

Reflection Paper: Healing of the Sick

When I was seven years old I got very sick with chickenpox. I was so sick that I was not allowed to go to school for almost three months. The strain I happened to get was one that was very resistant to many medicines available at that time. Because of this and the worry from my family that their first-born grandchild was going to die, my Great Grandmother was called.

Rose was the mother of my mother's mother and one of eight princesses to a Chieftain of a tribe that had bloodlines reaching from Oklahoma to Texas. I have been asked to not reveal the specific tribe because the rituals for healing are kept secret. Rose was raised very traditionally just on the reservation, until a local rancher came and bought her from my great-great grandfather for a parcel of land. She had eleven children all outside of the hospital, with some of them not getting birth certificates till they were almost a year old, and my grandmother was one of the youngest. She was one of those iconic wilderness women you read about. She would be seen on her front porch chewing tobacco, shut gun on her hip and an oil lantern on the table. Because my grandfather reminded Rose so much of her husband, and my grandparents were two decades apart in age and he married my grandmother when she was fourteen, they were not often found in the same house, or even the same county together. So we were shocked to discover he called her to come and help out with the situation.

The rituals first consisted of the creation of the healing space that was needed. We had rail-cars on the farmland my family lived on and one of them was cleared out, cleaned and prepared as a hot hut, a place like a dry sauna. I remember looking outside and watching my grandfather and grandmother bringing arm-loads of wood into the rail-car to set up and start a fire to have it extremely hot when I would enter. Blankets and mats were also brought in to create places for seating. The whole preparation took a half day to complete and was ready for us to enter just before nightfall.

The women of our tribe are the ones who are taught and perform the rituals of healing and blessing for the other members of the tribe, so the men were not allowed in the hot hut until after it was over, to remove and clean the rail-car. Rose, my mother, my grandmother, and myself were dressed in white and were not allowed to have shoes or jewelry on. This is because we were to be as close to the earth's children as we could. We entered the hut just as the sun set, and took our places at the four corners of the Cardinal points.

The ritual consisted of chanting and praying for health and blessings on myself. Rose believed that the reason I was so sick wasn't because of the ineffectiveness of the medicines, but because an evil spirit attached itself to me and it was able to take the form of the disease. She was convinced that this was because my mother placed me with a sitter who gave me the evil eye. The chanting consisted of guttural sounds and words in my Great Grandmother's native tongue. She burned sage and mixed the ash with the ashes from the fire. She used this to smudge circles, lines, crosses, and triangles over my body, detailing lines of protection and banishment. She said that the lines would give me strength. There were other herbs and more sage that was burnt in a bowl and she used feathers to waft the smoke from them onto all of us. While she was doing this, she asked the spirits that ride beside us to give her and the other women strength to help fight the sickness within me.

Rose also took some herbs and mashed them together with some clay and produced a greenish white paste that she then smeared on me between the ash marks. She then smeared the other women and herself with the same marks. It was explained to me after this was the way to tie our energies together and help take the burden from me. We stayed in the hot hut for hours and by the time we were done I had passed out a few times from the heat. We were all covered in sweat and our clothes were drenched. I remember when we left the rail-car that we looked like we were shining in the moon and star-light like angels.

The overall experience is something I will never forget. I have never been that sick ever in my life since. It is almost like a dream when remembering, sitting there surrounded by women from many generations and going through that process. I know that by today's standards it could even be considered dangerous by mainstream society. By experiencing something like that I felt the love of my family and the raw energy from these women wash over me. I used to think the smudging of marks on the body was funny, like body painting, and being that young I thought it was fun. I even got in trouble quite a bit when we were painting because I started to paint lines and circles and hearts on myself and my classmates and not on the paper.

Years later, after Rose died, I finally sat down with my grandmother and asked her about all the ceremony because I could only remember partial details and nothing about what was burned that she was using the feathers on and such. My grandmother explained to me those details like sage burning, and that it was the journey they felt that needed to be taken to make sure I was OK. Of all the things that I remember from that night the main one was of being carried out of the hut by my grandmother and looking over at my mother and Rose shining in the night sky. The sight of all of us shimmering was just amazing for a child my age to take in and something I will never forget.