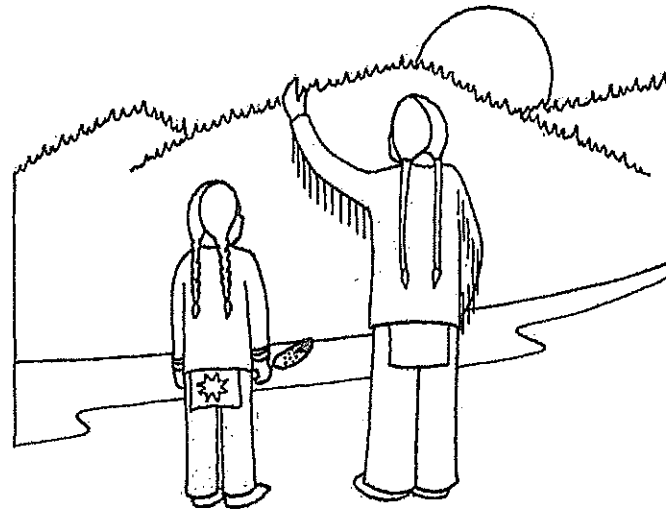


Chapter 12

“The Sweat Lodge”

The old man who had visited the lodge of the Seven Grandfathers, brought back to the people the gift of seeking spiritual advice and direction through the Ba-wa'-ji-gay'-win (Vision Quest). As a child would approach the coming of adulthood, the parents would provide the opportunity for the child's first Vision Quest. Often a Mide'-wi-nini (Midewiwin priest) or Osh-ka-bay'-wis (helper) of the Midewiwin was asked to serve as a guide for the child. The body was deprived of food and water, the life-giving forces of physical life. With the physical side of life lessened, it was hoped that the spiritual side would come into dominance. It is also said that fasting purifies the body and the mind and makes a person receptive for messages coming from the Spirit World. If the child was ready and fortunate, a vision would come to serve as a guiding light in life. The vision would give life its purpose and direction.

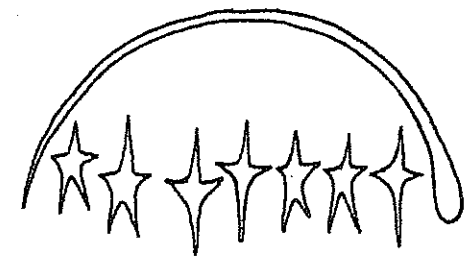


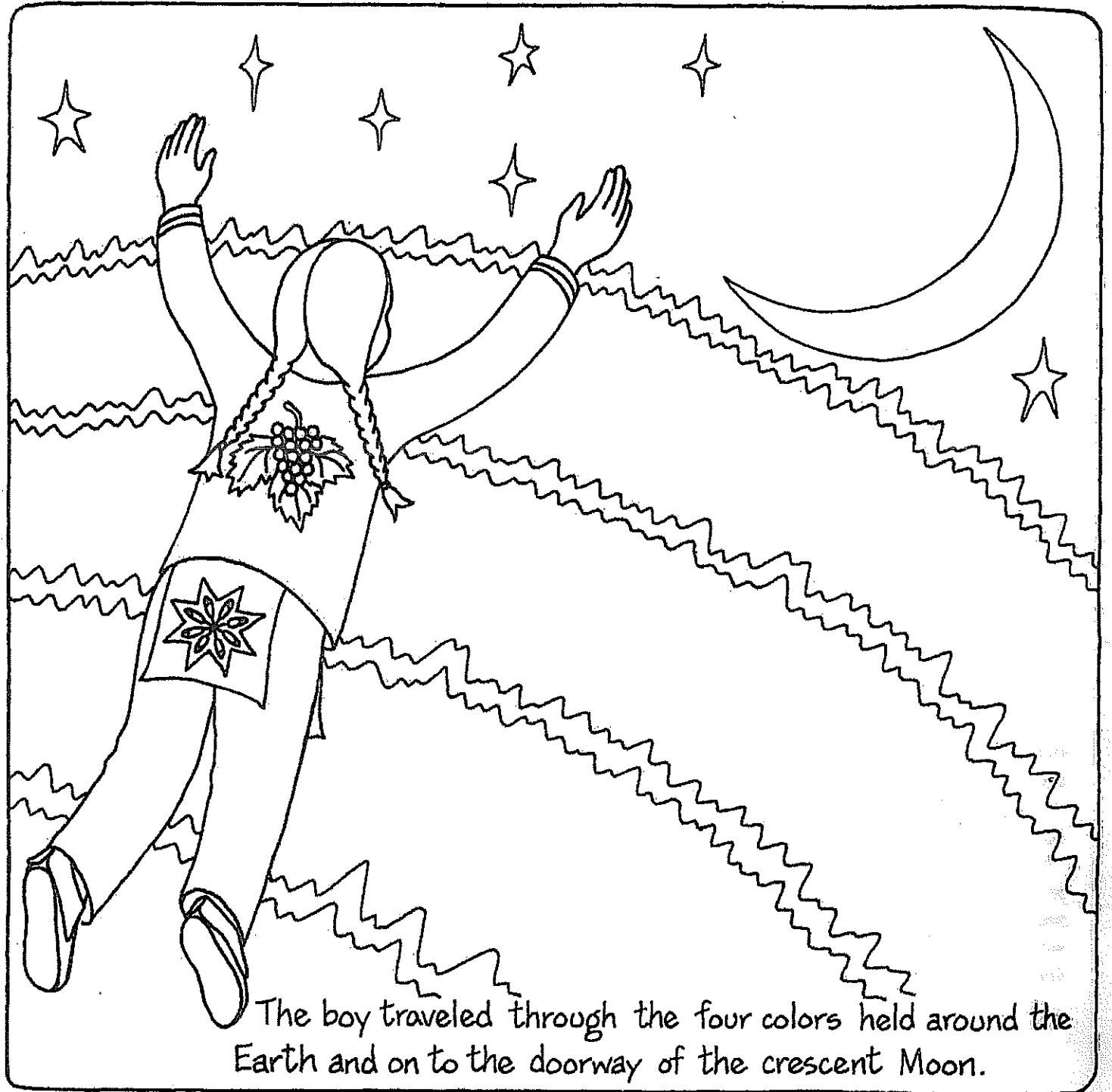
It is told today of how once an Ojibway boy went on his first Vision Quest. He did not know what he was searching for. He did not know what answers he was seeking. On the fourth night of his fast, the boy's spirit was taken from his body. He traveled in spirit form straight toward the crescent Moon in the sky.

The boy traveled through four colors that are held around the Earth by a force Gitche Manito placed on the Earth during the Creation. These colors stand for the Four Sacred Elements without which no life is possible. These four colors also stand for the four levels of spiritual knowledge that exist above the surface of the Earth.

The boy traveled through the part of the Moon that we cannot see — the part we know is there but which is dominated by the bright, shining crescent. The Moon is only whole when it is taken in its totality — that which we see and that we do not see. So is it with life. Life is not whole until its totality is comprehended. When the physical part of life that we can see is taken with the spiritual part of life that we do not so easily see, then life can be full and complete for each of us.

The boy traveled through the doorway of the crescent Moon and out into the Ah-nung'-go-kwan (Star World). He finally came to a lodge in





The boy traveled through the four colors held around the Earth and on to the doorway of the crescent Moon.

the sky. It was the lodge of Mishi'-mis-i-non'-nig nee-zhwa'-swi (our Seven Grandfathers). Being much afraid, the boy cautiously looked inside. What he saw and felt can never be fully described or explained.

"Ha Be-in-di-gayn! (Come in)" said one of the Grandfathers. "We have been expecting you. You have been sent to us by the Creator to carry a very special gift back to your people. We are going to instruct you in how a purifying ceremony can come to your people. It is a ceremony that will purify both the body and the mind."

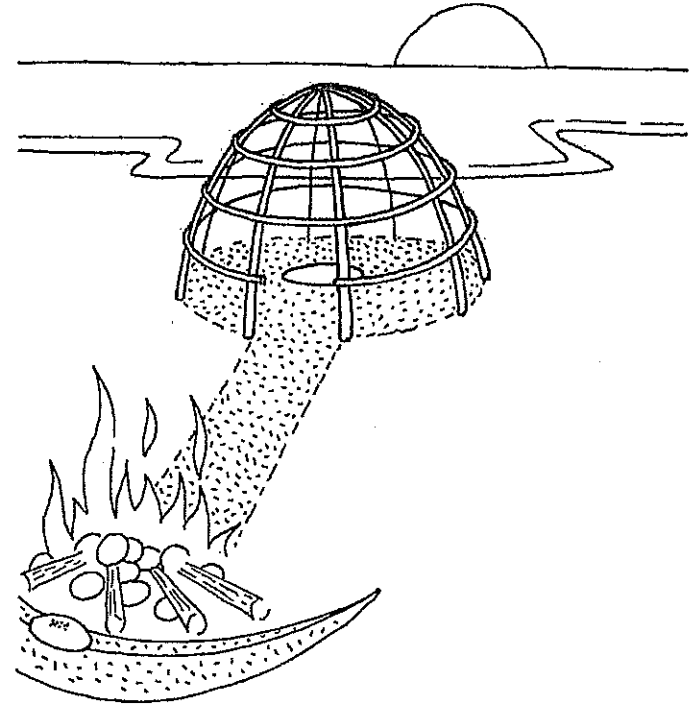
The Grandfathers spoke as if their words were sent directly from their minds to the mind of the boy. They told the boy all the details as to how the ceremony should be performed:

"The lodge is to be made out of saplings from Pa-pa'-koo-si-gun' (the willow tree). The men of the village are responsible for gathering the willow and building the lodge. They should remember that before they take anything from the Earth in preparing the lodge that they are to offer Ah-say-ma' (Tobacco) in thanksgiving.

"The lodge is to have four doorways so that the spirits can enter from each of the Four Sacred Directions. Only the eastern doorway is to be used by humans. There should be four rings of willow placed around the framework of the lodge that represent the four levels of knowledge above the surface of the Earth. There are also four levels of knowledge below the surface of the Earth. All the saplings are to be lashed together with the inner bark of Wee-goo-bee' (the basswood tree).

"In the center of the lodge there shall be a shallow pit that will represent the o-nee-ja-win' (womb) of Mother Earth. The lodge will be covered with the skins of the deer, moose, buffalo, or with sheets of elm bark.

"Outside the lodge, a me-ka-naynz' (pathway) shall be made from the eastern doorway to the fireplace. The fireplace is to be surrounded by a crescent-shaped Ga'-ki-na wa-ji' bin-gwe' (altar).



"The menfolk shall be responsible for gathering rocks to place in the fire. If they put Tobacco down as an offering, they will be shown just what kind of rocks will withstand the intense heat of the fire.

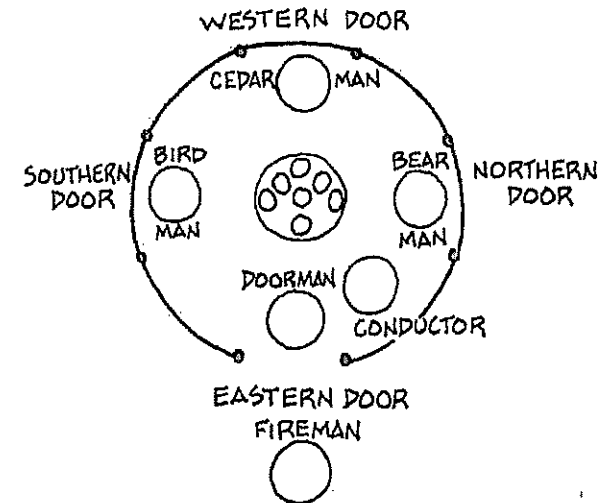
"All these preparations including the gathering of firewood shall be done by the men. When their work is complete, the women of the village will prepare the grounds of the lodge for the ceremony. They shall carefully clean the Earth around the lodge, and with their hands give final shape to the crescent-shaped altar. Their final act will be to gather Gee-zhee-kan'-dug (Cedar) for the ceremony. The women will take some of this

Cedar and sprinkle it over the altar and down the pathway coming from the eastern door of the lodge.

"Certain ones of the menfolk will be honored with a position to hold or function to perform during the ceremony. The Na-gahn'-way-wi-nini (man who leads) of the ceremony will hold a very important but dangerous position. At the start of the ceremony he puts his life on the line for all those who will participate. His life can be taken by the Spirit World if anyone participating is harboring thoughts of hate or greed. He will be the keeper of the Waterdrum and the purifying water. He will sit just to the north side of the eastern doorway just as the spiritual keeper of the drum sits at the doorway of life. Next to him will sit the Ish-kwan-day'-wi-nini (Doorman) who will be responsible for directing the participants in the ceremony to their places and receiving the heated rocks from the Fireman. At the southern doorway of the lodge will sit the Birdman. In the western doorway will sit the Cedar Man. He will greet the ah-sin-neeg' (rocks) with offerings of Cedar. This western doorway is the doorway to the next world and to the future as well. In the northern doorway will sit Bearman. He sits in the place symbolic of purity, fasting, and the healing powers of Mother Earth. Each of these four men who occupy the four doorways will be offering their bodies for the spirits of the Four Directions to come through, speak through, and sing through. Their positions, too, occupy a very delicate and dangerous balance between the Spirit World and the physical world.

"The Ish-ko-day'-i-nini (Fireman) on the outside will occupy a vital position in that he will tend the fire and bring the heated rocks to the eastern door of the Ma-do-do-swun' (Sweat or Spirit

Lodge). He first brings four rocks to be placed in the shallow pit of the lodge at each of the Four Directions. He then brings three rocks to make the four seven and to represent ourselves, the Seven Grandfathers. When the rocks are in their places in the lodge and the Doorman asks for the door to be closed, the ceremony begins when the Waterdrum is sounded four times. While the ceremony is in progress, the Fireman will tell all those on the outside of the lodge the origin of the ceremony and the symbolism of all the sacred things used. He will be responsible for educating the young Osh-ka-bay'-wi-sug (apprentices) who are helping and learning so that one day they too might earn a place in the Sweat Lodge.



"If the conductor has been given the power through fasting or ceremony to conduct the Sweat Lodge for women, then a special ceremony can be held for the women of the village who have earned the right to sit in the lodge. The conductor will have to be very strong in order to hold a Sweat Lodge for the women. The women, with their life-giving powers, make the spiritual power

of the Sweat Lodge very strong. They can make the spirit power so strong that a weak conductor might have difficulty in returning himself and the participants to the physical world at the end of the ceremony. Women can also be asked to hold a position at one of the doorways of the lodge."

The Seven Grandfathers gave the boy songs for the Sweat Lodge ceremony. They gave him songs for each of the Four Directions. They instructed him in all the details of the ceremony. They told him that the water which is offered to the heated rocks in the Sweat Lodge is capable of cleansing the bodies and minds of the people to make them pure and receptive for Spirit Ceremonies, Vision Quests, and the rigors of everyday life.

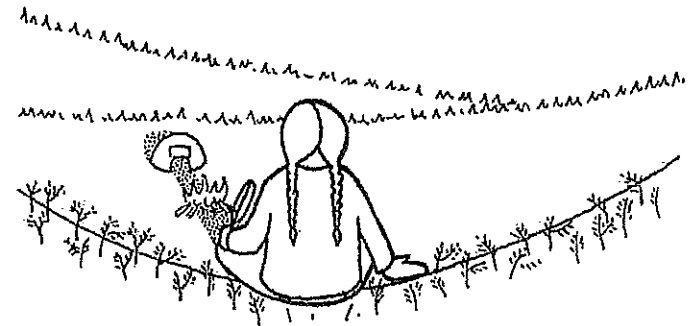
The Grandfathers told the boy that to sit next to the pit of rocks in the Sweat Lodge is like going back to your mother's womb. When the eastern doorway is opened and a person crawls humbly out into the world it is like being born anew. The pathway outside the eastern door represents the path of life. This pathway is sprinkled with the sacred medicine Cedar that we should use respectfully with all the other medicines to keep our bodies strong and pure in this life. The crescent shape of the altar represents the doorway of the Spirit World to which the origin of this ceremony is linked. And finally, the fire represents the very real power of the Spirit World—that hidden power that can be used to give balance to our lives.

The Seven Grandfathers then sent the boy back to Earth to carry this ceremony to his people.

When the boy awoke, he found that he was too weak to move. He did not know where he was. He was finally able to reach out with his fingers and

clutch at some plant brothers and sisters that were growing next to him. With much effort he brought his hand to his mouth. It was Cedar that was growing around him. He ate some of the Cedar and it gave him strength.

After a while he was able to sit up. He found himself on top of a *chi-wa-jiw'* (mountain). He tried to remember the details of his vision but he could not. As he looked from side to side he discovered that the mountain on which he was sitting was shaped like a *'huge Oh-shka-goon-jing' gee'-sis* (crescent Moon). Suddenly, parts of his vision came back to him and he remembered the altar of the Sweat Lodge. He noticed that Cedar was growing all around him on the mountain just as the Grandfathers told him Cedar should be sprinkled on the altar of the Sweat Lodge.



At the moment of his awakening, it was dawn here on the Earth—the brief time before the Sun comes over the rim of the Earth. As the Sun rose up behind him he noticed a fire burning with rocks in it below him in the valley. As the Sun rose his shadow seemed to make a path through the center of the fire and beyond to a lodge that stood there exactly as it appeared in his vision. He remembered that the altar was to be placed to the East of the Sweat Lodge just as the mountain

on which he was sitting was located to the East of the fire and lodge below. Looking to the West in the valley below, he was amazed to see that the lodge, fire and the altar-like mountain were in perfect alignment with himself and the new day Sun.

The rekindled memory of his time with the Seven Grandfathers gave the boy strength he had never known before. He came to his feet, placed Tobacco on the Earth for all that he had been given, and began the long walk home holding inside of him a very special gift for the people.

This is the teaching that was given to the Ojibway to tell how the purification ceremony or Sweat Lodge came to our people. Remember that the other nations and tribes were given teachings that are slightly different from this. But in all the teachings of different tribes there is a commonality. This sameness refers to the basic Truth that interweaves all natural ways of living.

Today, the Sweat Lodge is still used by groups of traditional people who choose to lead a natural way of life. The ceremony has kept its original form through the years. Many of the songs used today go back hundreds of years. Today, canvas is predominantly used to cover the Sweat Lodge but there are still those who make permanent lodges using elm bark as a covering. The elm bark can only be gathered in the spring when the bark can be peeled easily from the tree.

It is good that in spite of all the changes that modern life has brought to Indian people, that there are those who keep strong the gifts of yesterday. For it is with yesterday that we learn for tomorrow.

