

“THE SWEAT LODGE MIGHT HELP YOU”

How My Mother's Advice
Gave Me Miracles

“*In the Native way,
my mother didn't preach to
me. She didn't give me a long
list of 'shoulds.' She just said
one thing: 'The sweat lodge
might help you.'*”

In the summer in Bishop, California, a typical temperature is 105 degrees. On Mondays, some of us wake up smiling. Mondays are sweat days! It's going to be 105 degrees. Perfect day to go into a sweat lodge. We'll all be pre-heated when we go in. We are all excited. Monday is sweat day!

Thirty years ago, going into a steamy enclosure made of bent willow poles and covered with Pendleton blankets in the middle of summer would have been the last thing on my



Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

mind. I had come home to my mother with a baby in my arms and a marriage gone bad. In the Native way, my mother didn't preach to me. She didn't give me a long list of "shoulds."

She said just one thing: "The sweat lodge might help you."

I knew I needed help but didn't know where to look. I was desperately trying to hold it together. I was trying to be a Native person but didn't even know what that meant.

The line of Native traditions and finding answers in the Native way had been broken. Several generations of Native people, including my grandmother and I, had gone to boarding schools. Many of the ways that we healed ourselves were taken away—the crystal clear path to wellness had been dug up and piled with debris. What she and many others came back with was a sense that something was missing, that there must be a better way to relate, raise families, find peace. But they weren't quite sure what it was.

The sweat lodge and prayer are the foundation upon which I build all aspects of my health. I can be healthy in mind, body, spirit and emotion because I go to sweats and because I pray.

STARTS WITH PRAYER

Many times in my life, I thank my mother for saying those simple words: "The sweat lodge might help you." It has become the cornerstone of my wellness. The sweat lodge (purification ceremony) and prayer are the foundation upon

9: "The Sweat Lodge Might Help You"

which I build all aspects of my health. I can be healthy in mind, body, spirit and emotion, because I go to sweats and because I pray.

I do many things to be healthy but I always start with prayer. I walk every day. I have changed my eating habits and eat less sugar and fat. My portion sizes are smaller, about half what they used to be. I am a "doggy bag" customer when I eat out.

But these actions are just floating on the surface of my day. They are things my body does, steps it takes to be physically healthy. In many ways, these actions are easy. They are easy because the deep down driving force is grounded in prayer and tradition.



My day starts with prayer. I light the smudge and pray to the four directions, to the ancestors, people, animals and sacred sites. I pray to the Creator and to Mother Earth. I start my prayer by giving thanks. I am thankful for the

Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

blessings of Bob, my family, my friends, my health, my home and my community. Then I ask for help. I don't ask to lose weight or be skinny. I ask for help to be a person with good health so I can take care of my family. Being thankful and asking for help sets the stage for me to look at all moments of my day in a positive, humble way.

Over and over, I am amazed at how prayer and going to sweats affect my life. They say that if you pray over water, it changes the molecules. With prayer, water molecules are moved, are changed into something more spectacular. I smudge and pray over my blood sugar monitor, my files of paperwork, my computer. I pray before every meal, blessing and improving the molecules that go into my body.

LEARNING TO SING, LEARNING TO CRY

When my mother said to me, "The sweat lodge might help you," she wasn't sure what a sweat lodge was. During that time, I think my mother was experiencing an awakening of our people. Three Paiute men from Bishop went to Wyoming to learn the sweat lodge way. They brought back the tradition, taught us to focus only on our prayers and sing with all our hearts. They taught us it is okay to cry in the darkness and high heat, that by the steam and tears, we will be purified.

I thank those three men (who have now passed away), and all elders and medicine men who work to keep our traditions and ceremonies alive. I think of them when I stand on the ridge of Chalk Bluffs, at the base of Mount Tom, or at any sacred site.

I go to these places to gather medicinal plants and basket making materials. Before I harvest, I offer tobacco, burn sage,

9: "The Sweat Lodge Might Help You"

sing and pray. I feel an instant connection to Mother Earth, the Creator and my ancestors.

I gently cut the willow branches, smell them, put them in my canvas bag. Time is slow and focused. Gathering is not an act of numbers. Gathering is a meditation, like a prayer.

Each sprig of sage, leaf of tobacco, branch of willow is precious. I gently cut the willow branches, smell them, put them in my canvas bag. Time is slow and focused. Gathering is not an act of numbers. Gathering is a meditation, like a prayer.





THE BEAUTY OF BEADWORK

Doing beadwork is also like a prayer. Beadwork doesn't just happen! It starts with a good heart. The tension on the thread, the motion of pulling, going back and forth, giving and taking, is like a dance. It shows what is going on in your heart: Be in a good way. Eat right. Don't harm anyone. Keep the yard clean. Be humble and generous. Harbor no resentment. Put your life in order, like the order of the beads. Create beauty from the tips of your fingers. The finished piece of beadwork reveals your heart.

EXPERIENCING MIRACLES

Long before I found out I had diabetes, I was praying and going to sweat lodges. When I developed diabetes, one of the first things I asked the doctors was, "Can I go to traditional sweat lodge?" The doctors didn't know the answer. But I knew I could not be healthy without the traditional sweat lodge.

After my first sweat, I felt dizzy. I learned to eat a small snack before I went and to drink lots of water. Sometimes I test my blood sugar before I go in, to make sure it isn't too low. I know if I get dizzy during the sweats, I can get permission to leave. I never stopped going to sweats. I go every Monday.

If I miss a sweat, I can tell right away. Small events seem overwhelming. The protection of the ceremony seems to be missing. Life seems a little harder. I seem to lose inspiration for my beadwork.

And so, with diabetes, and even in 105-degree weather, I go to sweats. This tradition, coupled with prayer and visiting sacred sites, keeps me protected. Sure there are difficult times. Life isn't rosy. But if I fall, I don't fall so hard. I am able to look at my problems with purpose and clarity. I am able to look at my beadwork and see the hidden pattern, the flow of color, the miraculous finished piece.

Prayer, sweat lodge, ceremonies, gathering and creating beadwork all set me up to experience life from a sacred place, to experience miracles.

Thank you, Mother, for your wise words.
You were right.





Wit & Wisdom

I asked myself:

What do I need for my spirit?

What ceremonies, traditions,
and art will help me?
Who can teach me?

What can I do every day that will
nourish my spirit? How shall I
begin? When shall I begin?

