**Millie Benjamin Using Tobacco to Pray for Others**

Tobacco is a gift from the Great Spirit and our way to communicate with that spirit. The smoke from the tobacco carries our prayers to the Great Spirit.

Before our people had the white man’s tobacco, they used the inner bark from a red willow.  They would scrape the outer bark off and use the inside for their tobacco.  It has a really good smell – we call it kinikinick.  Combined with the white man’s tobacco, the kinikinick stretches and lasts longer.  I still use it.

My mom and dad weren’t smokers, but I always remember tobacco being around. I usually called my mom “gramma” because that’s what everyone else called her.  Anytime gramma needed something, or had an offering to make, or had a ceremonial dance to attend, she always made sure she didn’t forget her tobacco.

Gramma also encouraged us to make our food and tobacco offerings at the ceremonial drum.  When the drum came out in the spring and fall, she would tell us to make a dish of food and bring it to the drum and have an Elder pray for you.

We teach the students at the Mille Lacs Band’s Nay Ah Shing School, where I work, that using tobacco to ask the Great Spirit for something is not a selfish thing, because you ask for the health and wellness of family and friends.  You don’t ask for a new bike, Nike shoes, or a new car.

We can offer tobacco at any time of the day, wherever we are.  Just find a nice grassy area, put your tobacco out by a tree, and think about the people you are praying for.  If you are having a bad day, go off by yourself and take your tobacco and offer it, and ask that your mind be clear and that you get into a better mood.

There are a lot of people today who can’t offer tobacco to the Great Spirit in Ojibwe because they don’t speak the language.  But when you put your tobacco out, there is always a manidoo (spirit) that corrects you if you use the wrong words, so I’ve always thought it’s okay for people who don’t speak the language.

Every Monday at the high school, we have tobacco offerings and we teach the students how to offer tobacco.  We tell them, “If you have a gramma or someone who is sick or in trouble, put tobacco out for them.”  There are always kids who say, “There’s no one in my family who is sick,” so I tell them, “Put your tobacco out and be thankful you have a healthy family.”  All of the students go through and offer their tobacco.  Then the cultural advisor takes the tobacco from the pile and smokes it and prays that the kids will be safe.

Anytime you ask Elders or anyone for advice, you must always offer tobacco first.  My brother says it’s not proper to use the telephone; the tobacco needs to be handed to them.  The proper way to offer tobacco is to take a pinch out of the tobacco pouch and hand that pinch to the person, then roll the pouch back up and give the whole thing to the person.  You know it’s sincere when somebody does it the proper way.