

The Lighting of a Sacred Fire

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A spark, created from flint and steel, cradled in a tinder bundle was being gently fanned to life with an eagle feather as the first rays of sunlight peeked over the eastern horizon. Traditional Fires have been started in this manner for thousand and thousands of years. This spark awakened our consciousness and officially started the 23rd Annual International Conference for The Association for Experiential Education (AEE), on November 9, 1995. The conference was held at The Grand Geneva, a 1,300-acre resort, hidden away in the rolling countryside just east of Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Over 1,500 people attended from all over the world. The sacred Fire burned for the four days of the conference.

Ahsayma (tobacco) had been given to Muk-ta-thē Bruce Hardwick and Mukwa-o-day Duane Kinnart to light the Fire. Bruce and Duane are Ojibway and Fire keepers in their home area of Rapid River, Mich. Their teacher Nowaten Dale Thomas gave permission for the Fire to come to this gathering. Tobacco is the plant used to give thanks and carry our intentions to the Spirit World. When tobacco is placed in the Fire, the smoke becomes our connection to the world of Spirit and ultimately the Great Mystery.

A male and female cardinal guided two members of the AEE planning committee to a spot where they felt the Fire would be located. Among some native people, the cardinal is the red bird that speaks the truth. When Bruce arrived, he stepped out of his car and pointed to a grassy field north of a gravel service road. He said, without any hesitation, "That is where the Fire will be located. I saw it in a dream. It has been over two hundred years since a sacred Fire has been struck here. The Earth has been waiting a long, long time for this sacred Fire to return." After that statement he buried his head in his hands and cried. The area he pointed to was exact location where the cardinals sang their affirmation of truth.

The weather over the four days of the conference was volatile and constantly changing. Thursday had mild temperatures and sunshine. That evening, a gentle rain started and continued until Friday afternoon when the temperature dropped dramatically and it started to snow. The weather deteriorated into blizzard type conditions through most of Saturday. The howling winds and bone chilling cold cut through the participants like a razor knife. On Sunday afternoon, as the conference closed, the sun shone brightly through a cloudless sky, and the trees stood in a silent salute to the people who had gathered. There was not a breath of wind. It felt like all the elementals had come to visit and acknowledge the gathering.

Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, gave the conference's Friday night keynote address entitled *Nonviolence or Nonexistence: Options for the 21st Century* to over 900 people. That evening, at midnight, Gandhi stood at the sacred Fire in a raging snow squall with a small group of people who listened as he and several others shared from their hearts. Mr. Gandhi stood in ankle deep snow bracing himself against the bitter conditions. He was wearing an old pair of hiking shoes, which seemed incongruent with his business suit and trench coat. While he stood listening, a "crunching sound" was heard outside the circle. Paul Tucker, a conference participant from Albuquerque, New Mexico, confined to a wheel chair, had made his way from the resort, down the service road, and was laboring through the crusted, icy, snow covered field to join the circle. Paul was the person who gave Mr. Gandhi his own shoes so he could walk out to the Fire. Standing at the Fire that evening was one of those rare personal moments where time becomes meaningless and one feels "in the flow" of the universal cycle of harmony.

At the closing ceremony, participants made Earth Bundles of sand, ashes, and coals from the sacred Fire. The bundles were made from four inch square pieces of cotton cloth and bound with four interconnected colored cotton threads that fit easily into the palm of their hand, to carry home.