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# **A Christian Perspective of an Ojibwe Sweat for Women**

**Carol Z.A. McGinnis, Julie Ogemaanungokwe Smith**

## **Abstract**

It is a rare privilege to be invited to participate in a Native American Ojibwe sweat and I was fortunate to experience this as an all-female event with other counselors from across the US. As a pastoral counselor who comes from a Methodist Christian worldview, I thought it may be helpful to share my perspective with other counselors who may work with Native American clients who engage in this type of religious experience. Oftentimes we have difficulty in finding “common ground” from which to connect with clients from different cultures, and this experience helped me to see how our shared view of the Creator was such an opportunity. My intent here is to write from a position of honor and respect for the Ojibwe tribe and the Anishinaabe people, who were gracious in inviting our group to this sacred event.

**Keywords** [Anishinaabe](#), [Christian](#), [multicultural](#), [Native American](#), [Ojibwe](#), [sweat lodge](#)

We began our journey to the sweat lodge by stopping at the local medicine man’s home where we met with the woman who would be our facilitator, or Water-pourer, and receive instruction about what was about to occur. The medicine man’s wife and son had made themselves available to answer our questions and provide context for the sweat so that we would understand what would be happening. To begin this conversation, we presented tobacco to our hosts one-by-one as a customary gift to demonstrate that we appreciated the learning usually reserved for members and descendants of the tribe. The medicine man’s wife invited us to eat fresh fruit and drink as we began our learning of this important event.

A large abalone shell with burning sage was passed in a clockwise fashion around the room to provide each participant with the opportunity to cleanse ourselves of any negative influences. As a group, we had become accustomed to this practice, which was experienced at the beginning of each day when we gathered in a circle to learn more about the Anishinaabe culture. As before, I was able to approach this practice from my own worldview by praying internally to the God of my understanding for wisdom and humility. As participants in an Institute for Education offered by NBCC International, a division of the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) and Inner Wisdom Counseling, Inc., this sweat was a continuation of previous learning that had included medicine bag and drum making as well as interaction and lessons from many learned individuals.

## **At the Sweat Lodge**

Arrival at the sweat lodge location provided a much clearer idea of what we were about to experience. Not far from the road was situated a very low hut-like structure that was covered with tarp intermixed with a leather-like fabric. This fabric was tied very tightly to the framework, held down where it met the dirt on all sides by large stones and tied securely to the poles to

create a wide, round structure that was only a few feet high and not more than 15 feet wide. One door was visible at the front of the lodge, which faced a large fire area that was about 8 feet wide. A short wall of rocks surrounded the fire area on the three sides that were not facing the lodge, giving an impression of a direct route between the fire and the lodge of just a few feet. The ground below the lodge was indented, making it clear that we would be crawling down into the depression when it was time to get started.

With 18 women planning to participate in this activity, the sweat lodge looked too small and fairly scary. We looked at each other with uncertainty as our Water-pourer brought everyone branches of red cedar and directed us to begin removal of the smaller branches. She reassured us that there would be enough space in the lodge for everyone and tasked us with collecting the smaller branches into piles, with the darker side of the leaves facing upward. Once a few of us had collected a small pile of these small branches, the Water-pourer asked us to begin laying the small branches in a path around the fire and the lodge in a clockwise fashion in a stem-to-tip fashion. She explained that this path will be what we would follow to enter the lodge. The symbolism of the cedar in their culture represents not only the female, but also a good boundary of protection that would keep all of us safe from negative influences.

As we reassured ourselves through the laying of the cedar branches, the medicine man's son worked as our Firekeeper, continuing to stoke a large fire. This fire was going to heat the "grandfathers," or large stones, that would be brought into the lodge to generate the energy for the sweat. It was at this point that I found myself reviewing my own beliefs about the Creator as specifically God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit with power in and over all things. The use of the tree, the fire, the stones, and the earth all seemed poetic as I considered their significance in my sacred text of the Bible: Christ's path of branches upon His triumphal entry (Matthew 21:8), the Pentecostal fire (Acts 2:1), the potential of the rocks to shout (Luke 19:40), and the earth as belonging to the Lord (Psalm 24:1; 1 Corinthians 10:26).

I thought to myself, "How beautiful to have the opportunity to experience this alternative view of our Creator God," and made up my mind that I was going to participate despite inherent possibilities for disaster. Despite the insanity of trusting my life in the hands of 18 women and a 16-year-old boy out in the middle of nowhere of Minnesota, I felt drawn to understand this ritual that had survived for this native people for so many years. Although we share a different history, I had learned about the connection between the Anishinaabe and their spirituality that cannot be separated one from the other, and this understanding fueled my trust in the process of communicating directly with the Creator so very close to my own heart.

## **Gender Roles**

We had been advised that women who were "on their moon," or menstruating, are not permitted to join in the sweat, but all of us were either "exempt" or at a time that permitted everyone to participate. According to the natives on this reservation, women are traditionally able to refrain from all work when they are "on their moon," and in the past had to rely heavily on the men and other women to take care of daily activities and work in those weeks. This reminded me of Old Testament teaching about women who were considered "unclean" during these times of the month with prohibitions for being touched in that time (Leviticus 15:19). It occurred to me as I

stood in line to enter the sweat lodge that we have certainly lost something of value in disregarding gender differences that had previously helped to solidify interdependency and strengthen community.

Traditionally, gender roles in the Ojibwe culture were clearly defined in a matriarchal society that respected women as decision-makers and honored partners in the family unit. Modern influences have changed this somewhat, yet gender roles seem to still play a part in Ojibwe ceremonies. For example, each gender often has specific songs, dances, and rituals that represent a broader view of men and women that is rooted in honor and respect. Earlier in the week, we had learned that husbands and wives will stand when their partner is dancing to show support and respect at Powwow celebrations. Although drums are often played by men at the Powwow, there are circumstances when women play them, and our sweat was one such experience. Our Water-pourer had noted her preference to conduct sweats exclusively for women and that she would not facilitate a co-ed version, despite the fact that many people do. Individualism seems to be prized nearly as much as adherence to the “old ways,” and we found it difficult to break many rules. This orientation certainly did help us to prepare for the sweat that seemed to have more structure than other ceremonies that were shared.

Once the cedar had been laid inside the lodge, and the fire was burning at a rate that was satisfactory to our Firekeeper, we were invited to follow the Water-pourer into the lodge, carrying our towels with us as instructed. Prior to the sweat we were asked to remove all metal jewelry and glasses that would run the risk of burning our skin. I could not find the heart to remove my wedding band and took the risk of keeping it on. We were also asked to remove our shoes and any underwire bras, which would be potentially hazardous. Barefoot and nervous, we walked the cedar path that we had constructed in a clockwise fashion that brought us around the fire and sweat lodge and into the path that led to the doorway. We had all been instructed to wear long skirts, which made the entry a bit difficult because we each had to crawl in on our hands and knees. As I got closer to the small doorway I noticed that it had two flaps tied above it and realized as I hunkered down to fit that we would be closed in from the outside.

## **Inside the Sweat Lodge**

Inside, the ground was cool to the touch and tamped down to eliminate any loose soil. Our Water-pourer was situated to the immediate right and she directed us to crawl in to the immediate left, where we each followed the outer wall of the lodge until it brought us around to the farthest possible point. Each woman did the best job possible of sitting back against the canvas wall and pressing up against one another to make room. Sitting on my bottom with my knees up and feet pulled close to my body, I noted the location of the pit in the center of the lodge, which was about four feet wide and less than two feet from my toes. All of the women entered the lodge, with the medicine man’s wife ready to enter and sit in front of the flap “door” when it would be closed.

Sitting nervously around the fire pit in that low, covered lodge, we were reminded of a meaningful story we had been told from a long time ago, when the Indians had been in a time of sorrow and seven grandfathers had provided wisdom to help them survive. This meant that we would have seven stones brought into the pit every time the door would open, with a total of 28

stones and four “doors” before the ceremony would end. Arranged like sardines in this very small, enclosed space, it occurred to me that the earlier recipe for disaster I had imagined in my head was not even close to what I now saw as a real possibility.

What if someone falls into the pit? What if the fire creates too much smoke and we suffocate? How can 18 women have enough oxygen in this little space? How can we get out if the lodge is pitch black when the door closes? These, and other rational questions, were suddenly broadcast loudly in my, and presumably everyone else’s, mind as the first 10-inch stone was brought in.

Our Firekeeper brought the first 10-inch stone into the doorway with a medium-sized pitchfork and held it steady while our coordinator, Ogemaanungokwe, lifted it gently with two large antlers she had been given. Our Water-pourer gave direction for its placement in the pit, creating a firm foundation, with each red-hot stone in the shape of a turtle. Once a stone had been placed in the pit using the antlers, one of my fellow peers in the lodge had the job of sprinkling ground cedar on it, and another touched it briefly with a braided length of sweet grass. A more experienced peer spoke in Anishinaabe to welcome the stones with “boozhoo” and other words I did not recognize. Instantly, the lodge was filled with a rich aroma that was both comforting and warm, and my anxiety lessened as the red-hot stone pile grew.

## **It Begins**

It was so pretty to look at the bright red surface of each stone that twinkled like starlight when the cedar and sweet grass were added. We were all transfixed by the beauty of this process until the seventh stone had been placed and it was time to close the door. The medicine man’s wife deftly rolled inside the door without ceremony and shut the door with the inner flap. Simultaneously, the outer flap was closed by the Firekeeper and secured so that no light could get inside. Quickly, even the red of the stones had winked out and we were in total darkness, feeling the warmth of the pit and the presence of each other. In that moment I reminded myself that this was a sacred event that had been repeated for hundreds, if not thousands, of years and that we were going to be okay. Of course, I did consider the fact that we were all counselors, and that our immediate reaction to fear and uncertainty might be to listen in calmness rather than shout out in fear. At this point we were committed, it would take enormous effort to untangle the neatly arranged seating arrangement, and I wasn’t about to chicken out now.

As it turned out, the Water-pourer had a soothing voice that cut through the growing anxiety of the dark, and it was remarkable to feel the shared womanhood of the lodge when she began to speak in her native tongue. She thanked the Creator in Anishinaabe and then switched over to English so that we could gain strength and understanding from her words. The Water-pourer invited everyone in the lodge to share a prayer, beginning with the last person to enter the room, instructing us to indicate that we were finished by saying thank you in either Anishinaabe using “Miigwech” or English. We knew that we could ask for help at any time by saying “Asemaa”, which means “tobacco,” and prepared ourselves for whatever sharing might be appropriate. What was particularly beautiful about this activity was the invitation to pray according to our own faith. The medicine man’s wife took time in the dark to state softly that she knew we may not share Anishinaabe beliefs, but could participate in a way that would be meaningful to us.

Until this point, I had internally prayed to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and deeply appreciated the invitation to share at a level that was personal. Since the lodge was full, we were told that about five people would be able to pray before the opening of the next “door” so we began immediately after the Water-pourer did her duty and poured a hefty dose of cedar water onto the stones waiting in the pit. Steam instantly filled the lodge, making it difficult to breathe. Our water-pourer took this moment to begin singing, and I concentrated on the sound of her voice as I told myself to relax and breathe in the warm, heavy air. A woman sitting two or three spaces to my right had lit a pipe at that moment and I felt myself beginning to worry again. Would we be able to breathe with both steam and tobacco smoke?

Resting on my faith in God the Creator who had in His wisdom created the beautiful Anishinaabe people, I let myself trust in this process, these women, as a matter of conviction. We are taught that trust is the cornerstone of our profession and here I was, learning again about the risks that are involved in the act. Trust is difficult enough without adding the prospect of fire and smoke in a very small space, yet these women had taken the same risk and believed that I was capable of keeping my head and being there with them. As a Christian, this took my breath away because it reminded me of the love that Jesus has for us, trusting that we will reach out to Him and strive to live according to His example. Sitting in the dark, kept inside by a young man I had only met a few hours ago, I found the strength of my faith navigating me once again toward my Savior, who has taught me what it means to love and appreciate clients who continue to give their trust to me in the counseling session.

## **First Door**

By the time five people had prayed and we had heard a few songs, the door was opened and we were surprised at how quickly the air cooled and the steam escaped. One woman decided that it would be best to leave before the next batch of stones were brought in, and I appreciated the “get out of jail free” card that her action afforded me. Now that one of us had decided to leave, it was suddenly a bit easier to stay and see how the heat would progress.

Again the red-hot stones were placed carefully in the pit, cedar and sweet grass were applied, and the door was shut. Needless to say, 14 stones are much hotter than seven. Anishinaabe words were spoken as the cedar water was poured on the stones again, and the lodge was again filled with steam and tobacco smoke with a much hotter temperature that pressed against us. My brow began to bead with perspiration and I had to concentrate a bit more on keeping my breathing slow and steady. Five more women spoke up in the dark when it was their turn, praying for peace, understanding, and healing for themselves and others. One woman asked for forgiveness, another prayed for an end to an unspoken issue, and a third asked the Creator to look into her heart with a few minutes of silence before saying thank you, or *Miigwech*, and passing the invisible baton. At this point, while passing blueberries around the circle to eat, we were told a story about a sick man who had come to a village and been healed by a medicine woman. I don't recall all of the glorious details in this sacred story but remember that, after repeated healings, the man decided that it would be best for him to leave and return to the woods. To repay the woman, the man went to see her and thanked her for her kindness. “In return for the healing that you gave to me,” he said (I'm paraphrasing), “I am giving you all of the knowledge you will need to heal your people,” and then turned and began to walk back into the forest. When he

turned away from the village, he turned into a bear. This story was very meaningful on many levels, and I could not help but be struck by the similarity to parables in my faith tradition that provide many levels of understanding and instruction. Very powerful indeed.

## **Second Door**

At each door, some women did choose to leave and, as each woman crawled past, I noticed that the rest of us would reach out to touch her in a gentle, caring way. In what seemed to be a uniquely feminine dynamic, we asked each other how we were doing as others left and spaced ourselves out a bit more now that we had a little more room to maneuver. The next round was certain to get even more uncomfortable and I had not had a turn to pray. At the very least, I thought, we have each other. Our sense of community was getting stronger now that we understood how the heat would prove a challenge, and I was feeling confident about our ability to get through it together.

Twenty-one stones are much hotter than 14. When the door was shut, we felt the added heat like it was a new barrier in the room. The steam made by the water filled our lungs in a heavy, burdensome way, and I marveled that the Water-pourer could speak to us and the Creator with such confidence and love. We were given different objects to pass from the door to the Water-pourer, always going in a clockwise manner, feeling our way with soft instructions from each other. “This is a pipe,” the woman to my right said softly, “and my left hand has the bowl.” Her voice was so comforting to me and I felt connected to all of the women as she and I exchanged the object and I passed it on to my left.

I couldn't help but feel the palpable love in the heavy air that now seemed a comfortable essence in this small space where we were huddled together in the dark. Silently, I wondered about this as it pertained to my faith tradition as a Christian. How too might have the disciples depended on each other, alone in the dark after Christ had left them? Did they speak to each other as we did now – softly, gently, guiding each other with faith? And how important were the women who had stayed with him as He died and then later discovered that the tomb was empty? The female emphasis of this ceremony was palpable as we breathed and listened and prayed in the dark, and I could not help but wonder how gender plays out in other cultures. These and other thoughts stayed with me as I focused on my breathing and listened to the pain and conviction of the other women as they prayed.

## **Third Door**

When the third door opened, even more of us got out. After the women exited the lodge they were instructed to stay seated against the outside wall so that they would still be connected to the rest of us inside. It comforted me greatly to know that these sisters were still included in the ceremony, and that we who were inside were not completely separated from them. We helped the hot air escape by flapping our towels and repositioned ourselves to have even more room to spread out. Several of the women had found a way to lie down during that last round, and were doing so now with their towels over their heads.

This was going to be the last door. I wasn't sure what to expect, but when it had become time for me to pray I had asked God to take away the mark of ostracism, or shunning, in my family and to have it end with me. This prayer was genuine, and I felt compelled to stay with the sweat through the last round, which represented a closing of a higher realm when spirits would be escorted back home. This last round was meaningful to me because I associated it with the tangible workings of the Holy Spirit who is with us through grace at all times. For me, this last door would be my opportunity to reflect on the physical aspect of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26) and I wasn't about to miss it.

My lungs were clear and my skin had already cooled when the last seven stones were brought in. These last red-hot stones seemed just as beautiful to me as the first, with sparkling light flickering across each surface as cedar and sweet grass were applied. Earlier, one woman almost had her hair catch fire, and I once again thought of how that kind of disaster would be difficult to manage in such a small space. There was no time to fret about possibilities when the door was shut and we began the last round of singing and prayers. We had passed cedar water around the circle in earlier rounds, in clockwise fashion, but there never seemed to be enough to make it all the way back to the door. This time we agreed to abstain from the water as it was passed in a big ladle so that other women could have some to cool their throats.

The heat from twenty eight stones was almost too much to bear. It was difficult to relax enough to breathe and the heat felt as if it were going to give me sunburn. I turned my face to the wall and felt the ground next to the tarp wall with my left hand to get a sense of coolness. I thought about the furnace of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that had burned so hot that the workers who threw them in were incinerated (Daniel 3:22), and was comforted by the faith in our Anishinaabe leaders who now had our full faith and trust. Perspiration ran from my face, arms, and chest like water, and I felt as if I were being embraced by the Holy Spirit whom I now imagined in the form of a big, powerful bear.

As the heat built and the steam filled every inch of space in the lodge, we heard the now familiar Strong Woman song being sung by our coordinator, Ogemaanungokwe. Her voice was clear and strong, and I wondered at her ability to breathe with such confidence in the midst of thick, hot air. The drum was almost as loud as her voice as she sang with a mixture of what sounded like heart-felt joy and pain that I believe every one of us identified with as women, as mothers, as wives and lovers, sisters and aunts, and as children of our Creator God. Our Water-pourer did her job in pouring the remaining water on the stones, and we all breathed slowly and carefully while we sweated furiously to the cadence of the song. I felt that I was part of a larger community, and at peace with the realization that my life was centered in God, the Creator of all things. I didn't want it to stop. Our Water-pourer waited for the end of the song, said some words in her native tongue and then called for the door to be opened one last time.

## **Fourth Door**

The door did not open. There was a pregnant pause before she called again, emphasizing in English that she wanted the door opened. I did not panic or have concern but smiled at the delay that could not have been predicted. It is in those times of uncertainty and doubt that we really get to see what we are made of, and I was pleased to learn that all of us had reached what seemed to



be a place of calm and no hurry. Outside, we heard the Firekeeper's voice, shouting, "I'm coming," before the flap finally opened and all at once we felt the heat begin to subside.

It was difficult to move. As I crawled out of the lodge, taking care not to get wrapped up in my skirt and topple into the smoldering fire pit, I wondered about the experiences of other people around the world who practice their faith in similarly sacred settings. I was also in awe of how powerful that trust and community can be at a time when hate and violence seem to be pervasive throughout the world. Our Firekeeper helped me rise up out of the lodge opening, and I thought of the amount of trust these strangers had had to bring all of us into their culture and to share the mystery of their faith despite our religious differences and a history of painful oppression. There was no reason for us to be trusted in such an intense circumstance, yet they did it anyway. I was humbled by their gift. Such faith in others was what I wanted to learn.

We milled briefly around the entrance of the lodge and checked in with one another with hugs and encouragement to make sure that we were all okay. It was now after midnight and we had entered the sweat lodge at about 10 p.m., so it became clear that the ceremony had lasted for about two hours. Above us was the bright evening sky, where the big dipper was directly above the lodge. The fire had dimmed, and we were all so drenched with steam and sweat that we could literally wring water out of our clothes. It didn't take long for those of us who had brought a change of clothes to do so, and in no time at all we were back in the car heading back to our less dramatic, yet cozy lodging. Tired and exhausted, we were quiet, lost in our own thoughts, which were rich with emotion and steeped in gratitude. In the car I thought about this experience as it is understood by the Ojibwe tribe, and marveled at our shared focus on how the Creator is evident in our daily lives. This ceremony of earth, wind, fire, and water had helped me to find a new way to connect with my own faith as a woman, an academic, and a member of a larger community, and for that I was, and am, deeply appreciative.

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