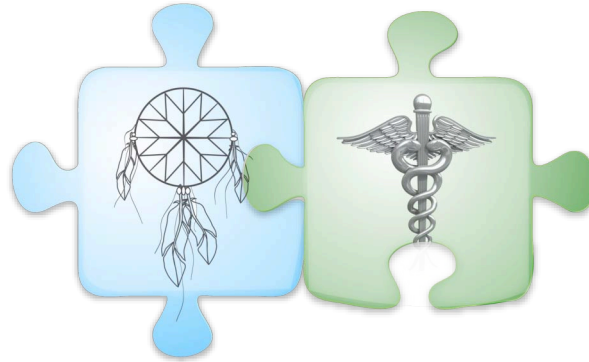


## Cultural Sensitivity and Cultural Humility Module

by: Murdena Marshall. 2008. Health and healing - death and dying: women's roles within. Workshop training materials for "cultural sensitivity and cultural humility"; for health organization.

### ***Introduction***

*The intention is to share Traditional Mi'kmaq Knowledge regarding health and healing, and death and dying, in order to aid Health Care Practitioners working with Mi'kmaq communities.*



To begin this module on Health and Healing, Death and Dying, a story from Eskasoni Elders Murdena Marshall and her sister Diana Denny.

“Our Mother was a Medicine Woman, and she healed not only by using herbs and plants. She also used her mind and spirituality. One time there was a woman from Little Narrows. She had cancer, leukemia, and she used to come down to my Mother who would make Medicine for her. She would pick plants and she'd pick this and that. And she'd prepare it in the kitchen. And we'd help her, we'd be picking the little leaves, washing it, putting it in the pot. Then we'd leave. And the woman would come and take her Medicine and then she wouldn't be back for another few months. So our Mother died on March 1<sup>st</sup> in '77, and in around May, who comes around but this woman, this Mrs. Matheson, and she wants more Medicine. “Oh, no problem, we'll make it for you”, we said. We made the medicine. We even blessed ourselves. Yes, we made the sign of the cross over it, over the pot, blessed ourselves. Except for this we did the same as our Mother, we did to the T what she used to do.

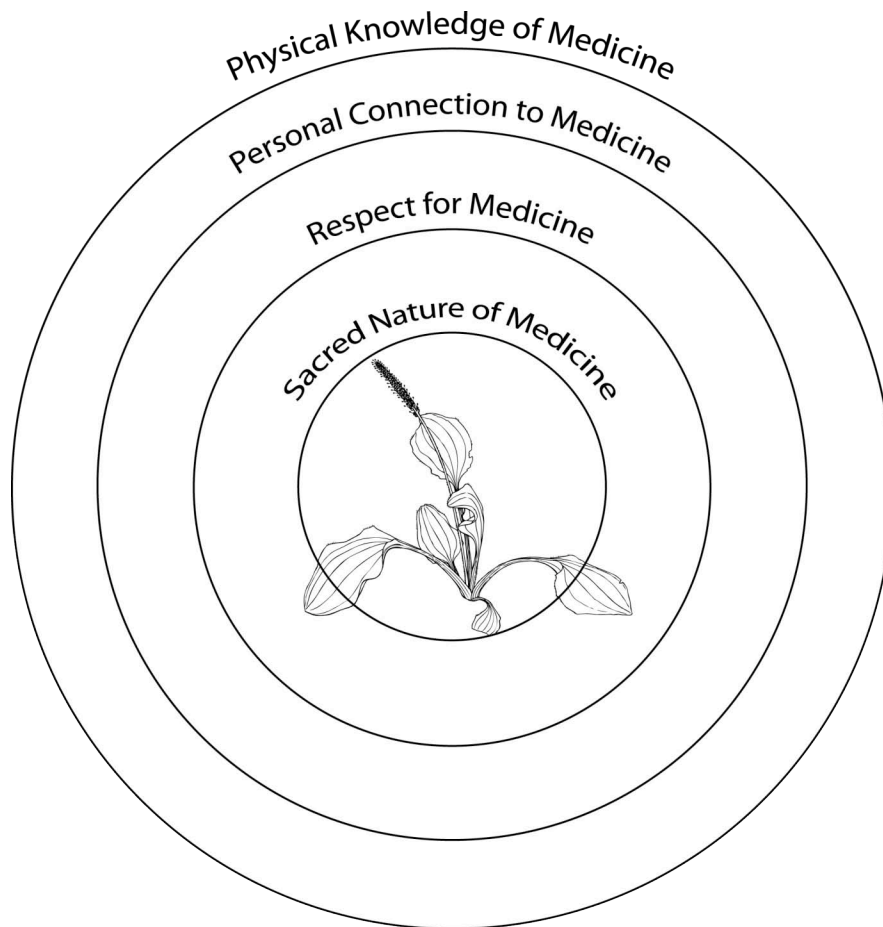
Mrs. Matheson passed away that summer.

I called up my sister and I said ‘Diana, did you see the obituary?’ and she said “Oh my goodness, you killed Mrs. Matheson!”. I said, “Me? You killed her!”

And as for the understanding of the story?

There's more to Medicine than just the physical aspect!

Murdena describes how she learned to understand more of this Medicine:



The outer layer represents her physical knowledge (stuff) of the medicine. Where to get the medicinal plant, what to do with it.

The second represents her personal connection to the medicine

The third layer is her respect of the medicine

And the final layer represents the Sacred Nature of the Medicine, the Spirit of it.

Remember: There's more to Medicine than just the physical aspect!

Activity: Ask the group to come up with what they think is necessary for healing from their group perspectives. Work with these thoughts in the module below.

*In order for Health Care Practitioners to work at their most effective within the Mi'kmaq communities some of the Mi'kmaq Sacred Teachings must be understood. In this module we will look at the Sacred Circle, the Seven Stages of Life, and the Seven Sacred Gifts and then relate these knowledges to Health and Healing, Death and Dying, and Women's Roles within these areas.*

## **Sacred Circle**

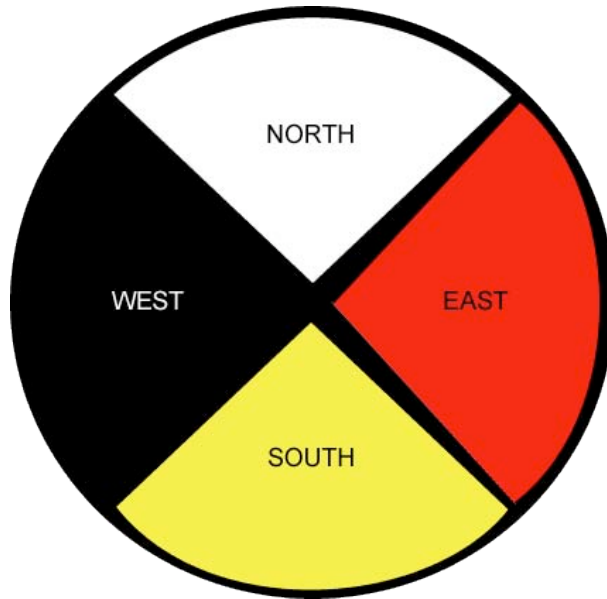
The understanding of things in a circular sense rather than a linear sense is key to understanding Mi'kmaq traditions, thought and actions.

- Reality passes from generation to generation through legends, story telling, and participation in rituals and ceremonies.
- The Sacred Circle represents the cosmic order and the unity of all things in the universe.
- The Sacred Circle reflects the patterns and shapes of nature, including the round planets, their orbs and their cyclical movement in space.
- Everything is in the Circle
- All things are related, interconnective and in harmony.
- The Circle symbolizes time as a form of the continual recurrence of natural patterns and cycles such as the seasons, day and night, and life cycles from birth to death and rebirth.
- The movement in cycles constitutes the process of coming to wholeness, interconnectiveness and balance.

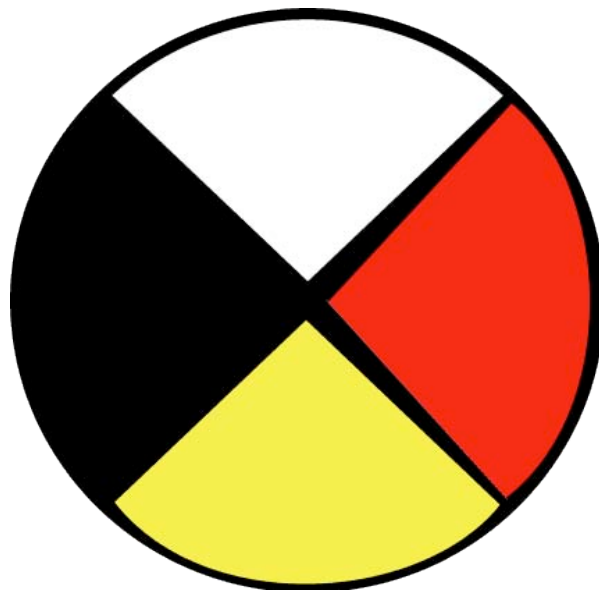
## Wholeness: Four Sacred Directions, Four Sacred Colours

The Sacred Circle, as symbol

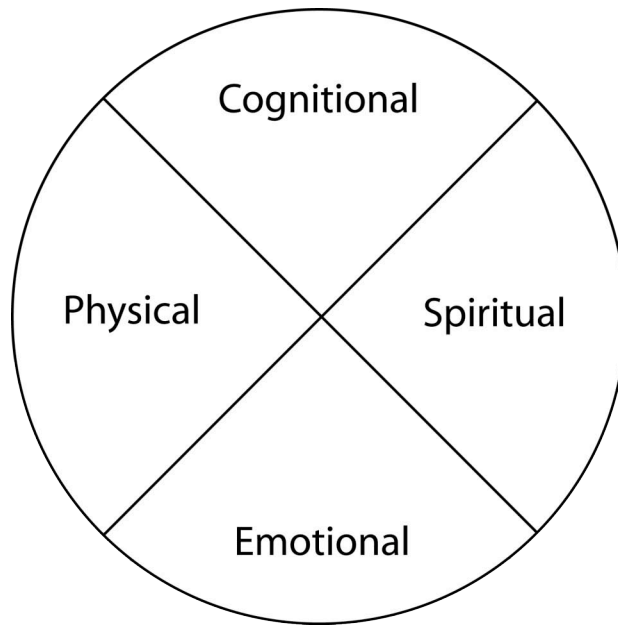
- The Four Directions: north, south, east and west.



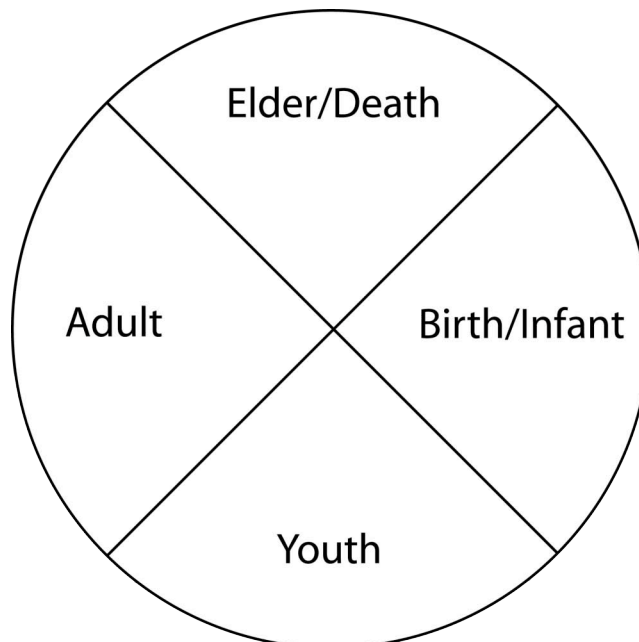
- The Four Colors of Humans: white, black, red and yellow



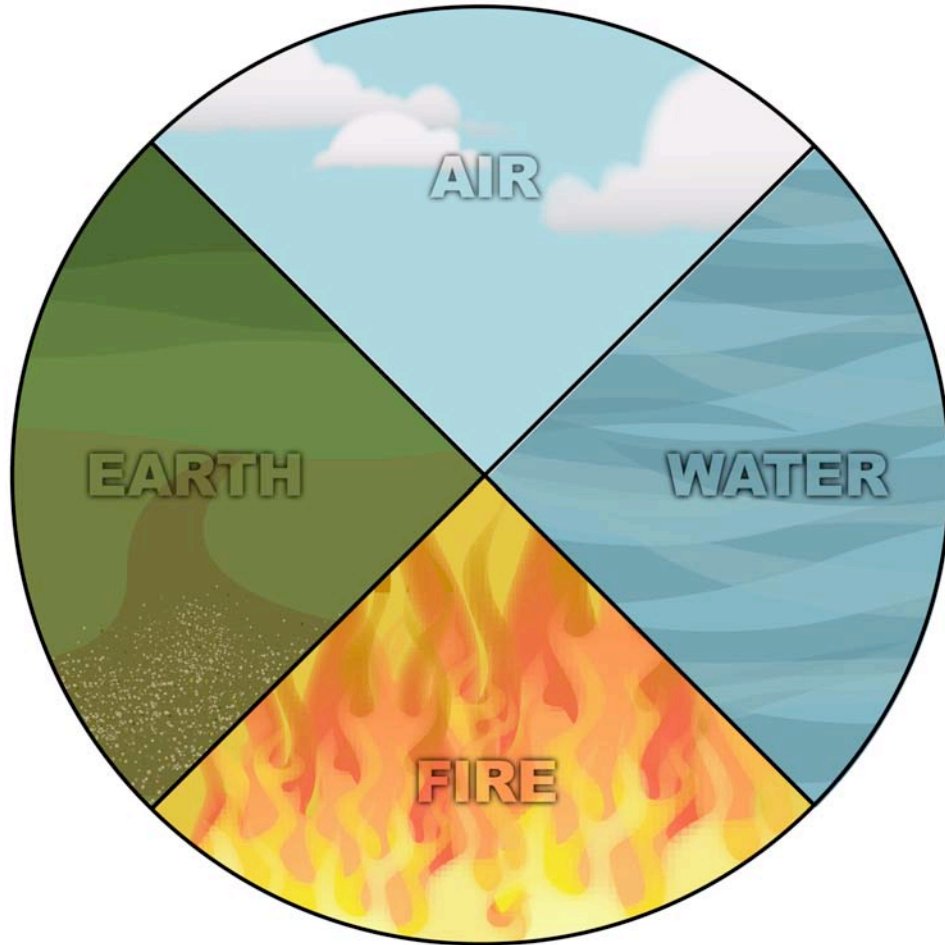
- The Four Aspects of being Human: emotional, physical, cognitional and spiritual



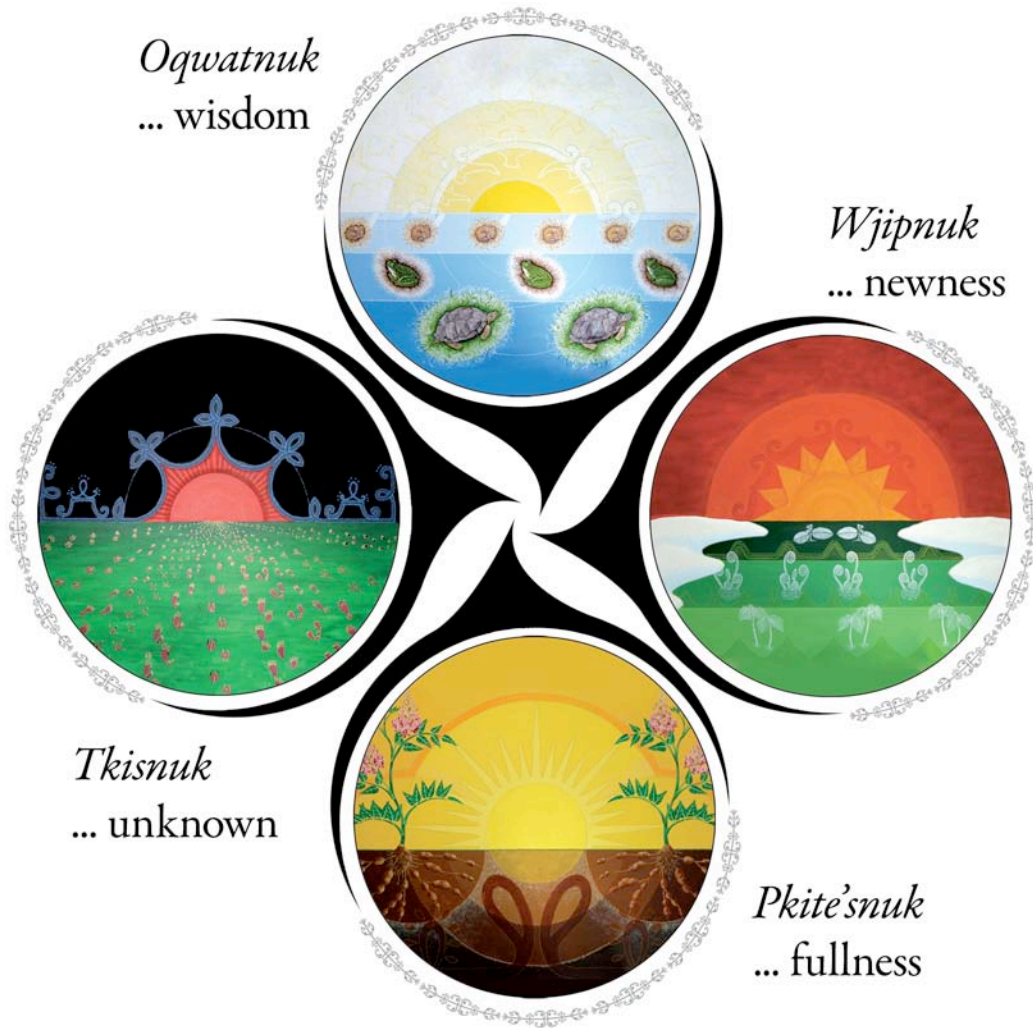
- The Four Aspects of Life: birth/infancy, youth, adulthood, Elder/death



- The Four Elements: fire, water, wind and earth

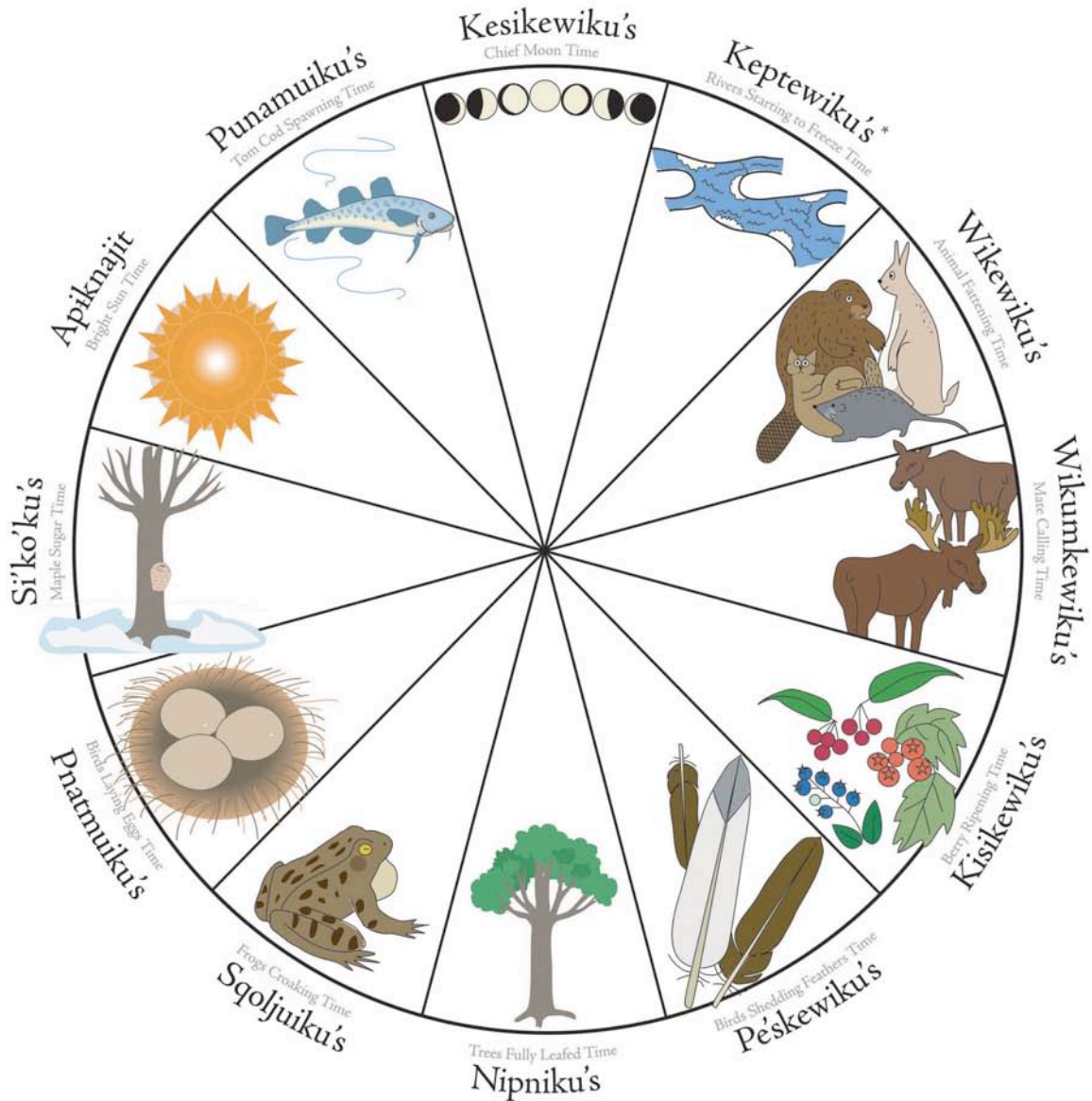


- The Four Seasons: spring, summer, fall and winter



[The image above depicts the four seasons within the four directions.]

Nothing in this Circle exists in isolation of the whole. Although parts are differentiated from one another, they are also interconnected with one another the ways seasons are joined through the natural passage of time.



[The image above illustrates the 12 moon months of the Mi'kmaq calendar and is read in a counterclockwise circle.]





[This image illustrates the 12 moon months of the year and the seasonal events that occur within the ecosystem of Mi'kma'ki.]

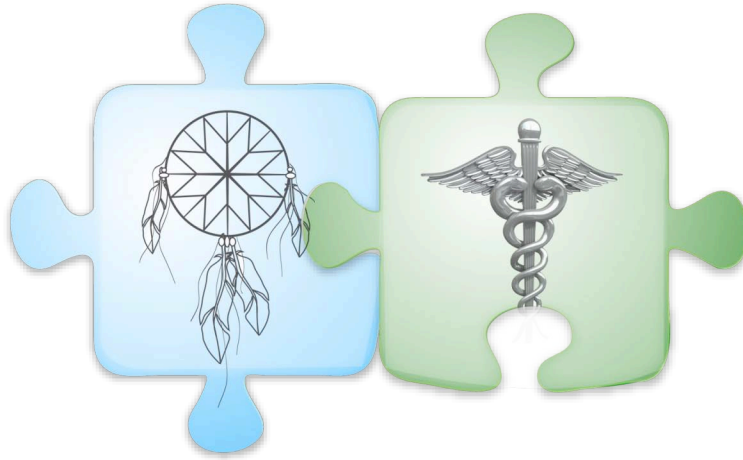
Within the Circle, reality is viewed as moving to wholeness, interconnectiveness, and balance. All is in constant flux.

Such balance brings health and healing to life, and it also brings peace and harmony to the process of death and dying.

When working within Mi'kmaq communities it is important for Health Care Practitioners to be mindful that their own understandings of Health and Healing, Death and Dying may not be the same as their patient's understandings. There can often be two, or more, perspectives as the following story illustrates.

In grade 7, in the mid 1950s I was sitting in class, and the teacher said 'Draw a picture of God'. And I drew my picture, and everybody else was drawing, drawing, and I finished first. I was so proud because it was good to finish first. And the teacher said 'Hold up your picture', so I hold my picture up and everybody was rolling about laughing and laughing. I drew God with a happy face. A big smile from ear to ear. My God is happy. Everybody else's God was hanging from a tree with blood all around. The punishing God. And the teacher, she was a nun, she was mean and she yelled at me 'What have you done!', and she sent me to the Head. And I was arguing with the Head.' God is not mean, God loves us. He is not a fearful God, not a punishing God'. My God was a generous God, you are forgiven because he has so much love in him or her. In First Nations' church I don't have to call out to God, He comes to me- through Creation, children, flowers. But a lot of this was confusing. Confusing at first and it can last for years. God saying 'I love you' and then 'You are damned. Going straight to hell. Straight to hell, no time to pick berries on the way down'. I thought there were two gods, or that god had a split personality.

## Traditional Health and Healing



For healing and health it is important to recognise that you are never working with only the physical aspect. Just as the Sacred Circle shows us, for wholeness and health you need to help bring to balance all aspects of the patient : the emotional, physical, cognitional and spiritual. As Health Care Practitioners you are not responsible for all of these elements in the individual. That is the responsibility of the individual who is unwell. But it is important to recognise that, for Health and Healing, all four aspects must be in balance.

It is possible for someone to be unwell in any of these four aspects. For example, someone can be physically healthy but emotionally or spiritually unwell. Even emotionally or spiritually dead.

Let's look at some factors that are important for health and healing in Mi'kmaq communities.

- Healing needs balance of the emotional, the physical, the cognitional and the spiritual
- Healing needs time
- The Mi'kmaq language contributes important understandings to healing
- The Health Care Practitioner and the patient need to trust and respect each other

## Women's role in Health and Healing



- To see when someone is emotionally sick or spiritually sick.
- Someone can be dead emotionally (no hope or curiosity). When this is the case the individual needs to be revitalised.
- It is important that individuals are permitted to dream. Dreams are very important. There is a danger in medicating yourself to sleep because then you don't dream and can't begin to bring emotional balance.
- Someone can be dead spiritually (for example, they may chase God from their lives because of the emotions and confusion that they have cancer and that they are going to die), but the opportunity to recover their spirituality will be given to that person and it is up to them to recover their spirituality.

- Women would see that the person is spiritually dead and then their role is to listen and try to reverse the situation through real stories. Remember the Sacred Circle teachings: reality passes from generation to generation through legends, story telling, and participation in rituals and ceremonies. So when someone is spiritually dead then by story telling that death can be reversed and the spiritual aspect can be brought back in to rebalance the individual.
- It is Women's Role to pass on the Sacred Teachings of the Seven Stages of Life and the Seven Gifts. When we look at the Sacred Circle image we can see that there are Seven Gifts within the Journey of Life. They are sequential and each gift is given in about seven year stages in a person's life following the belief that life makes a significant about change every seven years. These gifts are Love , Honesty, Humility , Respect, Truth/Trust, Patience and Wisdom .

# Mi'kmaq Sacred Teachings

## 7 Stages of Life with the 7 Gifts

Love of the Creator - Spiritual  
Love of a Mother - Physical  
Both are Unconditional

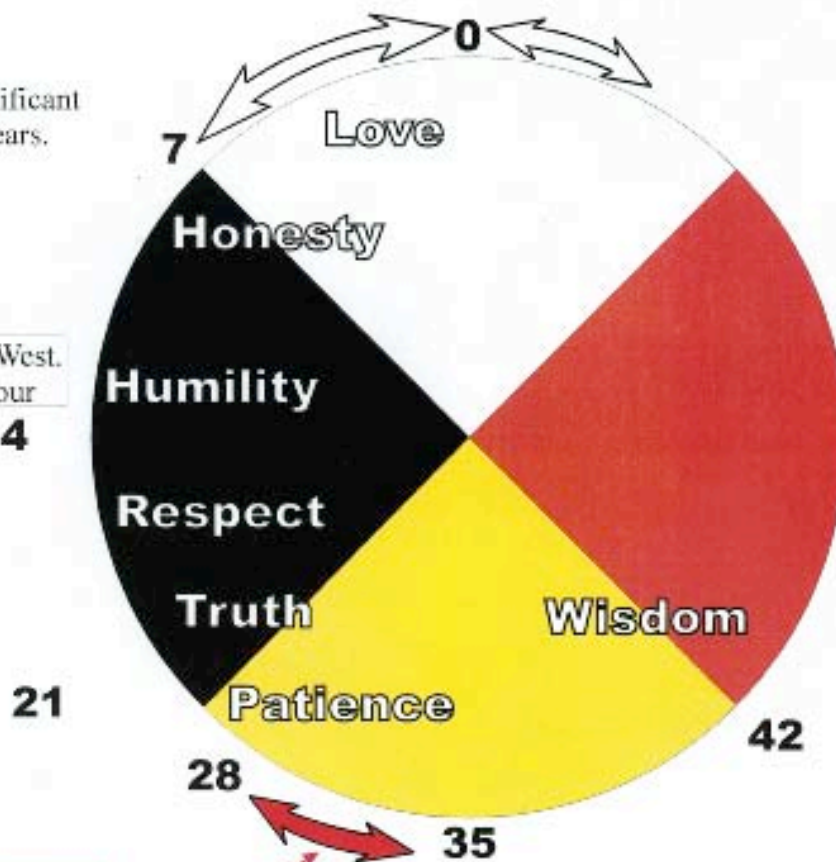
White is the color reserved for Elders but they share it with children under age 7. It is also the color for the North

If all of the Gifts are visible in a person, that person is an Elder.

Life makes a significant change every 7 years.

Black is for the West. It also represents our spiritual world. 14

Red is for the colour of the rising sun, and the newness of each day. It is the color for the East.



Elders say that this is when your spiritual awareness is realized

Yellow is for South, where warm breezes come from. It renews life through the cycles.

\*The gifts run in chronological order.

Elders believe that we can go back to age 7. This is the only time that the circle reverses in life. Apaji-mijua'ji'juen

*Apaji (preverb) - repeat, go back, again.*

*Mijua'ji'j (root word) - child under 7*

*uen (inflection) - in the process of, to be, state of being.*

## Death and Dying

Here, two short stories. The first is a young man who has cancer. He is dying. His family has been closely involved in his struggle against death. One day he says, 'No more. I don't want any more therapy. I have accepted death.' When this happens the whole attitude in the family, in the room in the hospital changes. They spend their time together sharing their love, their stories. They too accept the timing of the young man's death.



The second story. An older woman has cancer and is close to death. Her family is around her. Tensions are high. Rifts within the family are being revisited with certain members not talking to others, the room is full of blame. The woman cannot die. She waits. Waiting until she can leave in peace. She is ready to die but waits.

- The dying person needs peace and harmony to die. Can't be surrounded by arguments or clashes of personality
- Acceptance of death is an important medicine. Acceptance can replace the chemotherapy when the person is ready to die with grace. When this happens the people supporting that person change. There is no more trying to fight death but accepting it and sharing their thoughts and their love.
- Death is only part of a cycle that we all go through. Part of the Sacred Circle Teachings and Circular Thinking.
- Grief is part of that cycle. It needs to be coped with. Here it is the role of women to help the grieving person accept their grief.

## **Mi'kmaq traditions around death and dying**

### *Sispa'snekati*

When a person is close to death they see a deceased member of their family (mother or father) come for them.

That person takes them to a thicket where the rest of their family is waiting. This spiritual place is Sispa'snekati. The Place of Cleansing/ Washing/ Purification. In Sispa'snekati you get organised and ready to see Creator. There is no suffering in this place, the Catholic concept of purgatory does not exist in the Mi'kmaq world view. Instead Sispa'snekati is a place of welcome and preparation.

A person may stay there for a few minutes or longer. In Sispa'snekati the individual is given the gift of humility, if they haven't received that gift during their life.

When they are ready they leave Sispa'snekati and go to see Creator.

### *Salite*

Salite means 'to give from the heart'

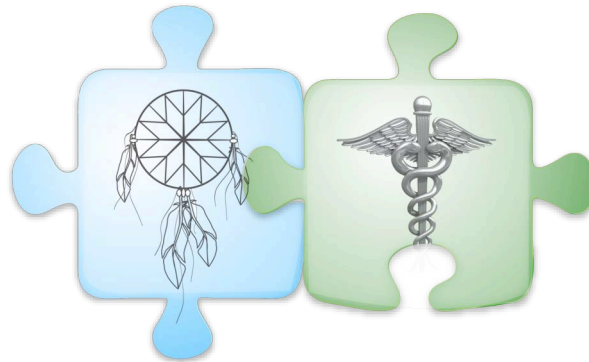
One of the things we do is, during the funeral, we have a traditional pot, and during the burial, we start giving things to the person in the casket. We offer tobacco or Sweetgrass or Mother Earth herself, like dirt. I've seen some people who can't walk, and will be wheeled down to do this, it's important. And then we all gather as a community to a house or to a hall, the church basement, and we feast to our hearts desire. You talk to people you haven't seen in ages, to appreciate their presences and the bereaved family appreciates your presence, and it's a good time to get rid of any bad feelings. Everyone has brought a small gift. In the old days, younger people would bring small gifts and Elders would speak eloquently about the person who has died. Either about the person or their family or something connected to them. If they were unable to find good words, but they would find something to say. That way you can make that person good. And the family is appreciative. When the speeches are all done, then gifts are handed out to those who spoke. In most cases would simply go back to the bereaved, most people would have just given them back. But today, because of the costs of the funeral and the casket and because of the regulations put forth by the province of Nova Scotia and Canada as a country, we have to have undertaking. We have to have a casket, we have to do embalming, we have to do all of that. We're compelled, and it costs money. So how do we appease that now, the people who are willing to give, and still appease the undertaker? There's a big table, and it's filled with gifts that people bring, and it's all auctioned off to defray the funeral expenses and



sometimes we make enough money to open a trust fund for children, or sometimes the family will insist the extra go to a charity. We work all day for the wishes of these people, and they are never alone after the funeral. And anyone who walks into that building is always happy. It is all about giving, communally and individually. The word itself '*salite*' means "given from the heart". Authentic giving. We don't expect anything in return. It's healing. *Salite* is actually a healing ceremony and people want to feel good about themselves will give. A pair of glasses might go for \$500, but if people want to give, then money is worth nothing in those times. And during those times, there's no crying. Healing is taking place.

In this story we see that Health and Healing and Death and Dying are all part of the same Circle and for this Circle to be complete family and community are involved.

## Cultural Sensitivity and Cultural Humility



The title of this module/workshop is ‘Cultural Sensitivity’. In order to explore a little what this is we can briefly look at how cultural awareness is evolving in the field of Health Care.

- **Cultural Sensitivity:** this is defined as being sensitive to your client’s cultural background. It is the ability to adjust your perceptions, behaviours, and practice styles to effectively meet the needs of different ethnic or racial groups.
- **Cultural Safety:** Cultural Safety is a nursing concept developed in New Zealand. It develops the idea that to provide quality care for people from ethnicities different than the mainstream, nurses must provide that care within the cultural values and norms of the patient. Cultural safety analyses power imbalances, institutional discrimination, colonization and relationships with colonizers, as they apply to health care.
- **Cultural Humility:** It is a process that requires humility (remember the Sacred Gift that is offered around age 14-21, or that is given in the Place of Cleansing). This humility is needed as individuals continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners. It is a process that requires humility in how physicians bring into check the power imbalances that exist in the dynamics of physician-patient communication by using patient-focused interviewing and care. And it is a process that requires humility to develop and maintain mutually respectful and dynamic partnerships with patients and communities.
- In Unama’ki we also use the term “Two-Eyed Seeing”

## *Two Eyed Seeing*



- refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western (or Eurocentric, conventional, or mainstream) knowledges and ways of knowing ... and to using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all.
- Two-Eyed Seeing is often a weaving back and forth between the perspectives represented (Indigenous and Western) and not domination or assimilation.
- Two-Eyed Seeing acknowledges the necessity of formal structure open to, and accepting of, new understandings and opportunities. By acknowledging this we might often need to be able to shift our views of a printed agenda so that it is capable of responding to the energies in the present moment (with its encompassed past and future) rather than being seen as a rigidly enforced document. In this way we can see health and healing, and life and wisdom as expanding senses of wholeness.

## Health Care Practitioners

The relationship between Health Care Practitioner and the person being cared for is of the greatest importance.

### *Elita'sualk*

Elita'sualk is the Mi'kmaq word for the action of putting your entire trust and faith in the hands of another person. Such as the doctor or midwife who is delivering your baby. This relationship is not a two way flow, it is not reciprocal but one of the patient putting their entire trust in another person's intent and ability.

### Mutual Trust and Respect

The other relationship is one of mutual trust and respect. The Health Care Practitioners needs to have:

- Reverence for the patient...irrespective of culture, gender, race
- Non judgemental acceptance of the person/patient/recipient

Remember that you, as Health Care Practitioners, ARE THE MEDICINE and can bring healing through openness, listening, care and love.



*Two Stories:*

One day an Eskasoni Elder is feeling sad and emotional and out of balance. The community nurse who has been visiting her family for many years pays her weekly visit. When the nurse takes her blood pressure she remarks how high it is and asks the Elder what is going on. The woman talks a bit but can't find the words to describe much. The nurse tries a few times to contact the doctor to tell him about the blood pressure. She can't reach him. The nurse stays with the Elder, listening and bringing comfort and reassurance. By the time she leaves the Elder, the situation has changed. Her blood pressure is beginning to lower. She is feeling more balanced. What is the medicine in this story? There are no pills, no injections, there is an open heart, an open ear and compassion. The nurse is the medicine.

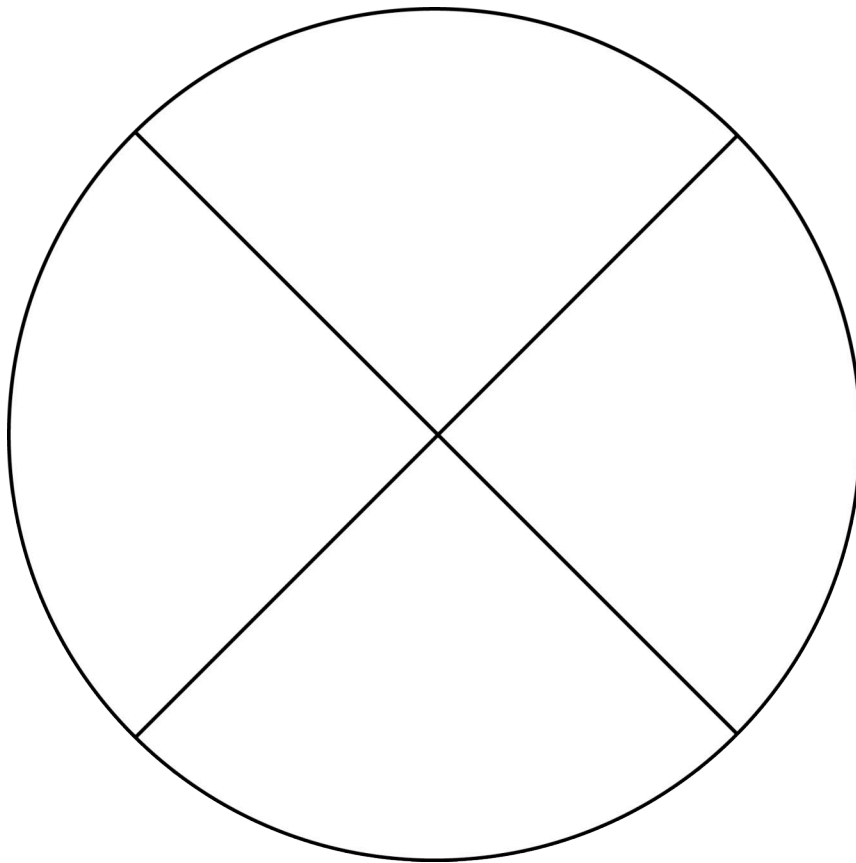
2<sup>nd</sup> Story. A Health Care Practitioner is visiting a home for the first time. A man is suffering from gangrene in his foot. The nurse enters and treats the gangrene. She asks how he is feeling and reminds him his gangrene would be a lot better if he didn't drink alcohol. She leaves him a leaflet with information on gangrene, and another with useful contact information on giving up alcohol.

The next time she arrives at the house the door is closed to her and will not open again. What happened?

In the Mi'kmaq tradition the nurse was allowed in the house to treat the gangrene. Only the gangrene. Trust was put in her skill to treat the physical ailment. By intruding, unasked, into the area of the patient's use of alcohol, the relationship of trust and respect is broken. There is judgement on the part of the Health Care Practitioner and therefore rejection on the part of the patient. Healing is not possible.

If the patient and nurse had developed a relationship of great trust and respect, and in that framework, if the patient had asked the nurse for information on alcohol use, then the home would remain open and accessible to the nurse. She is the medicine and the relationship of trust and respect is complete.

Activities: use a circle to fill in what the gifts are and how Health Care Practitioners can bring them to their Mi'kmaq patients, and what gifts the patient offers to them. Also, what is replaced by the gifts if they are lacking and how such emotions make healing and health more difficult.



*To end this part of the module let's look at a story about Plantain. It is a small and common plant, often seen at the edge of a path. Do you recognize it?*



Story 1: Every day a young Mi'kmaq girl watches one of the local boys who has a bike. He is the only kid with a bike in the community. Everyday as he flies past her house she runs alongside him asking for a ride. The response is always the same 'No!'. One day the boy leaves his bike outside a shop. She hesitates. She wonders. She gets on the bike and rides away as fast as she can. She has never been on a bike before and after only a few metres she falls off. Her hand is badly scraped up on the dirt road. She can't tell anyone she has hurt herself or they will learn of how she had taken the bike. Stolen the bike. Her injured hand is her punishment.

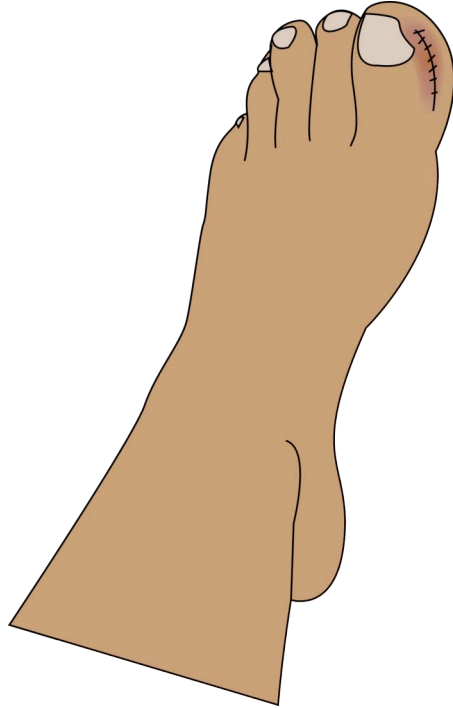
After a few days her hand has become infected. She can't use it. Her arm hurts. There is a sore lump under her armpit. Her pain is noticed by her aunt. She washes the wound in warm water. Then she wraps a plantain leaf around the infected hand. 'It will bring the infection out' she says.

The girl goes to bed, still sore. The next day she wakes and the lump under her arm is gone. The pain is gone. Her aunt soaks the hand again and again puts a plantain leaf on the injury.

'One more time after this', she says. By the third time the Plantain Leaf is taken off her hand, the infection is completely healed, the girl is fully recovered.

Story 2: We jump ahead a few decades. The girl who loved bikes is a grandmother. She still can't ride a bike! Her 12 year old grandson comes in one day limping and in pain. He has just returned from the doctor. He shows her his big toe. An ingrown toenail has become infected. Badly

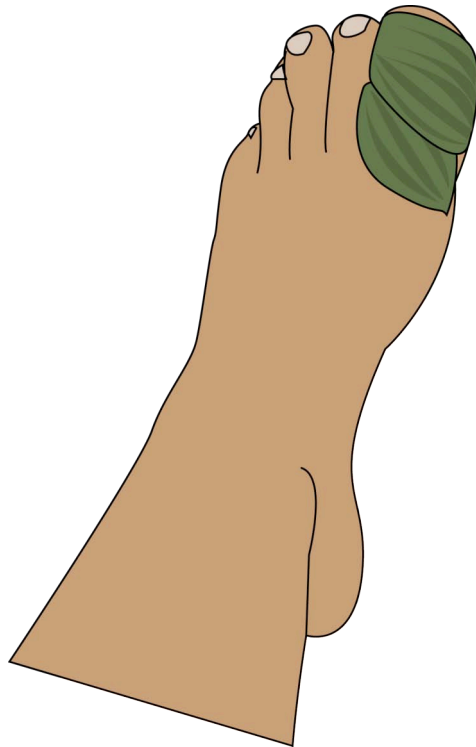
infected. 'I've got to go to the hospital tomorrow', he tells his grandmother, 'they are going to cut the toe open and get all of the infection out. I'm scared.'



'That is a big thing to do' the grandmother agrees. She thinks back to the Medicine of the Plantain Leaf. 'Let me do something'. She takes a walk and finds some Plantain. When she gets back to her home she washes the foot and wraps the plantain leaf around the toe. That night, when the child is sleeping, she hears him cry out. He is restless. She goes to him and he tells her how his toe is hurting so bad, so bad. 'That is the Plantain Medicine pulling the infection out' she tells him. He settles and sleeps. In the morning the toe is looking much better and there is no pain. The Plantain Leaf is covered in pus. She cleans the area again and again puts a new plantain leaf on the infected area. 'One more time after this,' she says.

By the third time the Plantain Leaf is taken off the toe looks healthy and healing. There is no need for the boy to go to hospital. There is no need to have a doctor lance his toe.





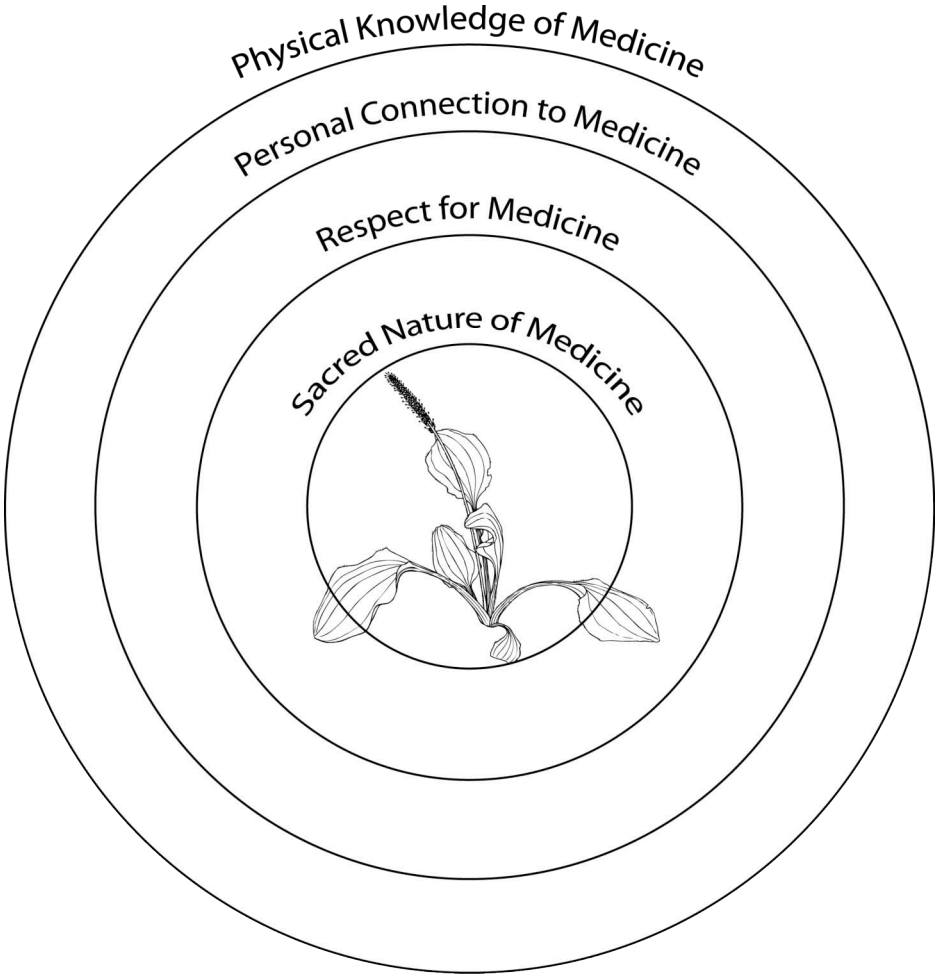
As Health Care Practitioners working within Mi'kmaq communities how does this story make you feel?

That the Grandmother should have taken the boy to hospital? How it was risky that she chose to put a 'weed' on the highly infected area? The boy had a hospital appointment scheduled for the next day. Would you have recommended that she take the boy to hospital if she told you she was going to wrap a leaf around the infected area? What would your judgements have been?

Does the story make you think that Traditional Healing methods are powerful and that Health and Healing should be viewed with cultural humility with a Two-Eyed Seeing approach?



That the Grandmother had, through her personal experience, learnt of the sacred nature of the Plantain Medicine and in using that Medicine gave a Sacred Gift to her grandson for him to know and respect.



Remember: There's more to Medicine than just the physical aspect!