

## **My First Sundance**

In the summer of 1997, I arrived in Pipestone, MN after an arduous 3 day Greyhound bus ride. Luckily, I had my new friend and soon to be Sundance brother, Chief Harry Goodwolf Kindness. We had met earlier that year while on tour with Dennis Banks, one of the founders of the American Indian Movement, to raise awareness for Leonard Peltier's clemency. Chief Harry Goodwolf Kindness had been a lifelong friend of Dennis Banks and often joined him during his many campaigns. While on the road, Dennis Banks would sit with us every evening and teach us Native American songs, singing and drumming into the night. By the end of the tour I was invited to join them at the annual Pipestone Sun Dance Ceremony. This would be my first experience with the Sun Dance ceremony and lead me on a course towards self exploration..

The Sun Dance, *Wiwányang Wačhípi*, is one of the 7 Rites of the Lakota people but is observed and practiced annually during the summer by other Native Americans of the Great Plains region. The Lakota people say they were given these 7 Rites by the White Buffalo Calf Women during a time when they had lost their connection to the Great Spirit and were out of balance with Mother Earth. This ritual utilizes song, dance, fasting and other teachings to bring the individual and community into a renewal of Life. The actual ceremony lasts 4 days but there is much preparation before the ceremony even begins. The Sun Dance can be one individual or many dancers vowing to represent the community. The ceremony is essentially a recognition and a giving thanks to the Sun and the gifts of the Great Spirit for their lives, family, and community. During the ceremony the Dancers vow to give up food and water. I was told that this is out of

respect to the Spirit World as those in that realm do not eat or drink so one must sacrifice this act to be initiated into the Spirit World. As I found out this also plays a major role in staying focused on the dance and prayers.

The Sun Dance drumming, singing, and whistle blowing also played a major role in maintaining the energy and focus I needed to make it through this ceremony. The constant drumming created a trance like state moving an energy force through my body with every step I took. It was as if I could feel the heartbeat of Mother Earth coursing through me. Andrew Neher's clinical research showed that drumming impacts the electrical activity of the brain while also influencing muscular patterns and subjective emotional responses. In his book *Healing Sounds*, Ted Gioia says, "The drum is referred to as the "shaman's horse" and is often seen as facilitating magical flight through the air or a journey to the mythical center of the universe." (2006, p. 58). The songs I had learned earlier that year helped keep my mind focused on my prayers. When hearing these songs again at the Sundance it was like meeting an old friend bringing me back home. Upon arriving at the Sun Dance campgrounds I was gifted an eagle bone by which then I had to find help creating my own eagle bone whistle. When properly carved this eagle bone whistle makes a high pitch screech similar to that of an eagle's call. All the Sun Dancers hold this eagle bone whistle in their mouth while dancing so with every exhale it simulates this eagle's call playing off the rhythm of the drum. This rhythm play between the down beat of the drum and off beat of the whistle helped synchronize my mind and body. Felicitas Goodman found in her research replicating shamanic trances

using rhythm patterns that 15 minutes was the typical amount of time to elicit an altered state of consciousness.

I know now, through my experience at the Sun Dance, that everything in the universe is dancing. I can still hear and feel these songs on a molecular level. It is as if these songs, rhythms, and vibrations are engraved into my DNA. "The healing force of music inevitably must come from the combination of these two elements: one stretching out into the community and surrounding environment, the other reaching into the body itself." (Gioia, pg 42). But I do not think one has to Sun Dance to receive this gift of Love and Life. One only has to open their heart and mind and step away from the everyday mundane distractions for just one moment and make their own ritual. Go for a walk, read a book, listen to music, sing a song, spend time in nature, cook together, eat together, dance together, be together.