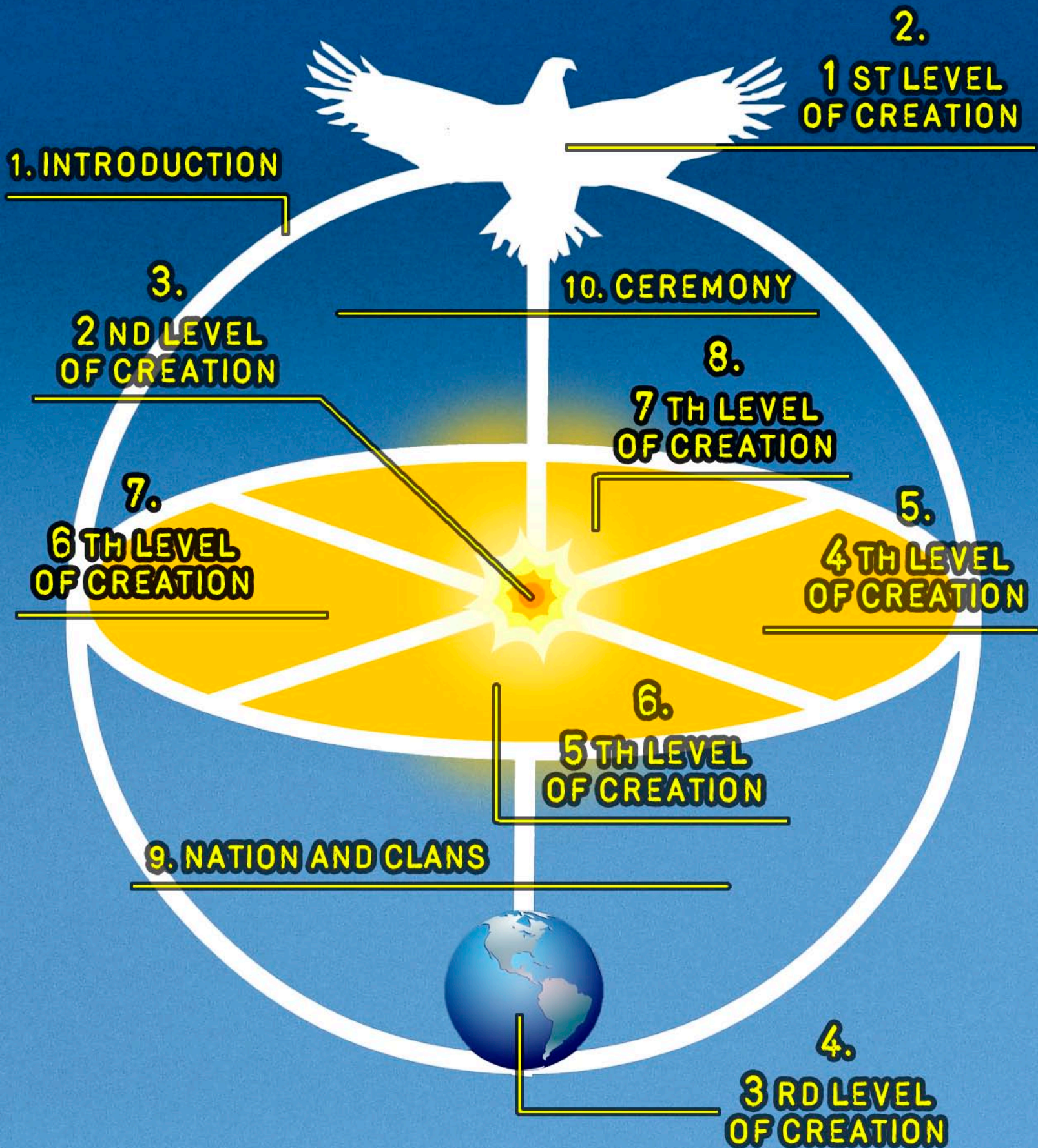


# Diagram for MI'KMAQ Curriculum



# **MI'KMAQ TEACHING**

## **ELDER: STEPHEN AUGUSTINE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The first person that was created on this Earth was Glooscap, with his head lying in the direction of the rising sun, and his feet in the direction of the setting sun. And his arms were outstretched, one to the south, and one to the north.

And so Glooscap was created on the surface of the Earth, stretched out in the four directions. And he was created with all of the Earth's elements: the dirt and leaves, the plants and stones and wood. Everything was gathered together to form Glooscap on the surface of the earth.

But creation did not begin with Glooscap. He came to life within the Seven Levels of Creation, which are represented by the Seven sacred directions.

The first level of creation comes with The Giver of Life. In the Mi'kmaq understanding of the world, the sky or the direction above is symbolic of this first level of creation.

The second level of creation is our Grandfather Sun. The sun is symbolic of the centre direction and also of the self.

The third level of creation is Mother Earth. She is represented in the direction below us.

The fourth level of creation is represented by Glooscap lying with his head in the East as he is being formed. And the quality of leadership is associated with this direction, as well as the birds.

The fifth level of creation is represented by Grandmother in the South - she is symbolic of wisdom and knowledge, and also the animal life.

The sixth level of creation is represented by the Young Man, the Nephew, and the west. He is symbolic of youth and vision and strength, and the fish, the ocean life.

The seventh level of creation is represented by the Mother in the North - she is symbolic of understanding and love, and the plant life.

These are the Seven Sacred Directions that represent the seven levels of Creation.

## FIRST LEVEL OF CREATION - THE GIVER OF LIFE

The first level of Creation is what we call *Gisoolg* in the Mi'kmaq language. When we say *Gisoolg*, it means that you have been created, and you are being created.

It's important to understand: that word, *Gisoolg*, is a verb, an action. Most of our indigenous languages are made up of action words, because in our view of the world, everything is alive, and has a spirit. And our way is not to stand around and talk about our beliefs and lifestyles, with words that symbolize inanimate things. Our elders showed us how to live by example, rather than just explaining it to us.

Here, I only share the spoken aspect of the Creation story in English. It would take a long time to give detailed examples, and support a deeper understanding of our traditional Mi'kmaq lifestyles and beliefs. But try to understand that these teachings are about a way of living, and experience that relates directly to all life, both seen and unseen.

And so, the Giver of Life is the first action, and it is the mystery of creation that exists all around us, unfolding in great cycles, and which we regard with awe. You can see it in the flowers and leaves that come out in the spring, in how they flourish all summer with sun, and wind, and rain; in how the waters lessen and the sun grows more powerful as the summer passes; in how plants lose vitality and fall to the ground; and in how they enrich the roots and soil, feed the earth with their nutrients and become something else - life passing into another life. This great beauty, these unfolding cycles of life and death, all taken together as one, contain the mystery of existence, and are a part of this wonder of creation all around us.

In the Mi'kmaq spiritual context, we look to the sky to acknowledge the Creator, the great Giver of Life, who comes first and contains all things.

## SECOND LEVEL OF CREATION – GRANDFATHER SUN

The second level of creation is the sun, which we call *Nisgam*, or grandfather. Grandfather Sun gives us our shadows. And when we say “shadows “ in Mi'kmaq, it refers to the spirits of the ancestors. So the shadows that Grandfather Sun gives us are the spirits of our ancestors.

And our Elders say that you are linked with your shadow, with the spirits of your ancestors, through your connection to the Earth, through your feet, and through your blood, which is their blood running through your body, which transforms itself to you. So the eyes and faces and smiles of our ancestors, their

movements and mannerisms and identity, are in fact reflected in our bodies: we reflect our shadow, our ancestors in the Earth, as we reach up to the sun.

In this way, we embody all our ancestors, carry their behaviours, share their hearts and lungs, as we breathe in the same air they once did. And so when we make offerings to the land in ceremony, we recognize our connection from the Sun to Mother Earth, who bears our ancestors. And Grandfather Sun teaches us all this by giving us our shadows.

And so we ourselves are in the centre of the world, where Grandfather Sun passes down to meet Mother Earth. And that centre is one of the seven sacred directions, because our shadow is the connection between the spirit world and the physical world. And we are the embodiment of that centre, which is also represented in our Grandfather Sun.

### **THIRD LEVEL OF CREATION – MOTHER EARTH**

The third level of creation, down below us, is our Mother Earth, on whom we walk, and who bears the spirits of our ancestors. In our language, we call the Earth *Wesgit*. And the top of the drum is called *Wesgijew*. And a person standing upon a drum would be *Wesgit ga'amit*. And the individual that stands, we call them *Osgijinew*, meaning the person who peeled himself off the surface of the Earth and is standing erect. *Osgijinew* refers to the people. And amazingly enough, the earth itself is also called *Otsit gamew*. It's the surface on which we stand and which we share with all living entities. That's what we call our Mother the Earth. And when I say it is our mother, the term is "*Ogijinew*."

And so our words for the people, and for the Earth, and for mother, and the drum, all come from that term which refers to "the surface on which we stand, and which we share with other surface dwellers."

And so when we talk about the drum, we are talking about our Mother the Earth. When we hear that drumbeat, we are hearing the heartbeat of our Mother the Earth. And so it is understood that when we drum we are acknowledging that we are children of the Earth and that we are sending a message back to our own mother, saying, "We hear you, we understand, and we recognize your heartbeat in the same way that a child after it is born recognizes the heartbeat of its own mother." And so we call her *Ogijinew*, mother.

### **FOURTH LEVEL OF CREATION – GLOOSCAP**

In the fourth level of creation, a bolt of lightning strikes the Earth. And a person is created on the surface of the Earth, from the elements of our Mother – from the dirt and leaves and feathers and bones and stones and wood. And his head is in the direction of the rising sun, in the east; and his feet are in the direction of the



setting sun, and his arms are outstretched to the south and the north. And so in the fourth level of creation, Glooscap is created.

And after the passing of one winter, Glooscap is struck with a second bolt of lightning. And with this second bolt of lightning, he is given his fingers and toes and all the other extremities. And he is also given the seven sacred parts to his head: two ears, two eyes, two holes in his nose and a mouth. And he is given all these things while still lying on the surface of the Earth.

And so it wasn't until the passing of another winter, the third winter, when the Thunder Spirits, the clouds and rain and thunder and lightning, hit the earth again, striking Glooscap where he lay. Finally released from the earth's surface, he stood up. And right away he looked into the sky and said, "*Gisoolg, wela'lin* - Thank you, Giver of Life, for giving me my life."

And then he looked at Grandfather Sun, and within himself, and he said, "*Nisgamitj, wela'lin* - Thank you, Grandfather Sun, for giving me my shadow, my spirit." And then he looked down below him to the earth and said, "My mother, thank you for giving me your self, your substance, for my creation."

And then he turned around seven times and began to travel in the direction of the setting sun, the path of Grandfather. And he followed it until Grandfather disappeared. In this way, he arrived at the land of the mountains and the ocean in the west.

He then decided to travel south, until he arrived in the land of red soil, and then he turned back and went up north, until he arrived at the land of the ice and snow. And then he decided to go back to the land of his creation, in the east. And in this way, he traveled the whole continent.

And there in the east, early in the morning, he saw Grandfather Sun peeking over the horizon, a bright yellow sun. And he traveled toward the east until he finally arrived at the place where he was given his creation.

And he stood in that place, in the middle of a circle of sparks that were left over from the time when those three bolts of lightning had struck the earth and created him.

As he stood there in that circle of sparks, he looked up at Grandfather Sun in the noonday sky and was going to ask what his purpose was. But before he could say anything, he saw a bird circling in the sky, and this bird then descended and it landed in front of him.

And this bird had a white head; it was a bald eagle. And it said, "My name is *Git'pu*. I am the bird that flies the highest in the sky, and I have been given the responsibility by the Creator, *Gisoolg*, and Grandfather Sun and Mother Earth, to

be the messenger, to come and tell you that you're going to be joined soon by the rest of your family, to help you understand your place in the world."

So Glooscap was happy that the eagle had come to visit him, and watched as the eagle flew up into the sky. And as the bird flew up, a feather came floating down. And before that feather could hit the Earth, Glooscap took it and looked up into the sky. He felt so strong holding onto that eagle feather. And from that moment on the eagle feather has been a symbol of strength connecting our people with the Giver of Life, and Grandfather Sun and Mother Earth.

## **FIFTH LEVEL of CREATION – GRANDMOTHER**

As Glooscap traveled around, he came upon an old woman sitting on a rock. So he went up to her and said, "Who are you; where do you come from?" The old woman looked at Glooscap, and said, "You do not recognize me? I am your grandmother. I owe my existence from this rock on the ground. Early this morning dew formed on this rock's surface, and with the help of the Giver of Life, I was given the body of an old woman, already wise and knowledgeable. If you respect my wisdom and my knowledge, this rock will help you understand your place in this world."

And Glooscap was glad his grandmother came to join him. He was grateful that now he had someone who was going to teach him all there was to know about living on Mother Earth. Wise in many ways, grandmother told Glooscap that she was going to teach him everything there was to know about the sky, Grandfather Sun, Grandmother Moon, the stars, the road of the spirits or the shadows, the Milky Way, and so many other things - and that she would teach him everything there was to know about the wind and the seasons and the tides and the characteristics and behaviors of the plants and animals, and how to make food and clothing and shelter. So Glooscap was happy when his Grandmother came into the world.

Soon after this, Glooscap saw a small animal scurrying along. It was *Abistanooj*, a marten. And he said, "*Abistanooj*, my brother, come here; I have a favour to ask of you." And the *Abistanooj* came over, and he said, "What do you want, brother Glooscap?" And Glooscap said, "Well, I want to ask if you can give up your life. Grandmother and I need to continue to live; we need to rely on your body, because you can provide for us. With your skin, we can make our clothing, with your flesh we can eat, with your bones we can make our tools, and your internal organs we can use for our medicines."

The animal looked down, and then looked up at Glooscap, and said, "Yes, take my life, I give it to you, so you and your grandmother can live." So Glooscap picked up *Abistanooj* and brought him over to grandmother, and grandmother snapped the neck of the little animal and laid him down on the ground. In the

meantime, Glooscap, with his eagle feather in hand, looked up into the sky, and said, “Oh, *Gesoolg*, forgive me for taking the life of the animal, my brother. Grandfather Sun, forgive me for taking the shadow of the animal, my brother, and Mother Earth, forgive me for taking part of yourself for my creation and my sustenance.”

In the meantime, Grandmother was preparing the animal, and she told Glooscap: “Pick up the seven sparks left over from the bolts of lightning that caused your creation. Bring them together in the middle of this pit. And bring seven pieces of dry wood, and arrange them on top of the seven sparks. And invite our cousin Whirlwind, *Wejosin*, to come in.” And so Glooscap did all this, and *Wejosin* came in and swirled around and left, and that swirling around caused the seven sparks to heat up and the seven pieces of dry wood to burn. This is how the first fire was created. The *Jibuktew*, we call it in our language - the Great Spirit fire. And so it was on this Great Spirit fire that Grandmother cooked the animal, the marten. And they shared this meat. They had a feast of meat, to celebrate Grandmother’s arrival into the world.

And so Grandmother taught Glooscap about the fire and its relationship to our survival. And they lived together, and Grandmother shared her knowledge. She made their clothing and tools from the animal that Glooscap brought her and taught him everything there was to know about surviving.

## **SIXTH LEVEL OF CREATION – NEPHEW**

One day, while Grandmother went off to find wood for the fire, Glooscap decided to take a walk down by the ocean.

As he walked among the tall sweet-smelling grass, a young man stood up in front of him. And though he was young, he was big, and tall and husky, with white sparkling eyes. And Glooscap looked at him and said, “Who are you? Where did you come from?”

“Oh, my uncle, you do not recognize me? I am your sister’s son. I owe my existence to the *Wejosin*, Whirlwind. When he passed through the ocean, in the direction of the rising sun, he caused the water to foam, and roil up. And this foam was blown ashore and carried by the whirlwind along the sand, picking up all these rocks, and feathers and wood and everything else, until it finally came to rest on this tall sweet-smelling grass. And then, with the help of the Giver of Life, Grandfather Sun and Mother Earth, I was given the body of a young man.”

He said to Glooscap, “I am strong. I have very strong arms and legs; I can do things for you and Grandmother. But I also have vision. I bring vision to the future.” He said, “I am looking at you.” In this way, our elders teach us that Glooscap had to understand that the young people were looking at him. And that

he had to live his life in such a way that he would leave a legacy of life and survival for the younger generations to come.

And the young man also said, "I bring the gifts of our ancestors." So in this way, our elders tell us that little children are the gifts of our ancestors. And they also carry all the characteristics and images of our ancestors: our Grandmothers, our Grandfathers, and so on.

And so Glooscap was happy that his nephew came into the world to share his life, to offer his strength, and to share his vision – because young people look ahead of us; they see into the future and provide us with guidance in the way we live, so that we share our survival with the generations to come. And so the nephew and Glooscap came back to grandmother with this understanding.

And because the nephew owed his existence from the ocean, Glooscap called upon the fish. He said, "My brothers and sisters, fish of the waters and the rivers and the oceans: come ashore and offer yourselves, because we need you for our survival." And so the fish came ashore, and he brought the fish to Grandmother. And he apologized for taking the life of the fish, and for taking the shadow of the fish. And he apologized to Mother Earth for taking elements from her for his own survival, and for the survival of his grandmother and his nephew.

And Grandmother prepared a feast of fish to celebrate the arrival of the young man, Glooscap's nephew. And so they ate, and shared their life and Grandmother continued to teach them everything there was to know the world and about surviving on the Earth.

## **SEVENTH LEVEL OF CREATION – MOTHER**

So finally, Glooscap was alone by the fire one day, and he had just finished putting another piece of wood to the fire. And as he was sitting there, a woman came and sat beside him, and she put her arm around him and said, "Are you cold my son?" And he looked at her and said, "Who are you; where did you come from?"

She said, "I am your mother; I am *Nigan aganim kwoseesg*. Early this morning, I was a leaf on a tree that fell to the ground, and dew formed over this leaf, and with the help of the Giver of Life, Grandfather Sun and Mother Earth, gave me the body of a young woman."

She said, "I bring strength for my children. I bring the colors of the world: the blue of the sky, the yellow of the sun, the green of the grass, the trees and the leaves, and the red of the earth, the black of the night, and the white of the snow. And I bring understanding and love, so that my children will learn to take care of each other, to rely on and love one another." And so this is how Glooscap's mother came into the world.



And so Glooscap was happy that she came to teach him how to love and understand and share with others, about how we all rely on one another for survival. In appreciation of his mother, Glooscap called upon his nephew to go and gather the food that came from the plants, the roots, the berries, the nuts, the fruits, and so on. So the food was brought together, and Grandmother prepared a feast to celebrate the coming of Glooscap's mother into the world, her creation.

And so they all assembled, and shared. And Glooscap's Grandmother, *Nogami*, was doing all the teaching that needed to be done; and the nephew was watching everything, and helping everyone. And Glooscap was there to show leadership, respecting the teachings of the elders, and respecting the young people for their vision and their strength, and the gifts they bring from the spirits of our ancestors, and respecting his mother's teaching to love and care for others, and rely on one another. And so, in this way they lived a very good life.

## **MI'KMAQ NATION AND CLANS**

One day the eagle came back and visited Glooscap. And Glooscap was told that He and his grandmother had to leave this world and travel to the west and to the north. They were to go away and stay in the spirit world until a time came when the Mi'kmaq people would be under threat of extinction, and that Glooscap and his grandmother would return at that time to help the people.

The eagle also told Glooscap that his mother and nephew would have to look after the Great Spirit fire. And the Eagle said, "Out of this fire, a spark will fly, and when it hits the earth, a woman is going to be created. And another spark will fly and another woman will be created, and then another spark will follow, until seven women are created. And then, over time, more sparks will fall out, and then seven men will be created. And together these seven men and seven women will form seven families." And the Mi'kmaq people are one of those seven families that were created out of the sparks.

And the eagle told Glooscap that after a time, once the seven families had learned the teachings, they would then disperse from the area of the great fire. And the Mi'kmaq people ended up in the Maritimes. And in order not to forget the significance and meaning of the seven levels of creation, we divided ourselves into seven clans, or *Mawiomis*. And down through the ages, for thousands of years, the traditional leaders of these *Mawiomis* maintained the knowledge and history of these seven territories, these seven Sacred Fires. And our memory of these lands stretches back to the time before the melting of the glaciers, thousands of years ago, down to the coming of the Europeans, and the making of our treaties, as recorded in our own histories, and up to the present day.

## **MI'KMAQ CEREMONY**

So after the passing of seven winters, those seven original clans come back with their seven fires to rekindle the original fire, which represents the first four levels of creation - to honour the Giver of Life, Grandfather Sun, Mother Earth and Glooscap, and to remember the bolt of lightning and sparks that brought him to life and created the Great Spirit Fire. And they put seven rocks in the fire to represent the first seven levels of creation, and seven more for the seven original families created from the first spark, and seven more for the clans of each of those seven families, and finally, they will bring together their medicines, their plants and roots and leaves, and seven more rocks to represent the seven great medicines that those families bring together. And so we have twenty-eight rocks in the fire.

And seven saplings are bent to frame our Sweat Lodge, with the door facing east. And the seven hereditary chiefs go inside that lodge, which is the womb of our Mother Earth, and call on the people to cover the lodge with seven skins of animals. And the chiefs call upon the first seven rocks to be brought in, which represent the Grandmother. And we close the door and pour water on those rocks, to remember how Grandmother was created from a rock, when dew formed on her and was heated by Grandfather Sun – how she was created from the merging of those elements of light and heat – that fire - with the water, converging on the rock. And the steam cleanses our bodies and our sweat goes back to our mother, connecting us to our creation, and our shadows. Then the doors are opened and we sing our songs and share the pipe and the sweetgrass. And then we call upon seven more rocks, and seven after that, and seven more again, and make offerings to the cardinal directions in turn, and all those things that come with those directions: the Grandmother and the elders' teachings, and the Nephew, and our mothers. And when the door opens again everybody goes around in a circle, and comes back out, like babies born again into the world.

So the seven levels of creation and seven sacred directions are recognized in our ceremonies: in the Sweat Lodge; in the sweetgrass ceremony, which is in honour of the nephew; in the tobacco offering ceremony, which recalls the creation of the Mother from a leaf; and in the pipe ceremony, which symbolizes the teachings of the Grandmother and the mother combined, by joining the rock with the plant, the stone pipe bowl with the wooden stem.

The words and prayers of all those brought together in our ceremonial circle are put together in the smoke from the sweetgrass or the pipe. And that smoke and those prayers are offered to the seven directions: looking above, we give thanks to the Giver of Life, for giving us life; looking within ourselves, we give thanks to Grandfather Sun, for giving us our shadows; looking below us to Mother Earth, we thank her for allowing part of herself for our creation; and we look east to give

thanks to Glooscap, for his leadership, and to remember the eagle and the bird life; we look south, to Grandmother, who came from the rock, and remember her gifts of wisdom, and the animals; and we remember the nephew, who traveled to the west, bringing the gift of strength and looking to the future with the eyes of the ancestors, and arriving with the fish; and we look to the north, where the Mother arrived from the leaf of a tree, representing the plants and the colours and the teachings of love and how to care for one another.

In this way, as we look above and within and below, and to all the four directions, we involve these spiritual entities in our ceremonies. And we include the world that we can see, with all the elements of life that we share on the surface of our Mother Earth all around us; and we have one mind in the physical world, and one mind in the spirit world, one foot in the world of our ancestors, and one foot looking to the future. And so in the centre we are communicating with the whole cycle of life in all its aspects, in respect for how life begins, and is all tied together.

In honour of my elders and grandmother – *Wela'lin*.