

Columnist Comes Clean About Sweat Lodges **By Lou Lombardo, LMT, NCTMB**

“The sweat lodge utilizes all powers of the universe: earth, and the things that grow from the earth: water, fire and air.”

- Black Elk, Lakota elder

Recently my wife and I were just sitting around in our bathing suits in a small hut with 20 other people pouring out sweat while listening to some inspiring sounds. Before this column gets an “R-rating”, let me explain.

Last week we attended a Summer Peace Gathering offered by a group known as the PeacEWeavers at their 250 acre Thunder Mountain Retreat Sanctuary just outside of Bath, NY.

At the beginning of the 1991 Persian Gulf War this group of people was formed to promote greater peace within their lives and in the world.

Their mission is to foster greater peace and wellness by offering gatherings, healing works and retreats

The activities they offered were truly enlightening and allowed us to become more aware of ourselves and our values and showed how we can interact positively with the world around us.

One of those activities was a very powerful ceremony known as the sweat lodge.

Contrary to popular belief, the sweat lodge is not the place where “Welcome Back Kotter” students stay when they come to town for their class reunions.

A sweat lodge is a small circular hut constructed of tree branches covered with boughs, blankets or skins. Hot stones are brought in to create a “sauna” effect to induce the body to sweat- thus the name “sweat lodge”

The sweat lodge ceremony has been practiced in some form by many cultures in the world.

Hippocrates, a Greek physician born in 460 BC held the belief that the natural healing process for the body should include rest, a good diet, fresh air and cleanliness. He once stated, “Give me the power to create a fever and I will cure every illness”.

Over 2000 years ago the Romans used their heated baths as a way to unwind and relax.

The Finnish sauna evolved from ancient times as a means to promote cleanliness and renewed strength.

Our ancient ancestors established the thermal bath as a means to facilitate cleanliness, purification and relaxation.

The most popular form of sweat bathing among Native Americans was the hot rock method.

The tribal elders didn't just establish it as an opportunity for the younger tribesmen to sit around "sweatin' with the oldies". It was an opportunity to cleanse and heal the body, mind and soul.

The hut-like structure itself would never be OSHA approved. First of all there's only one door. And there are no electrical outlets inside. And the HVAC system is totally inefficient.

Air conditioning is nonexistent. Ventilation consists of people twirling towels outside the door. And the heat is supplied by hot stones that have to be manually brought in using pitch forks.

But, that aside, the experience was absolutely breath taking- literally. It is this setting that Maria and I found ourselves this past week.

The ceremony consisted of four rounds.

Greg Lynn Weaver, the Spiritual Director of the PeaceWeavers, patiently and compassionately led us through the entire process.

He explained that the sweat lodge symbolizes the womb of Grandmother Earth and the heated stones are symbolic of endurance in the same manner in which the Earth endures.

Greg Lynn made all of us feel totally at ease as he explained each step. I, myself, was ready to throw in the towel after the first round because I was having problems breathing in the hot air. The manner in which he encouraged me and the reassurance that anyone could leave anytime eased my apprehensions. I am truly grateful that he gave me the strength and encouragement to stay for the entire ceremony.

During the first round seven hot rocks were brought in and placed in the pit in the center of the lodge. Gregg Lynn explained the significance of each rock.

This was followed by ceremonial drumming and singing which lasted about 20 minutes. Then the door was opened and fresh air was let in.

The second round involved each of the participants declaring the negative qualities we wanted to expel from our bodies during the sweating process and the positive qualities we wanted to take on as well.

As each of us made known our choice, water was splashed on the rocks, creating steam that permeated the air and created a hot, humid atmosphere conducive to manifestation of that part of the ceremony.

This lasted about 25 minutes. At the end we all exited the lodge and immersed ourselves in the nearby lake to cool off.

Upon re-entering the lodge we were given water to drink to help replenish our body's supply. The third round allowed each of us to call upon whatever deity we wanted to assist us in seeking whatever changes we wanted to make in our lives and in our world.

Many of us prayed for our families and our loved ones who might be going through some hard times. Some also prayed for those individuals who have negatively impacted the cause for world peace.

Once again water was splashed on the rocks as we each declared our wishes.

This step took about 25 minutes as well. At the end the door was opened once again and fresh air was "blown in" using the swirling towel method.

The last round was brief and involved more ceremonial songs and drumming.

I left the lodge totally exhilarated and truly moved by the sacred ceremony in which we had participated.

The major physical effect of the sweat lodge is the cleansing of undesirable toxins from the body. Bacteria and viruses cannot survive at temperatures much higher than our own body temperature of 98.6 degrees.

The high temperature also stimulates the endocrine glands that release negative ions into the air, inducing relaxation and alertness.

Equally important is the symbolic effect of casting off all our negative qualities and making an effort at improving our own lives and becoming more at peace within ourselves.

The PeaceWeavers are an extended community of people from different cultures and spiritual practices. More on those practices in my next column.

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