**Lee Staples Ceremonial Drums and Ceremonial Dances**

I realize that I am going to be discussing an issue relating to our lives as Anishinaabe people that may create controversy, but that is not my intention.  History can show that this country at one time wanted us to abandon our teachings, our ceremonies, and language in the name of “civilizing” us as a people and promoting the “melting pot” concept of having all its citizens conform to one way of life.  It was a decision that was damaging to our communities with its message telling us to reject our identity and way of life.  With the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in place, we are working toward healing from the damage done.

I bring this up to illustrate what has happened to us as people when it comes to our ceremonial dances versus what a lot of us call the “show powwows” that are happening today.  A “show powwow” is one where our people come in dressed up with beautiful regalia – colorful arrangements of feathers and material for their outfits with the idea of showcasing a way of life and a spectacle very much open to the public.  It is my personal belief that these powwows originated with the Wild Bill Hickock show, which in history traveled the country.  This was what was allowable to us as a people in those times, but far removed from what we were originally given as a people through our ceremonial drums and ceremonial dances.

Many of the participants in these “show powwows” are unaware of this fact.  As a result, it is understandable why a good share of our people wants to add too much spiritual depth and significance to what a lot of our Elders consider to be “fun” powwows, just a facsimile of what we were originally given from the Creator in our ceremonial drums and dances.  I write this not to judge our people who may totally live in that “show powwow circuit,” but to let them know more about our ceremonial drums and dances.  I also might add that our reservation does sponsor its “show powwows,” but makes sure their scheduling does not conflict with the dates the ceremonial dances are held locally.  The Hinckley Grand Celebration is becoming one of the bigger contest powwows in the nation, where individual dancers compete for prize money in various categories.  Some of these “show powwows” held in Minnesota and Wisconsin draw as many as 650 to 750 dancers.  No doubt these powwows have grown in popularity over the years, but yet the attendance at our ceremonial dances has wavered.

The Mille Lacs Reservation has 11 ceremonial drums, each of which has a history that dates way back and has been passed down to us as a people over several generations.  These are drums that were given to us by the Creator.  Each fall and spring these drums are brought out each weekend.  These ceremonial dances are an opportunity for our people to give their offerings of tobacco, blankets, cloth and food to those powers that we rely on as a people, requesting help for ourselves, our families, and our community.  Each of the drums has drum members, who represent those powers we rely on as a people.  There are ceremonial songs acknowledging these powers, sung on those Saturday afternoons of these get-togethers, and utilized only in those settings.  Saturday evenings consist of more socializing and dancing the sidestep or ladies songs, where money or 3-4 yards of cloth (women only) or blankets are exchanged in the dancing.

Space prevents me from sharing the spiritual depth and teachings around these ceremonial dances.  But I can say that the surface flashiness of the “show powwow” may not exist at these dances, but the beauty lies in the spiritual connection we have with those powers we rely on and each other at these dances.  It is my hope that our people are aware of the influences placed on them that will cause them to drive miles to attend a “show powwow” on a particular weekend and totally ignore a ceremonial dance taking place that same weekend just down the road at one of our ceremonial halls