

A MOMENT FOR RIGHT RELATIONS

Why I Drum – September 2021

It was in the mid-1990s that 2 friends asked if I would like to accompany them to a pow wow. They knew that I had indigenous heritage on my father's side (Plains Cree from Saskatchewan), but that I had grown up in Sudbury with little exposure to indigenous culture. I immediately said yes, and we headed out to Red Deer Lake where the N'Swakamok Friendship Centre was holding a pow wow. When we got out of the car, we could hear the beating of the drum. That sound was like a magnet, pulling me. I could feel it throughout my body.

When we reached the clearing, we saw several large drums in the centre, with men seated around them, each group taking turns drumming and singing. A few women stood behind and sometimes joined in on the singing. I wondered why only men were drumming, because I felt a real connection and that this was something that I would like to do. Every summer after that I made sure to attend at least one pow wow.

After I retired, I decided it was time to find out more about my indigenous heritage, and I took some Native Studies courses at the University of Sudbury. I attended an event at Laurentian University where the Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations was speaking. Before he started to speak, a group of women, in long skirts and carrying hand drums, walked on to the stage. They introduced themselves and proceeded to drum and sing The Welcome Song, to welcome the Chief to Sudbury and Laurentian University. Once again I felt that pull of the drum, and the feeling that I should be drumming was very strong.

Shortly after that, a young woman in my class asked if I was interested in attending a drum making workshop. I immediately said yes. My sister, Shirley, and I attended the workshop that was led by an Anishinaabe elder, Isabelle Meawasige, from Serpent River. Isabel provided all the materials that we needed and showed us how to stretch wet deer hide over a round cedar frame and then lace it together at the back. As we worked she provided teachings about the drum. We learned that women had originally gifted the big drum, also called the Grandfather drum, to the men, but that some younger women were beginning to drum at the big drum. Both men and women use the hand drum. Women should wear a skirt when drumming or attending a ceremony, as a sign of respect. The hand drum is also called a grandmother drum. It is a sacred item and should be treated with respect, as we would treat our Grandmother. We also learned that our songs are prayers and that drumming and singing carry those prayers to the creator.

"The beat of the drum connects our heart beat to the heart beat of Mother Earth" is another drum teaching. It explains why I felt the immediate pull of the drum. Shortly after making my drum, I joined the group of Anishinaabe women, the Waabishki Mkwaa (White Bear) Singers, that I had heard singing. Drumming became a very important part of my life, filling something that was missing. I made some good friends and learned more about indigenous culture from women who had grown up with it. We drummed for joyous occasions, like births and weddings, sad ones, like funerals, and to mark important events such as graduation ceremonies, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the 30th anniversary of the United Church's Apology to First Nations Peoples. We also drummed and sang for healing when one of our group or someone we knew was in need of physical or emotional support. The drum is a very important part of indigenous culture and spirituality.

Submitted by Carol Germa (Wind Walker Woman) for the Canadian Shield Regional Council Right Relations Resource Team.