

About 9 months ago, I was visiting family up in northern New Mexico when I decided to pay a visit to a long-time friend, Amy. Amy is of Native American ancestry, particularly Pueblo. As I was visiting her, she explained to me that her grandmother was on the way to her house to perform Shamanic smudging on her aunt, who had recently been going through some hard times.

Smudging is an ancient Native American practice of spiritual cleansing, protection, purification, and blessing. Its purpose is to wash away impurities, sadness, anxieties, dark thoughts and any unwanted energies or emotions that may be clinging to a person or personal space. The smudging process involves the burning of herbs and plant resins in a shell or clay bowl while prayers of gratitude and well-being are said. The smoke is traditionally fanned using the hand or a feather and directed over a person or throughout a living space. A particular feather that is treasured for this ritual is an eagle's feather.

My friend's grandmother was very helpful and informative in educating me all about smudging and what the involved items represent. She went on to explain that the materials each symbolize and honor one of the four elements, which is a central theme in many Native American rituals. The shell or clay bowl represents *water*; herbs and resins represent the *earth*; the feather and wind it creates represent *air*; and the flame used to ignite the herbs represents *fire*. The most common herbs used for smudging in North American traditions are white sage, sweet grass, tobacco, and cedar; white sage, as I was told, is the most preferred. Amy's grandmother went on to explain that the dried sage stems and leaves are bundled together and bound tightly to produce a smudging stick. Upon being lit over a candle flame, the smudge stick produces a very cleansing and pleasant smelling smoke that negative entities dislike. These entities end up fleeing from the smoke; therefore that is why smudging is perfect for purifying and clearing the person or place from all negativity.

For the actual ritual, it took place outside in an open field right in my friend's backyard. As I mentioned earlier, the grandmother used a smudging stick consisting of bound dried sage stems. She explained that the reason why she uses a candle flame is because it helps the stick to burn and smoke better. Once the stick was producing a lot of smoke and burning well, she placed the stick into the bowl while it was burning. Walking up to Amy's aunt, holding the bowl with one hand and the feather with the other, she gently fanned the smoke onto the aunt's body, starting from the top and moving downward. As she was doing this she was saying a prayer out loud in her native language. Once she had finished fanning the smoke onto the aunt, she had the aunt inhale a little bit of the smoke, which would purify her insides, according to what Amy explained to me.

I found this experience to be very informative and I was really glad I was able to witness it. Although there are differences, it reminded me of the frankincense and myrrh smoke used during Sunday Mass. In my Catholic faith, the visual imagery of the smoke and the smell reinforce the transcendence of the Mass linking Heaven with Earth, allowing us to enter into the presence of God, and our prayers ascending into heaven. What I found most interesting is that the role of holy water is similar to the concept of smudging. Smudging is used for purification and warding off negative energies; and holy water is used to reflect a renewal of baptism, the cleansing of sin. Holy water is also used for the blessing of persons, places, and objects, or as a means of repelling evil and protecting the individual.