



Welcome to 2017, a Fire Year. Those who understand the character of each of the elements in the Dagara cosmological wheel—Water, Earth, Fire, Mineral, and Nature—know that Fire kindles and sustains an animating and pervasive energy in all that lives. Fire is in the water that runs, it is in the trees, the rocks, the earth, and in ourselves. It is the mediator between worlds since it is very close to the purest form of energy. Any connection with ancestors, spirits and the Other World is mediated by Fire. A complete understanding of Fire requires a serious relationship with death and the dead. Because Fire burns, those who relate to Fire are often tense and must be clear about their intention in working with Fire. The tension referred to here is like a charge of energy about to burst. Those who carry such fire energy are being prepared for energetic action that reflects, and is the result of, a touch from the Other World.

Fire is the rising force that makes us do, see, feel, love, and hate. Fire has great power, both outside of us and within us. On the outside, visible fire drives us to perform our respective duties, to fulfill our life purpose. But a fire burns also within us. The fire within connects us to our real family—the people we are always drawn to when we see them—and causes them to recognize us. This fire originates in the Other World and connects us always to the ancestors. Through the fire within we can converse with those we left behind in the Other World by being born here. The inner fire is a rope that connects us to the world we abandoned when we were born into a human body. To the indigenous, that world is our real home. This does not mean that this world is not real. It is a place we pass through.

The way to move to a productive understanding of and relationship with Fire is through ritual, where fire is experienced not as a combustive fire, but as a warm, comforting, and loving fire connecting us to the ancestors in the Other World. At the core of the fire ritual is the indigenous belief that each person is born with a purpose, and that this purpose was presented to the Council of the Ancestors in the Spirit World for approval prior to each person's journey to Earth. We come into the world in order to bring to completion that very plan which, as we are born into this side of reality, became our reason for human life. In order to fulfill our purpose, we need the driving force of fire, just as a vehicle needs fuel to reach its destination.

Two things here are at work. We must remember what we came here to do, and we must have a community that knows and remembers our purpose and supports it fully. We do not want a community that tells us what it thinks we should do, but a community that unconditionally provides for us in a manner that allows us to accept our responsibilities and realize the life of our purpose.

From an indigenous point of view, every time a situation pushes us to move faster than is appropriate, every time our heart beats more quickly than normal, every time we get excited for one reason or another, we become situated in the fiery origin, that chaotic place at the time of the beginning of the world. To be ill is

therefore to be en route toward that origin; it implies heat, activity, friction, and struggle. It also calls attention to the fact that the encounter between Fire and Water that resulted in the creation of the Earth and life is not to be taken for granted. The kind of balance required for the maintenance of peace and reconciliation is so tenuous that we are constantly thrown back toward tense and chaotic fiery states. Many circumstances of our lives can send us toward the chaotic fire, such as death, accident, shocks to our life that we connect with. It is the indigenous understanding that we attract these circumstances in order to push us forward to a deeper transformation. The indigenous does not believe in coincidences or in accidents.

Thus is the shamanistic, spiritual and liturgical relationship with Fire that we must labor to incorporate in our daily living for the sake of continuity in our world. This is an invitation to reflect on the various ways and manners in which we as humans have alienated ourselves from Fire. For indeed, what can surpass that which warms us to our ancestors and to each other?

In continuing the discourse about Fire, we acknowledge that the power of fire must be aimed toward something through focused intention, or fire becomes misaligned in the psyche and in society. For example, a person who constantly attracts or makes trouble has his or her fire misaligned. Correction of the person's behavior would have to be ritualistic, that is, it would take place in a ritual. When the tension produced by Fire is not focused, it produces an extreme and often destructive tension in the world. When the fire within a person produces only fire in the world around them, the result is most often violence or death.

The fiery temperament of the world and particularly the West has resulted in a great deal of spilling blood, both symbolic and literal. Indigenous people see the death that results from war or accident as sacrifices to Fire, just as the animal killed in the hunt was offered to the fire as sacrifice. But the engine of Fire in the West appears, to indigenous people, to be the technological machine, which consumes nature around the world. Villagers see the fire of technology consuming through both its speed and through the capitalist accumulation of land and rape of natural resources.

From an indigenous point of view, Westerners are sacrificing much to fires that rage out of control. Just as fire consumes everything in its path, so consumers in the West sacrifice the life of Spirit for an endless pursuit of material goods. Material consumption does not provide care for the soul. It is as if misaligned inner fire is encouraged and supported in modern culture, something necessary to boost production and consumption. When adequately programmed through advertising and the media, people want to accumulate items because such items are regarded as an opportunity for fulfillment. Driven by an internal fire that cannot be quenched, the modern consumer is like a greyhound racing for fulfillment. The goal becomes not so much to reach a destination as to stay in your lane and keep running. When this inner fire is not connected to its source, it drives people to race endlessly after things that do not matter.

For this reason—the fact that fire can become so easily misaligned—I have hesitated before outlining for Westerners how to do fire rituals. From the point of view of my people, the growth, expansion, and progress by which the modern world measures success is a conflagration, a fire burning out of control and consuming everything it touches.

It is essential that the modern world stop burning itself and the rest of the planet, and learn to see beyond the notion of fire that can only consume, to see the aspects of fire that can lead to transformation, healing, and a renewed connection to the world of the ancestors and Spirit that holds our purpose.

To begin making their peace with fire, Westerners must notice the common symptoms of fire in their milieu. In the modern world, being out of alignment with fire translates into pollution of one sort or another. It is as if to be civilized, one must infect the air, leak oil into the waters, and seek to move faster today than we did yesterday. Once we understand this as symptomatic of a state of disconnection, then it becomes possible to seek reconnection and reconciliation with the past. Changing our intentions from consumption, as an out-of-control fire, to connection, like a fire that warms and soothes, will bring fire in Western culture under control to a very great extent.

It is reconciling oneself with the past—or, as the Dagara would say, with the ancestors—that brings the inner fire into alignment. The work of grieving is an important part of reconciling with the past, and for that reason I suggest water rituals precede fire rituals in the West.

The work of building relationships in community also contributes to the taming of fire, for in order to have healthy relationships, one must have made peace with the past. One must also tame the inner fire simply in order to live in community, for close relationships breed friction that would rage out of control if the friends or partners had not done a great deal of work with their psyches.

When an individual is not in alignment with fire, there is chaos and contradiction in that person's behavior patterns. There is a tendency to be fearful of fire, yet there is an almost irresistible attraction to fire. This confusion comes from a lack of harmony between the fires that burn within the person and the way that this fiery energy is expressed and manifested in the outer world. A fire ritual can allow us to experience the positive energies of fire without this chaos and fear.

In a fire ritual, one takes a good look at the intensity of the Other World. In the world of magic, heat opens doors. I remember times in the course of initiation rituals when the heat alone would rise to the point where it would open a window into the Other World, and one would glimpse spirit beings. At those times I was able to see and also to understand, what tribal wisdom means when it declares that divine or ancestral heat comes to us from below, not from above. It was easy to see why god cannot be above the clouds; god is here

underneath our feet. The opening was of the Earth, not of the sky. The faces that appeared in the heat were ancestral faces peeking into this world.

The heat of the fire ritual also reminds us that heat is the circulation of energy. Life is manifested only when energy can circulate. The Dagara language uses the same word *di* (pronounced “dee”) to mean “burn,” “consume” and “eat.” The connection is not, however, about destruction, but about transformation. Any person who goes through a fire ritual involves himself with transformation and change.

Fire must be redefined to become an instrument that offers the possibility of connection, and fire rituals must be seen within this context, where they help renew and strengthen one’s relationship with the past, present and future. One cannot maintain this focus without discovering in it the active role of the ancestors in one’s life and becoming as clear as possible about their own purpose.

These Ritual Programs can be offered as single Elemental Events in the time frame of one day to a full weekend, (offering, for instance, a Fire Ritual), or, in an extended one-week to ten-day program encompassing all five elemental rituals. Ideally, each of these rituals would take place outdoors in a natural and secluded environment. Each, however, can be modified and adapted to an indoor setting.

FIRE

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Fire, the first element of the cosmological wheel, is the mediator between the spirit world and this one, and it is seen as a most potent connection to the realm of spirits. A fire ritual opens the gateway to the world of the ancestors. Its function is to put us humans back on our spiritual track by consuming that which stands between us and purpose. The fire ritual also provides an opportunity to reiterate our commitment to walking our spiritual path.