

Who we are as Anishinabe: Mike Swan

Uses of Asemaa (tobacco)

In last month article, I mention that “These lessons will have to be learned in person by going to ceremonies, teachings, and listening to others who possess that knowledge. All it takes is a little faith and asemaa, ask around and give someone asemaa (tobacco) to ask for that help or direction.” Many people or many tribal people do not know how to ask and offer asemaa (tobacco).

Tobacco has been abused in our culture. When it is used in a ceremonial way, it is obvious why it has been used in making offering and to convey the sincerity of our purpose. As we hold the tobacco in our hands, it begins to take on the energy of our prayers. When we leave the tobacco, when we let it out of our hand, the energy departs and is magnified by everything around it. It is a very sacred act. Tobacco is often left when something is taken such as wood, or water, if game is killed, or even if a beautiful moment is shared with the land around us.

Used in ceremony, the tobacco offering is made to the fire or to a container at the center of the circle or placed out on the earth. It allows everyone to become involved in the ceremony by bringing each of them in their own way and in their own turn to the center of the circle.

To the Ojibwe, tobacco is the unifying thread of communication between humans and the spiritual powers. The manidog (spirits) are said to be extremely fond of tobacco and that the only way they could get it was from the Indians, either by smoke from a pipe or by offerings of dry tobacco. According to tradition, the Indians received tobacco as a gift from Wenebozho who had taken it from a mountain giant and then given the seed to his brothers.

In almost all facets of their lives, Native people had reason to solicit the spirits for acts of kindness or to give thanks for past favors. Dry tobacco was placed at the base of a tree or shrub from which medicine was gathered, and a pinch was thrown in the water before each day of wild rice gathering to assure calm weather and a bountiful harvest. Before setting out in a canoe, a safe return was assured by offering tobacco on the water. On journeys or hunts, Indian men paused for a smoke and left a pinch of tobacco as an offering when they encountered certain features of the landscape, including waterfalls, misshapen trees, oddly shaped rocks, and lakes or islands said to harbor spirits. When storms approached, families protected themselves by placing a small amount of tobacco on a nearby rock or stump. Tobacco was placed at graves as an offering to the departed spirit. Requests to elders to relate oral traditions or other special knowledge were accompanied with a gift of tobacco.

Before all ceremonies, tobacco is offered to the spirits. The universal method of inviting people to feasts or notifying them of ceremonies was the delivery of a small amount of dry tobacco by a runner sent out for that purpose. When a spiritual person, medicine man or woman, pipe carriers or even elders agreed help another person, they indicated it by taking the offered gift of asemaa

(tobacco), after they are told of what kind of help or assistance that person is asking for, not before being asked.

Another example is when a person asks a spiritual person if they are going to have a sweat lodge. They will tell you, yes, I am going to sweat, but not tell you when. If you want to go into a sweat lodge, you need to ask them that you want to go into the sweat lodge and why, then offer asemaa (tobacco). Then they will tell you when.

Elders must be offered tobacco when you ask them to share their knowledge. Please note that it is very important to be specific in making your request. If the Elder accepts the tobacco s/he is accepting the request and will do her/his best to help you. If they cannot do what you are asking they will say so and not accept the tobacco. The exchange of tobacco is similar to a contract between two parties where the Elder is agreeing to do what is asked and the one offering the tobacco also has obligations to respect the Teachings and the Teacher, thus the protocols which explains the expectations of the host. It is therefore very important that you are specific before handing over the tobacco. It is perfectly appropriate to ask for a referral if the Elder is unable to comply with your request.

When giving tobacco, place it in front of the Elder and state your request. The Elder indicates acceptance of your request by picking up the tobacco. If you hand it directly to the Elder you do not give him/her the opportunity to accept or pass on your request – it takes away their choice. Always speak to the tobacco when making your request, BEFORE handing the Elder the tobacco.

Tobacco can be given in a pouch, wrapped in a piece of cloth or even in the form of a cigarette. The minimum amount of tobacco is the amount needed to use in a Ceremonial Pipe, but a pouch of tobacco is still the most common form. Tobacco is a sacred medicine and only commercial tobacco or tobacco in its natural form (kinikinik) is acceptable. Some people have asked if a mixture of 'healthy' herbs or other medicines can be used instead of tobacco – the answer is NO.

Whatever your views are on tobacco it is still a sacred medicine.