories of Pine Ridge and of this great man. Certainly his life and service to our people was worthy of many medals and honors. Yet this Lakota holy man in our own community, was taken for granted. In the Red Sunset of his last years, it seems he faded, along with our memories of him. I picture him, smiling as he journeyed South without regrets for the life he lived. It is a sorrow in our hearts and the story of our people that others today will make that journey South soon. Honor your elders and holy men while they still live.