

## Selections from *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide*

### Unit: Plants (Middle and High School)

1. “Sage was an extremely holy plant to Plains Indians: few ceremonies were conducted without it. This fragrant herb pleased and attracted good influences and drove away the evil ones. It was used as an incense to purify implements, weapons, dwellings, and people. Beds and wreaths of sage played a part in several ceremonies; for example, sacred pipes were laid on a bed of sage. Purifying baths were scented with sage. It also had medicinal uses when made into a tea or salve, or taken like snuff. Perhaps reflecting its importance, Lewis collected eleven specimens of five different species of sage.”
2. “Illness could also be caused by a wandering ghost spirit or *skep* (pronounced ‘skape’ and spelled *ishép* in Nez Perce). Such disembodied spirits, often depicted as skeletons, made themselves known in dreams or as invisible voices. People possessed by a *skep* might waste away or become insane; they often mutilated themselves with knives. Wild rose was used to repel such spirits.”
3. “A number of curative plants—including sage, sweet grass, juniper, and balsam fir—worked mainly when burned like incense, to sanctify a space or purify an object or person. Transforming a substance into smoke freed its spirit or potency, according to George Sword, a Lakota holy man born about 1847. ‘The spirit that is in the smoke goes with it into the mouth and body and then it comes out and goes upward. When this spirit is in the body it soothes the spirit of the smoker. When it goes upward, it soothes the God. So the God and the spirit are as friends.’ It was the doctor who smoked, not the patient, and he did it to honor and invoke the powers that would perform the cure. ‘If one sings or prays while making the smoke, it will be more pleasing to the God.’”
4. “On the Plateau, it was said that the steam bath was first revealed to Coyote in mythic times. To some its construction was a sacred process filled with symbolism. Martin Louie, a modern member of the Colville Confederated Tribes, explained that each set of four willow boughs supporting the domed top represented a part of creation: the four directions, the four seasons, the four foods (bitterroot, serviceberry, salmon, and meat), the four colors (yellow, white, black, green), the four winds, and so forth.”
6. “Gathered without the proper songs and prayers, processed without the proper techniques, their spirits left and they became useless. Lewis attributed the medicinal effect of plants to the way their chemical properties interacted with the body. The Nez Perce attributed it to the way plant spirits interacted with the herbalist and the spirits that caused disease.”

7. “The Dakota called the red false mallow plant *Heyoke ta pezhuta*, which means ‘medicine [pezhuta] of the heyoke [a vision society].’ The heyoka were sometimes spoken of as clowns, or lunatics, because they did things contrary to nature. Their most famous act was plunging their arms into boiling water and splashing it over each other, complaining that it was cold, to the mystification of beholders. This plant was the secret to the performance. They would chew it into a paste or mucilage which was rubbed over the hands and arms, thus making them immune to the effect of scalding water. The plant was also chewed and applied to inflamed sores and wounds as a cooling and healing salve.”