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## The Sweat Lodge: the house of the stone people: Lakota lineage holder Paul GhostHorse gives us insight into the purifying ritual.

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The old Greeks wrote about strange people to the north who would whip themselves with pine boughs and climb into little huts with hot stones to make their bodies perspire. A contributor for Smithsonian Magazine wrote years ago about the discovery in Siberia of structures made from the rib bones of mastodons with piles of stones in each center. In Finland it's called a sauna. Naturopathic physicians call it hydrotherapy. My Lakota grandfather called it Tunkan Ti, the house of the Stone People, or Inipikaga, ceremony to renew the life force. The structure is called "tezi," meaning Mother Earth's womb. Warm, dark and safe, our spirits grow inside the structure, and as we exit we are reborn each time, greeting all of our relatives in creation with the words "Mitakuye Oyasin," or "We are all relatives." It is a "keya," the turtle, as well. Shaped like a turtle with the earthen altar as its head, it represents "Turtle Island," our North American continent, named so from old stories that speak of the Earth coming out of the water on the back of a giant turtle. It is our church, our hospital and our university that we never graduate from. The White Nation calls it Sweat Lodge, but there is so much more, in addition to sweating, that happens inside.

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[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The Stone People Lodge is most importantly a place of purification and prayer meant to heal the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual parts of the serf through ritual. Native families who have preserved the ceremony have done so by suffering through years of persecution. Christian churches were assigned by our Government to run the early concentration camps called Reservations, where food and supplies were denied to those who would not accept forced Christian conversion. My family was one of those who suffered to keep the instructions given to us by the Creator Spirit through prayer and purification. These sacrifices are why we still have our ceremonies today.

The whole structure is gathered and assembled with prayer. Saplings used are spoken to as "spirit to spirit" and "two-legged to standing people," as they are given offerings in exchange for their "robe." Even a song is sung to them to ask for their help. The trees help us willingly; they rarely say "no," and we always remember to thank them. Holes for the saplings are made into Our mother Earth, and into these holes are placed prayer with tobacco or cornmeal. The cut saplings are shaped into a structure that looks like an upside-down basket (see photo this page). In the center of this, a small pit is dug to receive the hot stones. When this pit is opened,

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it is said that Grandmother is listening to our words, thoughts and intentions for this sacred place.

Our stones are gathered far away in the West where the lava has spilled onto the earth. Offerings are made to these (stone) People, and we listen to them with our spirit to find the ones who are willing to come with us. We are reminded that all things are alive and have consciousness according to their nature. It may seem strange to talk to a stone. But, try it sometime when no one is looking. Sit quietly with a stone and listen closely. It may take a few attempts to quiet your mind and connect spirit to spirit. See what answer your mind reflects from this part of creation that will still be here long after we are earth again.

We awaken and recreate fire in a pit called "old man four generations." The fire itself is called "oehunkeshni," or fire without end: It is a spirit and also very much alive. This spirit enters the stones and paints their face red and is brought into the "inipi" (place where we renew our life force) through these Stone People. The structure is covered in blankets instead of traditional buffalo hide. Water, sometimes infused with plant medicines, is offered to the hot stones. The water gives them voices as they hiss in their own language. The old songs are sung in the same order they have been sung for a thousand years, like a very old, worn and familiar path. A spirit or angel shows up as it has for a thousand years and asks, "Grandson or Granddaughter, what is it you need?." "We ask for health and help for our People!" "Wichozani na wokiyehtelo."

Those who were taught this ceremony, passed down through generations, were taught without any thought of personal gain. There is never any charge for this ritual, as it was given to the two-legged for free and must be given freely for the help of one's people. Families and extended families will sweat together. Men and women who are unrelated rarely sweat together as they are a distraction to each other. traditional people do not sweat naked in mixed company. Men and women who have committed themselves to the responsibility of learning this way give years of service to learn the songs, the prayer and the ritual. Everyone who leads a Sweat Lodge has someone they are responsible to so that no one is on their own to do as they please. There are many who pretend to know these ways and exploit people. There are some who mean well but may hurt people through their own inexperience. East of the Mississippi, there are fewer traditional native people due to the ethnic cleansing that took place here generations ago and the prejudice that still exists today. Fortunately, President Jimmy Carter passed the Freedom of Religion Act for Native People in 1978, and now prayer does not have to be practiced invisibly.

If you have the opportunity to participate in this ceremony, always be respectful to that family and nation's tradition by following their guidelines of conduct. The rules are in place for important reasons that may be understood later. If you cannot find your local inipi, then jump in a sauna and do your hydrotherapy. Purify yourself and keep your prayer inside and private. Know that Spirit hears all and knows your intention, no matter where you are.

Hetchtu, Mitakuye Oyasin. As I have said, we are all related.

Paul is the son of Lakota elder Buck GhostHorse and intercessor for the Sungleska Oyate Sundance in Washington state. He follows the traditional teachings of his family.

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