

HOW THE SPIRITS HEALED BIRD FLU

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This account is the truth of what only I experienced during these sacred ceremonies. Others also had powerful interactions with the Spirits, but I can only write what I know to be truth, not of others. I am deeply indebted to Eagle Man, Ed McGaa, for opening the door to these Lakota ways which feed my spirit and made these ceremonies possible.

“These Spirits are different than anything that humans know. They are strange looking. That’s why the ceremony must be totally dark. If you see them, you might die or go crazy.”

This is how Grandfather Mike explained the mystery of the Yuwipi Ceremony I had just experienced. He issued his invitation on the last day of Sundance, when I explained how ill I was. “Bring me 402 tobacco ties and I can heal you.” With this oblique reference to his Spirit Guides, I knew he was offering a Yuwipi. I was ambivalent about accepting his invitation, however. I had been invited by several other Medicine Men, but I knew the power of this ancient ceremony, and I wanted to be extremely careful about who I worked with. Nonetheless, Grandfather Mike was my Sundance Chief. When I returned home, I prayed with my C’anupa (Sacred Pipe), but failed to receive either confirmation or warning, so I just let the matter go.

Several months later, in October, I have a dream about Grandfather Mike. He and I are sitting on the ground in total darkness – no fire, no lights, no C’anupa – and we do a ceremony together. As he rises to go, he looks at me one last time, “You’ll be all right now.” And then he is gone, and the dream ends. When I awake, I know that this is the Yuwipi and the confirmation from Spirit that I had been seeking. I call Grandfather Mike and recount my dream.

“Yeah. I also came to you in my dream last night. You were near this big mountain [Pikes Peak] and then there was a white building with a bell tower [the old schoolhouse near our ranch] and there was a beautiful tree that was bent like it was dancing [a Ute Prayer Tree near the ranch]. Usually the Spirits protect me, and don’t let anyone near me that way. Yes, it is time for the Yuwipi. Come next week.

“I’ve been really sick since Sundance” he continues “and almost took my Spirit Walk. I asked all the Medicine Men on the reservation to come and heal me, but they wouldn’t come. I guess they’re afraid of me. Finally, my sons did four Sweat Lodges and they healed me.”

“Bring me 402 tobacco ties, and four tobacco flags with the colors of the four directions. Also, you need to bring your Pipe and a gift for the healing.”

“What can I bring you that you need?” I want to be certain that my gift will be appropriate.

“Well, I need some guns.”

I am mute for several minutes, and this silence speaks volumes about my aversion to guns.

“We need guns to hunt for food. While we were at Sundance, someone broke into my trailer and stole all my guns. Hunting season is coming, and without guns we won’t have food for the winter.”

I’m sure that he can hear my sigh of relief. “Okay, I’ll bring you some guns.”

“This healing will take two ceremonies, so we will do the House Ceremony for two nights.”

With this, we end our conversation on the preparations, and I begin one of the most incredible experiences of my life.

Fortunately, I live in the high mountains of Colorado and have several friends who are avid hunters. They help me acquire the coveted hunting rifles in just a few days’ time. Making the tobacco ties, however, requires three days of hard work. I first pour the tobacco into a wooden bowl, then hold it to the four directions and ask each of the Grandfathers to fill the ceremony with light and love. I know that like a sponge, the tobacco will hold these prayers and our ceremony will be protected from any negative energies who will be sure to avoid the light and love. I then place a tiny pinch of this tobacco into each of the 402 two-inch squares of red cotton cloth, tying each one at the top, then binding them together into one long rope with cotton twine.

My friend, Elizabeth, invited us to hold the ceremony at her house near Porcupine. We arrive late in the day and I immediately set about preparing the meat and vegetable soup for feast after the ceremony. An hour later, we arrive at Grandfather Mike’s home a few miles away. Pungent smoke from the Sweat Lodge fire fills the air as we walk to his humble trailer. I had filled my C’anupa at Elizabeth’s, asking Creator to surround Grandfather Mike with love and support his work for the ceremony.

“Ah, good, you brought your Pipe.”

I am always delighted by Mike’s deep bass voice, and find it curious that such resonance emanates from his tall, gaunt body. He sits on the edge of the couch and begins to smoke my Pipe. I am amazed at his concentration, or *waableza* as Black Elk called it, in spite of the blare of the television, children jumping on the second couch, a teenager talking on the phone, and Lolita cooking the evening meal while visiting with her daughter. In the midst of this chaos and cacophony, my Pipe veils Mike in wreaths of silvery smoke, his every puff sending small circles like sacred hoops. The C’anupa’s bowl is empty of every tiny flake of tobacco in a matter of minutes. This seems a miracle in itself, as my Pipe is notorious for requiring a good set of lungs and at least 30 minutes of smoking time. Electricity runs up and down my spine as he smokes, indicating the presence of Wakan Tanka’s spirit, or *wocangi*, the whole time.

Mike returns my C’anupa to me, and adds.

“Ah, good. You understand these ceremonies, and it makes it easy to work with you.”

“Shall I bring your gifts for the ceremony now?” I quietly ask. Mike nods his assent.

My husband Harold and I hurry to our car and gather the coveted rifles and shells. What a gift is given us in seeing the joy of Mike and his sons as they enthusiastically examine each of the rifles. It’s like Christmas in October, and we are Santa Claus.

When the excitement dies down, we all proceed to the Inipi, or Sweat Lodge, where we will cleanse ourselves before the Yuwipi. Mike’s Lodge is quite large, and its dome shaped structure can easily accommodate about 35 people. Many people join us in

the darkness, but I can't see how many or who they are. Mike holds an Inipi every night and everyone in the community is welcome. As we settle ourselves in the darkness around the Stone Cradle, the Fire Keeper brings in 75 large gray stones that have been heated until they glow red hot.

"*Boy, this is going to be a Warrior Sweat!*" I catch myself worrying, and work hard to discipline my thinking into prayer and not on the searing heat that I know will come with the first ladle of water. "We will only do three doors, and the fourth door will be the Yuwipi," Mike instructs as the singing begins and he pours the water.

Almost immediately, small blue lights emanate from the stones and dance around in the darkness. Mike is praying in Lakota, and there are many voices speaking in hushed tones. I don't realize until later that these are the Spirits talking to Mike.

After prayers to each of the Sacred Directions, the door to the lodge is opened and we all gulp in the crisp night air, preparing ourselves for the next round, or "door." At the end of the third door, we file out into the chilly darkness and dry our wet clothes with a towel. We then climb into our cars for the drive to Elizabeth's house. She and her family have been busy moving all of the furniture out of her modest living room and covering the windows with black plastic and blankets.

My prayer ties and flags have been purified in the Inipi, and they are now placed to create a man-sized rectangle in the middle of the room for Mike's altar. A large coffee can is placed at each corner and the flags (attached to a red and blue staff) for the four directions are held in place in the can with dirt. An assistant unrolls half of the prayer ties to enclose the rectangle. An extra coffee can is placed in the center on the west end, and Mike attaches an eagle head and other sacred items to the staff. Wakinya Sna Mani, Mike's son, smoothes gopher dust at the base of this staff and traces symbols in it with his finger. He then places three rattles on the west side, then ties eagle bone whistles to the remaining staffs.

"My son Mike (*Wakinya Sna Mani*, Sound of Distant Thunder) will do the Yuwipi tonight as he is learning the ceremony. This is only his second time, so watch, and you're going to see something interesting."

Now Grandfather Mike and his assistants completely cover Wakinya with a star quilt until he resembles a mummy. Methodically, they secure it with a rawhide thong around the neck, chest, waist and feet after first binding his fingers behind his back. I marvel that Wakinya can even breathe at this point. When they lay him face down in the center of the *hoshika* or altar, I am sure that it must be virtually impossible to breathe.

"*Creator, have pity. Surround Wakinya with white light and love and help him with this ceremony.*" I quietly send a prayer to Wakan Tanka to help my little brother.

Harold and I are instructed to sit just outside the altar on the west side. About thirty other guests have filed into the room, and we all sit cross-legged on the floor around the perimeter of the altar. It is a tight space, only about eighteen by twenty feet, so we are only inches from the prayer ties outlining the altar. The singers, four young men, occupy the northeast corner. As soon as Wakinya is face down on the floor, the single light bulb in the middle of the room is unscrewed, and the singing begins.

Almost immediately, flashes of blue light emanate from the center of the altar and begin to dance through the air. Rattles fly around the room, their rhythmic clatter sounding over my head and in front of me. As the crescendo of sacred songs increases, the eagle bone whistles also take flight and their piercing sound sends chills up and down

my spine. The Lakota say that the eagle bone whistle is the voice of the Creator, and the *wocangi* that I'm feeling lends credence to this teaching.

"Wow! Look at those lights! This is incredible!" I catch myself with these thoughts, and struggle to discipline mind back to prayer.

Soon, I hear Wakinya's muffled voice speaking to someone low to the floor and close to his face. His head is only about eighteen inches from where I sit.

"Celinda, the Spirits want you to stand up and tell them what you want."

As Wakinya instructs, I struggle to my feet in the darkness and gulp a deep breath.

"Tunkashila, Grandfather, at Sundance I was very sick. When I went to Grandfather Mike, he told me that the Spirits would heal me with this Yuwipi. So, please Tunkashila, have pity on me and heal my lungs and my liver and the tumor that I have. Tunkashila, I also ask that you bless my brother Wakinya Sna Mani and all my Lakota brothers and sisters here so we may do the work of healing the Sacred Hoop." I end my request with the traditional Lakota blessing, "Mitakuye Oyasin! (We are all related.)"

As I finish speaking, the rattles become agitated, and now they are touching me all over my upper body, especially my chest and my abdomen. After a few minutes of this concerted activity, Wakinya addresses me again in his muffled voice.

"The Spirits thank you for your prayers. They say that they will heal you. In return, they would like you to come when the grass begins to grow and give a Wopila Ceremony."

When I agree to this, the singing begins again, and Wakinya continues a dialog with several other strange voices while the rattles work on me.

"*Hau Kola, Wopila Tanka!*" I silently thank the Spirits as they work.

Then the strange voices and the blue lights travel around the room, talking to each of the participants. They are speaking Lakota, and each person quietly responds to them as they are addressed. I silently promise myself to learn the Lakota language. Suddenly, a cell phone rings over near the singers, and its vibrant light goes sailing in a crazy zig zag pattern up to the ceiling and around the singers before someone manages to grab it and toss it through the curtain and into the kitchen.

A final song is sung, and when the lights are turned back on, Wakinya is sitting on the star blanket and the leather thongs are in a neat ball at his feet.

Grandfather Mike hands me his two-foot long ceremonial Pipe, and instructs me to light it and pass it around the circle. I take several deep breaths, and trying hard to draw the flame into the bowl. I struggle for a few minutes, quietly praying to the C'anupa for its help before I get a feeble wisp of blue smoke. After four quick puffs, I pass the C'anupa to my husband Harold who is seated at my left, and then the Pipe travels around the room.

"I can see that your lungs are not working good. The Spirits have shown me the herbs I am to heal you with. Tomorrow morning we will begin." With these words, Grandfather Mike reassures me that the healing will start right away.

We linger with Elizabeth over coffee the next day, and return to Mike's by mid-morning as he requested.

"Here, drink this. It's the medicine for your lungs. I was up at five this morning and went out and gathered these herbs. We'll go this afternoon and get the other two."

I pass the mixture under my nose and inhale its earthy aroma. I savor the pungent brew as I slowly sip from the steaming cup.

“You feel okay? Sometimes this can make people sick.”

“No. It’s wonderful and I love the taste.”

“Okay, you finish that. I have to go to town and attend to business.”

We sit outside Mike’s trailer, basking in the bright autumn sunlight and watching Mike’s grandchildren as they play. Suddenly, a familiar sick feeling comes over me as I recognize the energy of the pneumonia that made me so ill for many years. I understand that this is the medicine at work, purging my body of this old energy. I crawl into the back seat of our car and doze fitfully as my lungs heal. Harold busies himself with the young men who are preparing for tonight’s Inipi.

It is late afternoon when Mike returns from town, and I am still feeling wretched. Mike pulls up a chair and we chat for a while in the late afternoon light.

“The Spirits have told me that this Bird Flu will be very bad, maybe kill 60 million people. They want us to bring Elders from the four corners of the world and do a ceremony. If we do this, they can heal the Bird Flu and maybe only a few thousand people will die.”

“Mike, thank you for telling me this. It has been heavy on my heart. Just recently, the news reported that over 8,000 birds fell from the sky at Lake Qinghai in China and that the virus will soon spread to humans. Thank goodness we can do something to help. I will talk to Woody at the World Council of Elders, and we will make the arrangements for a Bird Flu Yuwipi.”

My mind is still on this wonderful opportunity to heal this pandemic when Mike continues.

“Do you see this scar on my finger? It’s from a snake bite. I was gathering this Wakinyan medicine one time and a rattlesnake was wrapped around its roots. They do that to protect these sacred plants. The Spirits taught me all about healing with herbs, and I know over 60 different plants for healing. There are only certain times of the year when the Wakinyan medicine can be gathered. I will be back in a while.”

With this, Grandfather Mike heads off up the hill behind his house to gather this most sacred medicine for my healing. I had thought that it would take him hours, but he returns in about half an hour and explains how I am to use the remaining herbs.

“Mitakuye Oyasin!” I breathe this brief Lakota prayer as I crawl into the Inipi, honoring this sacred space as the womb of Mother Earth. I still feel awful, and pray hard as the water is poured on the mound of red-glowing stones in the center.

“Unci Maka, Mother Earth, have pity on me. Please take the spirit of this sickness from my body and harmonize it so that I can be strong for the ceremony tonight.” A flood of *wocangi* flows from my hands into the earth, and I instantly feel better.

Afterwards, we all file into Elizabeth’s small living room for the second night of House Ceremony. Tonight, Grandfather Mike will be the Yuwipi man.

“Yeah, you’re going to see a lot of Spirits tonight. They’re going to pound on the door as they enter so that you’ll know they’re here.”

In a matter of minutes, Mike has his altar laid out and his assistants are binding his fingers behind his back.

“Tighter. Tighter. Do it so that it looks like it’s cutting off the blood.” Mike instructs the young men as they lace his fingers together with a leather thong.

Soon he is wrapped in a star quilt and lying face down in his altar. Someone unscrews the light bulb, but doesn’t remove it as they did the night before.

Again, the blue lights flash and move around the room as soon as the singing starts. Within a few minutes, the rattles and the eagle bone whistles follow course.

As rattles fly over me, small bits of material fall onto my head and shoulders, and I think that the Spirits must be sprinkling us with rice much as we do for a wedding. Suddenly, there is a heavy banging on the door. The pounding is repeated again and again as the room fills with strange voices while Spirits flood into our small space. Some of their voices are like hoarse whispers, some are a high nasal pitch, and others are deep and nasal pitched. I can’t figure out how the Spirits open the door, as people are packed into the room and at least three are seated right in front of it. There is no room for anyone to stand up, much less move around.

“*Wow! This is amazing! How fantastic!*” Again, I have to catch myself and channel my mind back to prayers instead of wonderment.

As I stand with my palms open and outward, the Spirits began to doctor me. Small, warm hands are placed on my chest starting on the left side. I count up to ten different hands on my lungs, but am distracted as the rattles trace over my kidneys and liver ever so gently. Someone’s head is pushing against my hands, and when I allow it to pass upward between my palms, I feel thick silky hair with a part in the middle.

“Tunkashila, Wopila Tanka!” I thank the Spirits as they work.

Slowly I become aware that I can no longer hear Grandfather Mike’s labored breathing from within the blanket. Just then, the woman next to me whispers in my ear.

“They have taken Grandfather Mike! Pray hard!”

I catch my breath in order to listen again for Mike’s breathing. His head was only inches from me, but now I can hear nothing.

“Tunkashila, have pity on us. What will we do without a Spiritual Interpreter like Grandfather Mike? How will we live? Who will help us to talk to the Spirit World? Have pity on us! *Wakan Tanka, oshi mala, ye oyate, wani wicinca!* Creator, have pity on us so that our people may live!”

Black Elk taught that this is the most powerful prayer we can send, and I breath it over and over as tears stream down my face for the return of this powerful and beautiful Medicine Man.

The singers send their hearts into their voice, the rattles soar around the room, and blue lights flicker everywhere. It seems like hours of prayer before I hear Mike take a deep breath.

“Wopila Tanka! Thank you, Creator.” I have never felt so thankful in my life. The Spirits have returned Mike to us.

In his muffled voice, Mike explains that the “Spirits took me flying over the badlands.”

I can hear the Spirits voices as they now pass around the room speaking to each of the people there. At one point, an owl calls and I can feel the air from its wings as it flaps across the altar and over to the woman in the southeast corner.

Now the tiny hands are gently and firmly pressing me against the wall. They place something large and warm on my left shoulder, and then they are gone. I don't dare to move or touch the object on my shoulder.

When the lights came back on, Mike is sitting cross legged on his neatly folded quilt and the leather thongs are rolled in a tight ball in front of him.

I take a deep breath and finally dare to look down and to my left. There is a perfect ball made from my prayer ties connected to a tail woven from the yellow, white and black prayer flags. This ball and tail are draped over my shoulder. I am still afraid to touch it.

My attention is now drawn to Harold, who is intently examining something between his fingers. We look around as the murmuring in the room grows louder. Almost at the same time, we realize that the Spirits have taken our lonely light bulb, completely crushed it, and sprinkled it over our heads like confetti.

I am still shaking from my experience of actually feeling the Spirits hands and head, and the close call we had when they took Mike. It is difficult to steady my hand when Mike hands the Pipe to me to light. With one easy breath I draw the flame into the bowl! Silver hoops waft toward the ceiling as I take four puffs and then pass the Pipe to Harold.

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Giant, wet snowflakes swirl around the GMC pickup as Tom, Woody, Ove and I begin our journey from Colorado to the Pine Ridge Reservation for the Bird Flu Yuwipi. It is early March, but I am not concerned about getting caught in a blizzard. When I prayed with the C'anupa to fill our journey with light and love, the *wocangi* was strong, so we will be all right.

Instead, I am fascinated by the lacy outlines of the frozen water landing on our windows. They remind me of the recent Japanese video, "Messages from Water." Traditionally, the Lakota have taught of the sacredness of water. *Mini wiconi* literally means "that which gives life." Now the Japanese have developed a technique to show the effects of thought on the development of water crystals. Not surprisingly, "Love" and "Thank You" create the most beautiful of crystals. When we focus our minds on these two intentions, they also create the most powerful ceremonies.

The week before, our Pipe Circle had come together to do just this for the healing of the Bird Flu. When we were all gathered together, I held a wooden bowl of tobacco to the Four Sacred Directions and asked each of the Grandfathers/Grandmothers to come into this sacred herb, filling it with White Light and Love for the healing of this Bird Flu spirit. We then played Sundance songs as each person from the circle took a small square of red cotton cloth and placed a pinch of blessed tobacco into it, praying the whole time. When all of the 402 prayer ties were made, we then placed them at the center of our circle as we prayed with the C'anupa. Each member of the circle took four puffs of smoke and blew them onto the prayer ties. In this way, our entire Pipe Circle, the White Horse Circle, was lending their intentions and presence to the healing Yuwipi that was to come.

Each of these beautiful people from the circle also contributed what they could to help bring Ove from Sweden. He is the leader of the Four Sacred Warriors from the four

nations of earth's people, and is to represent the White Race. We had hoped to bring one of the Mayan priests to represent the Red Race, but at the last moment our funding didn't come through. Now, we can only raise enough money to bring Ove. Through the Pipe, however, Grandmother says that this will be enough. Woody, from Hawaii, will represent the Yellow Race, and our Lakota brothers and sisters will represent the Red Race. The Black Race will be taken care of somehow. All races from the Four Directions will be represented – Black, White, Red, and Yellow – just as the Spirits had requested. This donation of money from our circle for the ceremony is a huge gift. Each of these beautiful people is quite humble, and most work at least two jobs to make ends meet. Most cannot even attend the ceremony with Grandfather Mike, and yet they trust Spirit implicitly and make this sacrifice on behalf of all humanity. They also do this in anonymity – no one will probably ever know how much they have given for the sake of all humans, and the winged ones, on earth.

“Ove, do you have a tradition of the Little People in your country?” I feel a compelling curiosity about these Spirits who will be working with us.

“Yes, we have the Little People and they often come to us in our ceremonies.”

I know that Ove follows the traditions of his Scandinavian and Nordic people. He continues.

“Our little people are gray, and very few people see them.”

My mind races through all of the accounts that I have heard of these strange beings. And I share this information with Ove.

“Clifford, the Ute Medicine man that I work with in the World Council of Elders says that they see them as green. He says that they came to him and taught him all of his healing ways. Frances Densmore, who documented many of the Native American songs and ceremonies at the turn of the century, recorded many of the Ute Medicine Men saying that they learned their healing from little green men. One of the elders of the Lakota told me that they see them as blue, and a friend of mine from Iceland said that they see them as purple.

“As I studied Lakota (Sioux) culture, I found numerous teachings about these Spirit Guides and Guardians, the *Manitoukala*. The Lakota say that our soul lives forever, and that we are in this physical body in order to learn and to grow spiritually. Their word for reincarnation is *kini*, meaning to ‘return to life.’ When a person has finished all of their work in the physical body, they can return as spirit guides or guardians of the earth, and these are who the little people are. Grandfather Mike says that we cannot see them, or we may die or go crazy. At the last Yuwipi with Mike, I felt their little hands and touched one's head and hair. Have you ever seen them?”

Ove is quiet for a moment, then responds.

“Maybe you think about them too much. Maybe you just need to let them do their work.”

“Yes, you're right.” But like a dog with a bone, I can't let it go.

“Ove, did you ever hear about the new research on geckos? Scientists have been intrigued as to how the gecko can cling to any surface, even glass, upside down. They thought originally that they had some sort of gluey substance on their feet, or that they perhaps created a type of suction with their feet, but found neither of these hypotheses to be true. Just recently, they discovered the geckos secret. It is something called Van der Waals force. Geckos have billions of spatulae, that resemble broccoli, on these

microscopic hairs on their feet. These spatulae allow them to literally become a part of any surface on a subatomic level. Their feet actually *become* a part of whatever surface they are walking on! Maybe this is how the little people live within the earth and yet can come out and manifest as physical beings. I had a dream where one of these spirits took me flying within the earth, and then used the root systems of trees as highways to the surface. It will be so exciting to meet them again in ceremony!”

Ove is silent as I finish this last. He has already warned me not to overanalyze, but my mind seems to need a logical explanation. Finally, I honor his silence with my own and retreat into a meditation on the scenery passing by.

Black clouds curtain the horizon all around us as a spring blizzard dances from the mountains to the plains. Nonetheless, we are enveloped in a circle of sunshine throughout the six hour drive to Porcupine as the Spirits work for our safe journey. We arrive at Elizabeth’s late in the afternoon. Tom and I will stay here while Woody and Ove return to Pine Ridge and their hostess Grandmother Marie. My brother Tom has come for this Yuwipi to represent the women and children of the world. We are to do Inipi Ceremony tonight (Wednesday), and also on Thursday and Friday before the Yuwipi.

It is not necessary to present a Pipe to Mike for this ceremony, as the Spirits are the ones who requested the Yuwipi. It is now Friday, March 10, 2006, and we enjoy a leisurely visit with Mike before we all go into the Sweat Lodge. As soon as the door is closed and the singing begins, blue lights emanate from the Grandfathers, the red-hot stones in the Stone Cradle at the center of the Lodge. These lights travel around the circle, flashing in front of each person as the Spirits address them. Sometimes we can all hear the dialog, and other times we cannot.

Spirit addresses my brother Tom, telling him to “listen to the White Woman as she speaks the truth.” I am surprised and humbled to hear the Spirits speak of me this way, and silently thank them for the honor. Now, Grandfather Mike begins to laugh.

“They are calling him ‘Jesus’ (referring to Ove). They like his beard. Other Medicine Men on the reservation claim to bring Crazy Horse or Sitting Bull into their ceremonies. But I brought in Jesus! Yeah, I am the only one who can say he brought Jesus!”

And we all laugh at this joke from the Spirit World. I can’t see Ove in the darkness, but I can hear his laughter as well. It is not often on the reservation that you see men with hair on their face and, obviously, the Spirits are enjoying this novelty. It helps that Ove’s thick brown hair hangs loose clear to his shoulders, adding to the resemblance.

“Tunkashila, thank you so much for this ceremony. Tunkashila, thank you for offering this healing for the people of the earth. Tunkashila, I thank the Wakinya for giving us a safe journey.” It is my turn to talk to the Grandfathers, and blue lights flash and the drum booms at this acknowledgement of the help from the Thunders.

“Tunkashila, I ask for special blessings for Grandfather Mike and for the Lakota people for they have given us these sacred ceremonies. Tunkashila, I ask that you have pity on my brothers and sisters of our Pipe Circle. They are all humble people, and many work two jobs, yet they have been very generous and made this ceremony possible. Tunkashila, have pity and bless them. Tunkashila, have pity and bless my half-side, Harold, for without him I could not do this work. Wopila Tanka! Mitakuye Oyasin.”

When I finish, I cover my face again with my towel to protect it from the scalding steam as Mike pours yet another bucket of water on the Grandfathers. I breathe deeply of the vapors, the breath of Mother Earth, as I silently send my prayers.

“Unci Maka, have pity on me and cleanse my body of all negative energy so that I may prepare for this sacred ceremony. Help me to be like a hollow straw so that Creator’s love may flow through me for the healing of the hoop.”

Blue lights flicker around the stones and strange, whispering voices hold intercourse with Grandfather Mike.

“The Spirits say that this is a big day for the White Woman. The Spirits thank her for her prayers and say that some of them will be returning with her to her home.”

I catch my breath at this last from Mike. Did I hear correctly? Why will they come home with me? Aren’t they going to heal the Bird Flu here tonight? Instead of voicing these concerns, I am overawed and simply whisper, “Wopila Tanka!”

It is a short drive to Elizabeth’s after the Inipi, and we all file silently into her small living room. Clarence and Clyde have been busy covering the windows with blankets and black plastic. All of the furniture has been set out on the porch, and we seat ourselves around the perimeter of the room, on our blankets with our backs to the wall. Mike instructs me to sit in the sponsor’s seat, on the west end of the altar and just behind the center, red and blue staff. Tom sits to my left, and Ove to his left. Woody sits in the northeast corner with the singers. Grandfather has told us through the C’anupa that everyone in the circle represents the Black Race, as we all are descended from those few survivors who came out of Africa 70,000 years ago. Our circle of the Four Races (Black, White, Red, Yellow) of people is complete.

Yuwipi, the Lakota word for “Tie Up,” is the historic term for this ceremony and is certainly appropriate. Grandfather Mike, however, prefers to use the term “House Ceremony.” I wonder if this is due to the American Indian Religious Crimes Act of 1884, when all American Indian ceremonies were deemed a federal crime, punishable by imprisonment.

Mike’s assistants once again lace his fingers behind his back, wrap him in a star quilt with ties around the neck, shoulders, waist, and feet and then place him face down in the altar. The single light bulb is carefully removed, and the drumming and singing begin. Almost immediately, blue lights flash and rattles fly around the room as the Spirits enter.

“Celinda, the Spirits want you to stand up and tell them why you are here.”

“Tunkashila, last fall when I came for my healing with Grandfather Mike, he told me that you said we needed to bring Elders from the four corners of the earth and do this ceremony to heal the Bird Flu. You said that if we didn’t do this ceremony, then as many as 60 million people might die from it. Tunkashila, you said that if we did this ceremony, then maybe only a few thousand would die. Tunkashila, we have done as you asked. We ask that you have pity on us. Tunkashila, we ask that you give special blessings to Grandfather Mike and to the Lakota people for keeping these sacred ceremonies alive. Tunkashila, we ask that you have pity and heal this Bird Flu, so that our people may live. Mitakuye Oyasin.”

When I finish, Mike converses for a few moments in Lakota with a strange whispering voice near his head.

“The Spirits thank you for your prayers. They say that they will ‘blow the flu the other way’ so that it won’t come on the reservation. The Lakota people are already struggling, and they don’t have the medical services that others have. The Spirits will take special care of them.”

There is a prolonged silence, and my heart sinks.

“Please, Tunkashila, have pity on all the people of the world. Please extend your protection to all people. Thank you so much for protecting the Lakota, but please have pity. Wakan Tanka, oshi mala, ye oyate, wacin wicinca!”

After what seems an eternity, the strange whispering voice speaks to Mike again. Then Mike’s muffled voice continues.

“The Spirits say that the world is a big place.”

Again a long silence.

“They say that they will bury the Bird Flu in the earth and cover it with dirt.”

The Spirits again converse with Mike.

“This ceremony is your Wopila for this healing.”

Relief floods through my heart, and tears stream down my face as the Spirits now go around the room, speaking to each and giving healings. A final song is sung, and when the lights are turned back on, Mike is sitting on his neatly folded star quilt and the leather thongs are in a tight ball in front of him. He is strangely silent during the ensuing feast, and gravely accepts our modest thank you gifts for the ceremony. How can we ever give enough for the work that he does as our Spiritual Interpreter? Will the world ever know the work that he does for all humanity, and how much he suffers in order to do this work?