

## Some Thoughts on Being at Turtle Lodge

*Aaron Mills, 2014 scholar*

Boozhoo nindinawemaaganag (hello my relatives),

I'm really looking forward to seeing you at Turtle Lodge during our Summer Institute this year. I'm confident it will present an important learning opportunity, in different ways, for each of us. At the risk of stating the obvious, Turtle Lodge is a permanent structure in the shape of a turtle. I'll let elder Dave Courchene, the lodge-keeper, explain why it has that shape. I know it as a place of higher learning, of ceremony, of relationship-building and of law for many indigenous peoples and friends. Turtle Lodge is at Sagkeeng First Nation (an Anicinabe community), in Treaty #1, at the major southeastern outlet to Lake Winnipeg.

I thought some of you might like a few thoughts about what to expect at Turtle Lodge. I also thought it might be helpful if I took a moment to offer some insights on cultural norms operative in a space like Turtle Lodge, which may vary from what many of us ordinarily experience. Please bear in mind that this is just what I've come to understand from spending time with elders and in lodges in spaces like Turtle Lodge (including Turtle Lodge). Others may have different teachings, and these are also true.

My first thought is that you should be yourself. Your *whole* self. In my experience, Turtle Lodge is a space to listen and to engage the elders, the knowledge-keepers, and one another with body, heart, and spirit in addition to mind. Some folks find this disorienting or even a little uncomfortable, especially if when experiencing something new they like to retreat to their minds. As academics, many of us are particularly prone to letting our minds dominate how we hear and how we speak. We police ourselves often without knowing it. At Turtle Lodge you'll have an opportunity to challenge yourself to hear not just *what* the elders say, but *how* they say it. After watching and listening carefully, you might try to be present and to communicate in like fashion.

Connected to this first point is respect. Although elders and knowledge-keepers are knowledge and practice experts, they don't presume to speak with any authority. They speak in a way intended to allow for diverse perspectives, sharing only how they've come to understand something (often, this goes for indigenous community members generally, not just elders and knowledge-

keepers). And they generally assume that others are doing the same thing. Since there is, thus, a shared presumption that everyone is sharing as best they can, no one directly confronts or challenges anyone else. The Nancy Jones transcribed oration, “All Teachings are Correct,” speaks directly to this point.

This communicative norm contrasts sharply with a great deal of contemporary academic practise, at least in the humanities and social sciences, where a spirit of critical interrogation is generally expected and frequently rewarded. Critical engagement at Turtle Lodge is likely to come off as arrogant and presumptuous: it forgets the epistemological understanding that no one has superior knowledge and that there is no one, correct understanding. The purpose of dialogue isn’t to settle on a universal understanding. We’re all just sharing what we understand, and, by listening to others, expanding our existing understandings. Dialogue is a series of situated offerings, not a death match for truth.

In terms of my own experience, I’ve never critically engaged an elder with something he or she has said (in the academic sense of “critically”) or identified what I took to be a contradiction or inconsistency. However, I’ve often entered into dialogue with elders about something they’ve earlier shared, explaining a point of confusion, a concern, a follow-up thought, etc. The distinction I’m trying to draw is that there’s a significant shift in *how* I engage “critically”. I present opportunities for shared exploration and dialogue, not what I take to be a critical defect that demands redress, or worse, what I presume to be a superior position. Most importantly, if the context is such that the elder is sharing knowledge (as opposed, for instance, to talking casually at dinner) I spend probably 90% of every conversation listening carefully. Instead of giving voice to the 100 things I didn’t understand, I appreciate that it’s my responsibility to take time to reflect before coming at the issue a second time. As I understand it, this is part of what it means to engage not only with my mind, but also with my heart and my spirit. Those parts of me often need time to organize and hold a teaching, and that’s my job, not the job of the elder who shared. And elders often share with me *expecting* that I know this.

Third, elders often communicate indirectly. Stories are a common narrative form. There are many possible reasons for this: non-confrontation, a better opportunity for the lesson to stick, the desire to be invitational instead of directive, etc. And when elders or knowledge-keepers tell me a story, they often don’t unpack the teaching. It’s for me to do that on my own time or in

dialogue with my peers. Gifting me with that opportunity is the elder respecting my unique spirit.

I've often heard elders and knowledge-keepers say that each of us is a sacred person and that each of us has a gift. The elders will respect you and will be happy you came to learn. They will probably think you're here for a reason—even if you don't know why you came. So there's no need to be nervous coming into Turtle Lodge.

Fourth, elders and knowledge-keepers are ordinary people! They laugh and hurt and make mistakes. Don't let the need to show respect inhibit you from being yourself with an elder, on a break or at lunch. They love to laugh! So like you would with any other person, feel free to discern as best you can whether it's a good time to approach. When chatting, use plain-language the way you might with anyone of that age you haven't met before. In a sense, these elders are taking a risk coming to share their knowledge with a room of people who are so smart and so educated. So let's avoid academic jargon and be sensitive to their needs.

If you're chatting with an elder and decide to stray away from casual conversation or the topics that elder was addressing, into a request for knowledge, there are some things you may wish to know. First, not all but many elders don't share much outside the context of an established relationship—which takes time and effort to build. Second, I've found it useful to very rarely make my initial ask for knowledge; usually I ask for a conversation where we can set time aside to sit down, just the two of us, in a more suitable time and place. Third, when I do ask for knowledge, it's important to the elder or knowledge-keeper that I come with tobacco, and depending on the nature of my request, sometimes a gift. I thought I should say this much.

My fifth remark is that if you make a mistake, the lodge won't collapse. ☺ I made hundreds as I figured all this out. If you get the sense that you've run afoul of things, my suggestion is: *do not blow it off*. That said, don't feel ashamed either. The elders and knowledge-keepers usually understand that this is not your way and that you're trying your best. Just own the mistake, apologize and be humble, and all shall be well. You may even get a joke out of it, and if you get teased, then you know you're doing well!

Now as to what to expect at Turtle Lodge specifically. Although I have some relationships there, I'll be a visitor just like you. I don't speak for Turtle Lodge.

Elder Dave Courchene is the lodge-keeper (which means he's the one who had the vision to build the lodge); he speaks for the lodge. I've heard elder Courchene explain that everyone is welcome at Turtle Lodge, regardless of their beliefs or faith tradition. I also understand that Turtle Lodge is a space to build peace and understanding across our many differences. Our ceremonies are inclusive: my understanding is that everyone can participate in ceremonies at Turtle Lodge, even though each of us may have clear beliefs of our own. A possible exception here is moon time teachings, which, being a man, I don't know about—but as we settle in, they will address this if it's part of their protocol (and I suspect it is).

On that note, it's a virtual certainty we'll begin the day in ceremony (a pipe ceremony followed by a water ceremony). During the pipe ceremony, the elders and knowledge-keepers will invoke the creator and will receive direction on how we should proceed (which may adjust our schedule). It goes without saying that one does not enter Turtle Lodge under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

In any ceremony or ceremonial space for Algonkian peoples (which include Anishinaabeg and Cree), movement is clockwise, like the sun. The chairs will all be set in concentric circles. Beyond the circle (i.e. towards the walls of Turtle Lodge), we're free to move about the way we do everywhere else we go in your daily business. Inside the circle (i.e. past all of the chairs), movement should only happen clockwise. Also, there will be sacred objects and medicines on the floor—this is a no-brainer, but don't step over them. Many of those objects (like pipes) are alive. It's rude to step over them and one can inadvertently affect their medicine power.

Around noon we'll have a feast. The details vary across Indigenous communities but the importance does not. Some feasts are intended to do particular work and thus have very serious moments. Many feasts, however, are celebratory expressions of gratitude. Part of what makes the feast so significant is of course the exchange of food: we acknowledge the Earth for taking care of us in so many ways. A feast is also a time to celebrate our links to one another. We're all humbled by the same basic needs, and a feast provides the host an opportunity to care for its guests. On such occasions—as this one—a feast is a time for laughing, learning and sharing together: it's one of the many ways we build relationships. For those reasons in particular, I encourage us to **mingle with the elders and the knowledge-keepers at lunch, rather than just eating amongst ourselves**. Some of the elders and knowledge-keepers will have travelled from great distances to join us; others will come from nearer by,

but all appreciate an interest in their thoughts and experience, and like all people everywhere, they enjoy friendly interaction.

As an aside, once the feast food has been laid out, it's important that you not graze or sample anything until after the spirit plate has been prepared, and the prayer for the food has been offered. We invite the spirits to eat first, and only then do we partake. Dave or the elder offering the prayer will tell us when we're invited to help ourselves. Second, in a traditional context, the younger folks at a feast will ask the elders who are older (some folks are considered an elder in their 50s, in which case this doesn't always apply) and sometimes the drummers, too, if they'd like a plate prepared for them. Given the context, the elders will not be expecting this of anybody (and I don't think the drummers ever expect it), but I imagine that any invitation to do so would be met warmly. Finally, usually at a feast we don't throw out any food. If you can't finish everything on your plate, look for a bin with food scraps. Usually there is one and leftover food goes in there, not the garbage. It will be burnt.

Finally, you'll probably notice some of the elders occasionally checking their text messages. When we aren't in ceremony (which will be the first part of our day), I think it's okay to have a quick peek once or twice, but not often, and obviously I would never talk on my phone. Also, veggie, vegan and gluten folk: I've never been to Turtle Lodge when there haven't been some food options friendly to you, but I've also never seen substitutes for the main dishes. Not a lot of veggie and vegan folk on-reserve. ☺ And last but not least, Turtle Lodge doesn't have indoor plumbing and usually there are only two outhouses. I advise folks to bring a roll of toilet paper and their own travel-sized hand sanitizer. They provide these things in the outhouses of course, but with a group our size they occasionally run out.

My parting thought is this: during our visit, many of us will experience things we don't understand. Let's push ourselves! Too often visitors lapse into passively respectful cultural tourism, and although good-hearted and often accidental, that's the worst. It isn't *actually* respectful just to rise when others do for an honour song and to appreciate that a beautiful song was sung. That song is doing work! The pipes are raised for a reason. The drum beats our prayers out into creation for a reason. It all has real governance purpose. Try to understand what and how! It's okay if it remains a mystery; it's the effort of inquiry that matters so very much. One last time, it's an inquiry you undertake with your whole self.

Okay, I hope this was helpful for some. I wanted to share that it makes me feel hopeful that so many in our community want to come and learn at Turtle Lodge.

Weweni (go carefully),  
Aaron