

## **First Nations University of Canada**

### **Cultural Protocols**

The following is a description of some of the ceremonial activities that will take place during the Pathways Annual Gathering and the protocols for participating in each of them.

#### **Traditional Feast**

At a traditional First Nation feast it is customary for men who are chosen by the head server, to serve the food to the women and children.

When you enter the place where a feast is being held, you will notice the food is assembled at the centre of the room. Guests are asked to sit in a circle around the food.

Before the food is served an Elder will say a prayer to bless the food and all present will bow their heads. After the Elder is finished saying the prayer, and when everyone is ready, the men will serve the food. Never refuse food. If you are served more food that you can eat at the feast, you must take your leftover's home and eat them later. Food is not to be wasted, especially not food that has been blessed at a feast. Once the food is served, everyone is invited to enjoy what has been put before them.

#### **Smudging**

When you smudge you are preparing to communicate with the "Great Mystery".

Smudge your mouth so that only good medicinal words will come out when you speak;

Smudge your eyes so that you will be allowed to see the "medicine road" (the traditional teachings and values) that have been placed before you;

Smudge your ears so that you will capture only good medicine (good words) and that negative talk will not be allowed into your universe; and finally

Smudge your entire body to signify that you as an individual have attempted to come before the Creator as you were born; in purity and simplicity.

#### **Pipe Ceremony**

Before entering a pipe ceremony, remove your shoes, your jewelry, your watch and your glasses. It is customary for men to join the Elder(s) by sitting in the inner circle where the pipe is being passed (here, women do not usually sit in the inner circle although they do so elsewhere). Here, women sit in the outer circle, and while they do not smoke the pipe with the

men, they may pass a cigarette between themselves. Those who don't smoke can still take the cigarette and pass it on to the next person.

After you sit down an Elder's Assistant will offer you the smudge (smoking sweetgrass or sage). Use your hands to cup the smoke over your face as if you were washing. Continue to cup the smoke in your hands and waft it over your body.

An Elder will open by saying a few words of welcome and he will ask if anyone else wishes to speak. This portion of the ceremony is usually in English.

The prayers will be spoken in a traditional language(s), and during the prayers you must sit quietly to listen and pray. The smoke that rises above our heads represents our prayers to the Creator.

Pipe ceremonies usually last an hour. They are usually solemn occasions when we gather to pray for something or someone in need. While they are solemn, they are also very nourishing, spiritually.

### **Sweatlodge**

Sweatlodges may be mixed, for men only, or for women only. The lodge is prepared prior to the sweat by the Elder who will conduct it.

You should wear light clothing that covers but does not constrain you (a flannel nightgown is common for women). Remove all artificial items such as jewelry, watches and glasses before you enter the sweatlodge.

As you enter the lodge, the Elder(s) will direct you; it is extremely dark and you will not be able to see. While the lodge is very hot, it will not hurt or suffocate you; it is a very spiritual and safe place. The Sweatlodge facilitator ensure no-one is harmed; sweats are not meant to test strength or bravery.

Sit in a circle at the periphery of the lodge. The Elder(s) will begin the prayers and pour water on the hot rocks placed at the centre. The Elder(s) may burn sweetgrass, sage or cedar during the sweat and will use a feather to fan the steam that rises.

The sweat is a place to pray or seek spiritual guidance, strength or focus. Some people experience powerful sensations in a sweat; other hear unusual sounds. Such an experience is a gift.

The Elder(s) indicate the sweat is over. It is customary to crawl out (without looking back) when leaving the sweatlodge. You have come there to leave your troubles and your negative ways with the grandfathers. Looking back may signify that you regret leaving them behind so one must never look back.

After everyone has changed into their clothes, a feast may be held, often in the home of the one who asked for the sweat. Food is brought by everyone. The feast is a time for sharing a meal together, and socializing.

As First Nations peoples, our way of sharing knowledge has largely been an oral tradition. For that reason, a great deal of thought went into the production of this written pamphlet. We consulted a number of people, especially our Elders about writing them down in the European way, what is best shared by people through the spoken word. At the same time, we are aware of the need to adapt in a changing world. We are also aware that many of our youth, due to circumstances entirely out of their control, are not knowledgeable about their culture or their ceremonies.

Furthermore, some people are too shy to ask other about the proper behavior at First Nation ceremonies. The consequence of that shyness, and that silence, is that many people simply do not attend the ceremonies at our college and elsewhere.

Producing a pamphlet that describes what we do at ceremonies in this part of Saskatchewan, was done to foster a greater sense of belonging among all those who wish to join us. We do acknowledge the fact that First Nation ceremonies differ throughout Canada and North America, but we hope those differences won't deter you from joining us in our ways of communicating with the Creator and with each other.