

# The Presence of Mother Earth in Women's Ceremonies

## *Observations of an Ojibway Medicine Woman/Wiccan Practitioner*

by Marilyn Johnson

*L'auteure raconte comment elle a pris part aux cérémonies Wicca et Ojibway.*

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It was sunrise. I was attending a Women's Healing Gathering, near Thunder Bay, in northern Ontario, about ten years ago. A cool summer morning mist shrouded the shore of the lake and a gathering of women, standing in a circle. Women from many races stood together. We were instructed to be silent and greeted each other with our eyes, smiled, and shivered together. An Ojibway woman Elder prepared for a ceremony. This was my first experience with this particular type of Cedar Ceremony which is conducted for women only. I was excited.

I was a practicing medicine woman at the time. Being Metis (mixed blood) of Ojibway ancestry, I had participated in many pipe ceremonies, fasts, swear lodges, feasts for the dead, and healing ceremonies but never something for women, of many ethnic origins. Ojibway ceremonies were usually only open to persons of Aboriginal ancestry. I was pleased to be participating in a ritual which included women of other backgrounds. The Elder and her helper placed four pieces of cedar upon the ground, in a crescent-shaped arrangement, closest to the western edge of the circle. A small fire burned in the middle. The helper took a braid of sweetgrass and lit one end. We "smudged" ourselves which involved "washing" the smoke of the burning sweetgrass over our bodies with our hands, to cleanse our minds, in order to prepare for the healing at hand.

The Elder gave us a teaching. The Women's Cedar Ceremony is ancient, handed down from one generation of women to the next. The knowledge of how to conduct the ceremony was almost lost due to the oppression of Aboriginal culture by Christianity. In spite of this interruption, she explained, this is a special ceremony for women only. We stood and faced the rising sun in the East. The Elder offered a prayer on our behalf to Grandfather Sun who keeps us warm during the day, provides

light for all our relations, the plants, and animals, in order for us to be fed and clothed. In turn, each of the four directions were honoured. The four directions were not asked to enter our circle to participate but rather, acknowledged from the middle of the circle, to keep watch over us.

Then She came into the circle. The power of Mother Earth entered upward from the middle of the circle and scattered in all directions, to each woman participating in the Cedar Ceremony. Mother Earth was present to envelope each woman with caressing embraces, and brush our faces with Her hand, to let us know that we are loved and cherished. Some of us who were visionaries could "see" Her; all could sense Her presence.

Each woman walked over the four pieces of cedar, in a specified manner, asking the ancestors for a healing for themselves, friends, and family. Some spoke their prayer aloud, others were silent. I was deeply moved by all the requests for healing of mind, body, and spirit, for the women individually and their loved ones. Many of the women present at the conference were incest survivors and asked for peace and comfort. Some had sick family members who needed relief from pain. Many were weeping and speaking about things that they have never mentioned to anyone before. I am always touched by these requests and amazed by the amount of power and healing energy that is generated by a group of people in ritual. Mother Earth and the ancestors, take these requests from within the circle to the four directions, to Grandmother Moon, Grandfather Sky, to seek their assistance in helping ease the suffering and sense of loss.

After completing the cedar walk, we went back to our places in the large circle. After the last woman finished, the Elder offered a prayer to thank Mother Earth, She who cares for us at all times, and the Grandmother spirit of the moon who watches over us at night and our cycles of menstruation, birth, and death. Some of us said, "megwetch" (Ojibway for thanks), and "All My Relations." The elder left the circle first, we all followed one by one, embraced each other and went to a wonderful breakfast, to talk and laugh together.

Since that time, I have attended other Cedar Ceremonies, all as powerful and poignant, and learned how to conduct the ceremony for other women. In traditional fashion, I offer tobacco to a woman Elder, go through the teaching on the significance of cedar as one of the four sacred medicines (cedar, sage, sweetgrass, tobacco) and the importance of women's rituals.

I conducted a Cedar Ceremony when I took on my new symbolic name, Daughter of the Winter Moon, in January 1995. Men and women were present. Men are allowed to attend the Cedar Ceremony but are delegated to stand

outside the circle. They cannot participate in the cedar walk or enter into the circle once the ceremony begins. In this way, a man may attend with his wife, daughter, or friend to share in the experience and support her.

I was pleased to share the Cedar Ceremony in a workshop format at the Female Spirituality Conference, held at York University, Toronto, in March 1996. One brave man came, to attend with his wife. This time, women from various parts of the world were in attendance, and I was honoured to be part of such a group. After we smudged, I could sense the power of Mother Earth entering into the middle of the circle through the concrete floor and carpet of the classroom. In my experience, the energy feels the same, whether we are standing outside or in a building in a city.

My Ojibway medicine teacher, John-Paul, from many years ago, instructed me, "We need to do things in the modern way." If that means conducting a ceremony inside a building, then it is done. The outcome is still the same. When women gather with the right intentions, Mother Earth and the ancestors are present to help us.

Due to the fact that I am of mixed ancestry, I had been searching for years, for a way to round out my spirituality and my relationship to Mother Earth. For as much as I had enjoyed and benefitted from Native ceremonies, I began to feel that "something" was missing. A few years ago, I continued to participate in Native ceremonies but also started to attend pagan ceremonies, mostly conducted by women. Even to this day, especially, at the time of solstices, I am very active, attending a Native pipe ceremony at dawn then celebrating the pagan traditions well into the night. After a particular point on the road to spiritual development, I knew that there was something else that I needed, to add to my religious repertoire.

On All Hallows Eve of 1995, I was initiated into Wicca. "Do what you will, but do not harm others," is the instruction that we have been given in the ways of Wicca. Four of us were initiated together. We stood in a circle, one woman for each of the four directions, a fire burning in the middle. It was a cool, crisp autumn night, my favourite time of the year. All Hallows Eve marks the beginning of the pagan new year and we felt that it was an appropriate time to be initiated. I felt proud and exhilarated at being initiated with my sister, and two close friends, one of whom our group considers to be our "Wise Woman" or "Goddess Mother." Other friends who were not being initiated, were also present. Again, I felt the excitement of being involved in an activity that would expand my spiritual self.

We began by invoking the four directions in turn with a prayer. We thanked the elements of earth, water, fire, and air. The circle was "cast" by moving in a clock-wise direction. The four directions came into the circle to do our bidding. Then She arrived. Mother Earth came out of the fire burning in the middle of the circle. She was greeted and Her energy scattered to the initiates as well as to others present. We asked for prosperity, the strength to accept the

responsibility that we are taking on, and healing energy for ourselves, family, and friends. We promised to support each other in our daily lives, grow together spiritually. At the completion of the ritual and the initiation, we asked for the four directions to leave the circle to carry our wishes to the four corners of the world. Mother Earth was thanked and She left as well. We exclaimed, "Blessed Be!" The circle was broken and we embraced each other. We feasted, laughed, and talked late into the night.

As a practitioner in Wicca, I have taken on the responsibility to utilize my spiritual skills to help others through the casting of "spells" or wishes set in motion by the right intentions. The outcome is the same whether I utilize Native traditions or Wicca ceremonies. I have to behave in a responsible manner, being careful to not hurt others. The phrase, "Be careful what you wish for," is very true in either tradition. Your prayer may be answered but you may not really want what you get in the long run. In both the Native and Wicca ceremonies, Mother Earth is always there assisting with the fruition of prayers and wishes.

I have concluded from these experiences of various forms of female ceremonies and rituals, that when people gather with the proper intent of healing, not to do harm, the highly potent female energy of Mother Earth comes into the circle and She assists with the answering of prayers. The only difference I have been able to discern, is that in Wicca ritual, the four directions are hailed and they come into the circle to do our bidding. They are the forces that carry our wishes to the four corners of the earth and bring the outcome for which we are hoping. Generally, in North American Native ceremonies, the four directions are honoured from inside the circle but are not invited to come into the circle to assist Mother Earth with the outcome of prayers.

In each tradition of women's ceremonies, the energy or forces within the circle is somewhat different, respectively, due to the presence of the four directions, depending as well on which ancestors or other spirits are present. My experiences of the energy of Mother Earth, however, is the same, in both types of women's ceremonies. Overall, through ceremonies in both traditions, my sense of the spiritual relationship that I have with Mother Earth is more complete.

All My Relations! Blessed Be!

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