

GIFTS

One must be careful about gifts. Once a gift has been given, you cannot ask for it back. You can trade for it. If you feel you have received a gift that you feel that the other person wants back but is too polite to ask for it back, you can trade the person for some other item. You can make the first move, but remember, a trade is where both people are happy with the outcome. If you or the other feels you have been taken advantage of, then it is not a good trade. No matter what anyone else says, the trade is between only two people, both must be happy with the trade, and it is not to be talked about later.

A man must ask permission of the husband, if giving a gift to a married woman, if the husband is present. A woman must ask permission of a wife, if giving a gift to a married man. Same sex does not apply. There are exceptions. The feathers of a bird do not belong to us; they can be passed on without prior permission, if for a good reason. The bird belongs to the upper world, and is a gift from the bird and God. This is why the feathers are not to be worn in the hair standing up, this insults the bird. A woman cannot wear the feathers from a war bird unless a real "chief" has given it to her. (A war bird is a bird of prey such as a falcon or hawk.) She is better to use the feathers for saging. If she is instructed in the old way to "tie it to the left ear" then she can wear it.

Along with a "chief", a medicine person can give a gift of feathers of the "war bird" to a woman or a man. As long as they are recognized by the people as a medicine person, not someone who just calls themselves one, the gift is honored. An elder can also give a gift of a feather to a man or woman and it is honored. An elder is recognized as someone who has reached the age of 50, male or female, who knows the traditions well. Remember, just because someone is old does not mean they are an elder, they must know of the traditions. Gifts from either a medicine person or an elder are considered an honor to receive them and should never be given away for it would be an insult. The feathers should be kept until one is told by a medicine person that it should be passed on or it is ready to "go back to the upper world". This means the feather is old and worn and is given to someone who has been taught how to "take the feathers back to the upper world" by fire. One does not bury the feathers.

Each gift is supposed to be an honor to give and to receive. If you refuse a gift from an Indian it is an insult. This does not apply to others who do not know what they are doing. Usually, I tell someone about gifts before I give or receive them. You can refuse a gift of food if you're not hungry, but do it politely.

Disposing of a gift is different. If it is old, worn out, and served its purpose, then it can be discarded. If it was given to manipulate, then it should have been discarded at the beginning. If you are too polite to discuss the gift and knew it was to manipulate, then give it away. It insults the intention of the giver who should have not done it in the first place.

Gifts are given to a person when you go to their home for the first time. This usually is done by the person visiting giving the "Lady of the House" a gift of tobacco wrapped in red cloth. This is not limited to tobacco either. One can place sage and cedar in the red cloth. This is a must and should be done, as stated, upon the first visit to the house. If you do not smoke it does not matter, tobacco is given for many reasons and the main one is it is used in a lot of ceremonies. So therefore, the need for more tobacco always is there.

If you cannot find red cloth then a good piece of calico material will do. With calico, the "simpler the pattern" on the material, the older and more authentic it is. There is a lot of nice calico material in most crafts department of discount stores. But, if you want the older style then you may have to settle for buying a plain piece with NO pattern on it. In the old days the "patterns" were hand done on calico (it was hand-stamped on the material after the basic color was dyed into it). It is very hard to find calico with a simple "one dot" stamped on the cloth. But it can be done if you have a large material store near where you live.

Another thing about gifts (other than the house gifts) is that sometimes the person who gets a gift returns the honor by giving a gift to you also. Now, this does not mean you give a gift to "get one".

That is not right and never should be done or expected. Just because you gave a gift does not mean you will "assure yourself" of a gift in return! The person who received your gift in the first place may not know of "reciprocal gifts" or may just decide to not give one in return. There is NO INSULT intended if you do NOT give a gift in return. This especially applies to the "house gift" of tobacco. One does not have to give a gift in return as the fact that they come to your house is gift enough. While they are in your house it is customary to offer drink and food, as well as a place to sleep, should it become necessary. These are considered reciprocal gifts and take care of all formalities'.

This should help with the gifts thing and we hope all understand how gifts are very important. Even the "gift" of a feather, found by the wayside, that the Bird and Grandfather let you find should be honored in the proper way of leaving tobacco.

Gifts were one way our people showed respect of others, and should be noted that our culture is one of respect of others first. Sharing the things you have was a lesson learned early by our native children. Our people did not horde things, if one had an abundance of hawk feathers they would share them with others who did not. Respect and honor are also things our children learned early. It would be good if the people of today would teach this to their children. The world would be a better place.