

Annual Elders & Traditional Teachers Gathering

Orientation Manual

Compiled and written by the class of:

**Working with Elders
NATV 2000**

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Purpose:

The course *Working with Elders* has taken different formats since the inception of the annual Elders and Traditional Peoples Gathering in 2002. The Gathering was created by the Native Studies Department to facilitate the student's learning and understanding of how to listen, learn and work with Elders.

In 2009, the Elders Gathering Board, which includes the instructors of NATV 2000 and a variety of staff and students at the University of Manitoba, asked for the creation of an Elders Gathering orientation manual as one of the assignments of the course. The manual will now be used as a teaching tool for the course and a guide for the Elders Gathering Board to build upon.

The following manual has been written and compiled by the 2009 NATV 2000 class (listed on the front page). *The information in the manual is not inclusive.*

The Elders Gathering Board is thankful for their hard work and contributions. Miigwetch.

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Who is an Elder?

Who can become an Elder?

An Elder can be either male or female. When someone is seen as an Elder by the community, gender is not a factor. The knowledge, experience and understanding they have is what is seen and respected. New Elders can be chosen by existing Elders who see something unique in them and help bring them up as an Elder. As well as growing into the role from inquiring knowledge and experience that can help others. Many people who have become an Elder do not see themselves as fitting the role, even though they are seen so by others and are approached by others for guidance and knowledge. An Elder can be someone young or old. If something unique or special is seen in a child they may be reared and assisted to become an Elder at a young age but their role may not fully come into effect until they have experienced enough and learned enough to have the full recognition. It is also possible for someone to blend into the role of being an Elder without fully realizing it until someone refers to them as an Elder. Many Elders will not say they are an Elder even though they accept the role they have been given.

How does someone become an Elder?

A person becomes an Elder by spending the majority of their lives devoted to their community and the people that they are in contact with. Living and demonstrating respectable qualities and characteristics of an Elder, is a task that often begins at a young age and continues throughout a person's life. Becoming an Elder involves a life time of studies; with oral teaching being taught by teachers who are already Elders. Future Elders usually have one mentor that they study very closely with but occasionally can have three or more mentors as teachers (Ellerby, 2005, p.20).

The life long journey that is endured following the path to become an Elder is very in depth. It is only once a person has become a master of their craft and has the respect of the people in their community that they will become an Elder.

Who is a traditional Elder?

Traditional elders are recognized and respected because of their outstanding achievements who are principle oriented individuals in a community or a nation. They usually do not hold office; they stand out in the crowd, selected by people recognized for their leadership within the community life. They are knowledgeable within the tribal customs, traditions, language, spirituality, land, herbal medicines or governing structure. When an Elder does talk to you, there is a feeling of love, kindness and compassion. They have also made the great journey from the mind to the heart.

For instance, Dean Linklater (or Mountain Peak), of the Nisichawayasik Cree Nation, speaks of his Grandfather who lived to be 120 years old. Even though he did not fully understand at the time of what his Grandfather had shared with him, in his heart, he knew it was genuine, kind, comfortable. Most of what Mountain Peak's Grandfather shared were teachings. Mountain Peak is now or only beginning to understand or grasp what was shared with him. He is only now beginning to realize all the diamonds given to him by his Grandfather. Mountain Peak states, "Every piece of knowledge is like diamonds." His grandpa did not speak much, but when he did say something to him, his simple thought provoking words would echo in his heart, mind, body and soul. His Grandpa would say, "If you keep moving, you will keep moving, if you slow down, you will slow down, ok now go play." It took Mountain Peak 20 years to understand what his Grandfather was saying to him, which was to keep moving in all areas of life; to move with mind and imagination, body and soul. Mountain peak recommends, "You cannot keep stagnant, to live is to move, to move is to rejoice, to rejoice is to love." So we as people need to keep moving. He also states, "Never stop desiring in life, become all that you can

possibly be in a life time. We may think that we understand what has been shared with us.”

However, Mountain Peak adds, “I think you do not understand until 20 years from now, but remember this, it is the Great Law of Movement that my grandpa spoke of, and there are a total 49 Spiritual Laws of the Universe.”

What is the role of a Contemporary Elder?

The Contemporary Elder brings all of the values and wisdom that traditional Elders possess into the day-to-day life of our modern world. The many modern challenges we all face regularly offer multiple opportunities for the contemporary Elder to help and guide individuals and communities. These Elders provide important counseling skills whenever they are invited to visit people immersed in various stressful modern institutional situations such as hospitals, prisons, universities and schools. Contemporary Elders provide important teachings, during board meetings and Elders’ conferences, to help others more deeply appreciate how aboriginal individuals and communities are trying to heal themselves. The healing that they provide to damaged and recovering people is through helping them by bringing the past into the present and showing the way for the future seven generations. Contemporary Elders are highly educated and therefore are well equipped to provide useful advice and careful guidance to a wide range of important organizations such as Band Councils, Legal Services, Health Services and Social Services. Contemporary Elders are particularly effective at conflict resolution with their ability to calm aggravated parties and support constructive dialogue by bringing traditional teachings into areas of dispute. Contemporary Elders have all of the strengths of traditional Elders but they are very much in tune with everything that we face in the modern world so that they are able to bring serenity, guidance and control to all of the modern challenges that so often can leave all people feeling desperate and not knowing where to turn. All modern people can find truly valuable support and help by spending time with and listening to an Elder.

Spirituality & World Views

Aboriginal people are diverse through language and cultural traditions. However, there is a universal holistic understanding and connection of world views and a spiritual way of life among most Aboriginal communities. In this way, there is a shared relationship between Aboriginal people, spirituality, teachings, laws, sacred ceremonies, beliefs, values and traditions. Elders are not homogeneous in their approaches to the spirit world or world views. This diversity in the way Elders view the spirit world, and the connection they have, are acknowledged and expected as this spiritual relationship is shaped in many ways. These influences include family traditions, teachings given to them by their mentors, and individual personality. The work of the Elder is also guided through a personal relationship to the spirit world, ceremony, and prayer. Elders are seen as the workers of the Creator. In terms of a healthy spiritual based lifestyle, “they teach it, they talk it, and live it” (Ellerby, 2005, p.10). Fundamentally their ways of life, teachings, and ceremonies are the same, but may vary among different clans.

Prayer and Worship

Several medicinal plants are used in various spiritual ceremonies. The four main plants include Tobacco, Sweet Grass, Cedar, and Sage. When the plants are burned smoke rises and ascends into the air, and with it, prayers are carried into the spirit world and given to the Creator. These plants are viewed as a connector for Aboriginal people to communicate with the Creator and creation. Before prayer, smudging must occur so that the individual may communicate with the Creator in a respectful manner. Smudging creates a doorway to talk and connect to the Creator. This is done by allowing the smoke of the medicinal plant to wash over one’s body in the following ways; clean your hands so that you may do the Creators work, clean your mouth so that you may speak only good words, clean your eyes so that you may see only good things, clean your ears so that you may only hear good things, clean your mind so that you may rid

yourself of all negative thoughts and clean your body (Laramée, 2009). Worship and prayer are also performed through ceremonies such as the Pipe Ceremony, Sweat-Lodges and Pow-Wow. These ceremonies, among others, provide spiritual teachings and guidance.

Spiritual Values

Principles for life emanate a great respect for both the spirit world and Mother Earth. The spiritual principle of living with an attitude of respect for the land and all that it is connected to is a common belief held by Aboriginal people. This respect fosters peaceful and harmonious relations with all creation.

Spiritual Connection to the Land - Mother Earth and all of Creation

The gifts of medicinal plants have a spiritual connection to traditional Aboriginal people. It is believed that a person is given a gift to use a specific plant for physical healing, which in turn helps spiritual healing. Physical elements given by the Creator to Aboriginal people include the sun, air, water, fire, trees, plant life, grass, thunder, wind, rocks and animals like the Bison and Eagle. These gifts are also connected to Aboriginal people through a spiritual sense in that they connect individuals to the Creator and are part of a spiritual family.

Spiritual Representation of the Medicine Wheel

The circle or medicine wheel is used in many forms within Aboriginal communities including healing circles, praying circles, and talking circles. The circle symbolizes the unity and interconnectedness of all creation. The Medicine Wheel can be divided into four separate sections, which can have many meanings, concerning emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual concerns.

Spiritual Connection to North American Origin

Many Aboriginal people possess a creation story that speaks about their origin and belonging to North America. The gift of being placed in North America has a spiritual connection with Aboriginal people. Being both physically and spiritually supplied with all of

their needs through Mother Earth, Aboriginal people have a spiritual duty to respect Mother Earth and those who follow, know that they have been entrusted to do so by the Creator.

Interacting with Aboriginal Elders: Protocols, Customs & Courtesies

What should I know about working with Aboriginal Elders?

It is important that an individual who will be, or wants to be, working with an Aboriginal Elder has “an understanding of culturally appropriate ways of showing respect, non-verbal communication, sharing gifts, use of tobacco, and other cultural protocols [...]” (Ellerby, 2005, p. 22). Therefore, it is essential that one be open to learning new concepts, behaviors and beliefs and not judge an Elder through ‘Western’ eyes.

Questions directed towards Elders should be asked with openness and sincerity. It is important that one understand that an Elder’s response may not always be the answer that you are looking for. However, it is important that one understand that self-reflection is a vital part of the process; you may get just as much out of what they do not say, as what they do say.

In ‘Western’ society, it is often customary to take notes when listening to someone sharing knowledge. However, it is important to be aware that many Elders believe that note-taking is not necessary, and that attention should be concentrated on listening. It is important that when in doubt about such protocols it is acceptable to simply ask. It is important to ask upon meeting, rather than interrupting an Elder while they are speaking.

Another important protocol that is often disregarded is that of joining a sharing circle. It is important that one understands it is vital that a sharing circle not be broken once it has been made. Please consider that some circles will last a long time and therefore it is important that one be willing to devote such time. (R. Shuttleworth, Personal Communication, February 11, 2009).

How might I make a good first impression when meeting with an Aboriginal Elder?

A good start to any positive relationship is “a handshake denoting respect...[and] is always appropriate upon greeting Elder” (Ellerby, 2005, p. 24). Nonetheless, it is important to be aware that a ‘Western’ handshake is often too firm and can cause discomfort or pain for an Elder. An appropriate handshake should be light and gentle, almost like a passing of the palms.

Another important practice is communicating to an Elder with a soft and quiet voice. Of course, it should be mentioned that there are many different teachings depending on which Aboriginal Nation or community one is from. What a Cree Elder may practice might differ from that of a Mohawk Elder. If at any time you are in doubt, simply ask the Elder.

How might I show an Aboriginal Elder respect?

As with any professional an appropriate amount of respect and assumption of ability and skill should also be shown to an Elder. It is important that one acknowledge that “Elders are highly qualified individuals, usually with decades of experience often both within and outside institutional settings” (Ellerby, 2005, p. 23). Throughout the life of an Elder, he/she has earned an enormous amount of respect and appreciation among the communities with which they have worked. Therefore, it is important that an Elder be treated with this respect.

Always bring Tobacco when approaching an Elder, but it is important to understand that you must have a reason for offering Tobacco. Tobacco offering is a contract between two separate parties, as well as showing meaning in both receiving and giving. By presenting an Elder with Tobacco, you are showing your understanding of the request and the successive answer. It is important that one never directly place tobacco in an Elder’s hands, rather it should be placed near the Elder, giving him/her the chance to accept this offering if he/she can help.

A gift/honorarium should be presented when requests are large or will take a long time. A gift is an exchange for an Elder’s time, and can range from Tobacco, moose hide, food and money. While the gifting of money has become very controversial, it is important to be aware of

the many personal expenses Elders face, such as travel expenses and purchasing materials for ceremony and caring for their helpers. In terms of how much one is expected to offer, the answer is simple: whatever one can afford.

Usually one will get a good idea of such protocols, customs and courtesies within a few minutes of a conversation with an Elder. Trust your instincts, you are probably right. Following such protocols, customs and courtesies shows respect and will aid in providing a positive learning, communicative and receptive environment between all parties. It is important that one understands that Elders share knowledge with great care, and therefore, it should be understood that this knowledge is not a right, it is earned.

What Happens at the Elders and Traditional Teachers Gathering?

What is a Teaching Circle?

The Teaching Circle is a fundamental activity for preserving the history and knowledge of Aboriginal people. Those who possess traditional cultural wisdom can share their personal reflections through stories, and it is these stories that capture the essence of a teaching.

The teachings speak to a variety of “themes and lessons” which may not always be obvious at first. As well, the teachings are interpreted and understood on an individual basis, and those interpretations are dependent on the state of the listener. The “themes and lessons” carried out through story can be categorized by seven traditional teachings, or otherwise known as the guidelines for living a good life: *Respect, Honesty, Bravery, Truth, Wisdom, Love, and Humility*.

The focus of a Teaching Circle is to connect people through communication. By creating the form of a circle, people are connected *equally* in a spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical manner. It is well accepted that communication is also a significant source of healing.

What can I expect at a Workshop?

Each year, the Elders speak to the theme of Gathering. They will be grouped in panels of 3 or 4 Elders to show respect and represent the connectedness among teachings. These panels, including the different teachings within, will also represent the poles of a tipi and the foundation of that connection. Like the poles of a tipi, teachings intertwine to provide strength and support for the community. In practice, each Elder will listen to the others' stories and support those stories with their own. This oral tradition keeps the teachings alive and also presents an engaging experience for those involved.

The workshops are free and *everyone* is welcome. All workshops may begin with a traditional smudge, and after the Elders have spoken, there will be time for a question and answer period.

The workshops will be a great opportunity to learn first hand about the traditional teachings of Aboriginal culture. There is great emphasis on respectful listening; it is therefore a blessing and a great honour to be in attendance of an Elder's teaching.

Listening to and Understanding Traditional Teachings

"You are where you are meant to be, when you are meant to be, according to the Creator's plan" (Myra Laramee). Everyone present at this Elder's gathering has been drawn here for different reasons. Over the next two days you will be exposed to different ideas and teachings of the Elders. Keep in mind each Elder may have a different method of teaching or speaking about traditional knowledge. And what is taught may not be of importance until later in your life. The Elders have come to share their experiences, knowledge and wisdom. Some ways to help you listen and understand these traditional teachings are: coming with an open mind, having respect for the Elders, and acknowledging the importance of personal interpretation of the traditional teachings.

Being Open

When coming to listen to an Elder, it is important to come with openness and with a willingness to let go of one's own personal thoughts and biases. One of the techniques used to open one's mind is smudging. A smudge is usually made by the person using it and is most often a combination of Cedar, Sage, or Sweet Grass. In the ritual of smudging, participants are invited to use the smudge to cleanse their minds, ears, mouth, eyes and the air around them. In doing so this helps the participants to think good thoughts, hear and speak good things, and see the good in everyone. It enables the individual to clear one's mind and provide room for the traditional teachings.

Respect

“Maybe you'll learn something. There's only one price I ask you to pay—and, I'm sorry, but it's a very high price. I ask you to pay the price of attention!” (E. Benton-Banai, From “Wisdomkeepers,” 1990).

Respect is a mutual aspect in learning and understanding the traditional teachings of the Elders. During personal one on one communication, it is important to not speak more than the Elder so that they feel that they can talk and share. Once respect is seen, they will open up and disclose the stories and traditional teachings that they have learned and that they believe you will learn from. When you have respect for the Elders then you will be more able to retain the knowledge they have shared. However, the knowledge that you retain from these traditional teachings will depend on one's own personal experiences. Another part of respect is learning to take in the teachings that are being shared without needing to take notes. This is done in respect of oral tradition and a belief that you will interpret the stories the way you need to.

Personal Interpretation

Each individual has a unique history and experiences, which influence their interpretation of the stories being shared. There are many different teaching styles and traditional teachings. Each Elder approaches them differently. It is up to the individual to interpret these teachings the way they need to (Ellerby, J, 2005, p. 17); everyone will get something different out of the teachings. “You will get out of this what you are meant to get” (Myra Laramée). You may think that you have not learned anything, but certain things that the Elders share will come back to you in the future. Only then will you realize the importance that the teachings have had on your life and the world around you.

References

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