American Indian Narratives: “...My Spirit is Starting to Come Back”

As American Indian women, we have a concept of relationship that extends across time and to all living things. Whether we are social workers or clients, researchers or research participants, we have come from similar places and we use those places to solidify our relationships with one another. Some of us recognize each other in the stories we tell. And when we are no longer together, we take our joined narratives with us.

by Christine T. Lowery

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When I first saw May, I saw her in a way that tugged on my memory, sensing something familiar but having no proof of how I knew her. May, a woman from the Yakama tribe in Washington, was the first of six women I interviewed in a study of Indian women and their addiction and recovery processes. I used the life history to gather data and to explore her life with her in a series of interviews. As a researcher, I did not anticipate May’s themes of grandmother and granddaughter and foster child to braid into the themes in my own life as a Laguna/Hopi (Pueblo) woman and Indian child welfare worker. But it should be no surprise, for as Indian women, our lives in middle age are not the reflection of ourselves in a mirror, but the reflection of our relationships through the generations.

To help is to share strength that continues to influence us over time. May and I share a larger connection in our research relationship, a trust that permits memories that come from the experiences of our people to be relived and, in that reliving, to be reinforced for the truth and comfort they represented the first time. It was in the stories of May’s experiences of abuse in child welfare that I connected with her most strongly. These stories reignited my role of protector as an Indian child welfare worker. I will tell you these stories in four circles, circles that intersect time and cross generations: recognition, child welfare, “my spirit is starting to come back,” and coming home.

The First Circle: Recognition

In 1993 when I interviewed May, she was 52. In our cultures, May was becoming an elder, a teacher, a leader. May had double bypass heart surgery at 49, and the scars of surgery criss-crossed her chest. At 50, she was working out a seven-year relationship with her lesbian partner, who was in her sixth year of struggling with sobriety. That same year, May had a bout with pneumonia and won, despite her weakened physical condition. When she was 51, AIDS hit her gay and lesbian community with force, and the couple lost many friends. After 28 years of alcoholism, at age 52, May had 12
years of sobriety. She had finished 10 years of working in the alcohol field and received her certification for chemical dependency intervention. She was diagnosed with diabetes that year. Her social service agency had been notified of pending budget cuts, and she and some of her co-workers faced possible unemployment.

My connection to May is intergenerational. She is a large woman, dark skinned, broad shouldered, barrel chested, with a face that marks hard time. I saw my own Laguna grandma somewhere in her face, the way I must have seen my grandma when I was a little girl. Interestingly, May recognized me, too. In 1993, I was seven years younger than she was, and May was the age my grandma would have been when I was born.

"I've gotten a lot better about just staying within my own little... sober world," May interrupts. "I know!" I whisper. "How much of a difference does that make?"

"I would probably be real... ah... veiled in some of my responses," May begins. "I'd have real cliche," she pauses, "because I am a con, and I know how to do that kind of stuff. And I've done that before to people who are asking questions. They're very glib answers and very pat and stir all the passion in that person... but I didn't have to do that with you. Because for some reason I've seen you before... you know. You've been there before, somewhere; you've been there and I recognize you. Nobody would understand that if they weren't native."

"Which is why," I respond, "when I see you, I see a Pueblo woman."

"Uh-huh," she answers, nodding her head.

"And you look, you look familiar to me too," I say. "In fact when I came up [the steps tonight] I recognized your profile... and you do... you..." I wanted to tell her she looked like my Laguna grandma but May was ahead of me.

"Because I can go to [your] country and they come up and start talking to me like, 'Yeah, where's your family?' you know. 'Well, they're from Washington State.' 'No you're not!' I have this image that fits a lot of tribes... and it's amazing how it works."

May stops, she is thinking, then she continues the circle of her thought: "Not that there wouldn't be a lot of people that I would talk [to] about my alcohol history. Because I've had students who tried to interview me and they're very intrusive. Now, I've told you stuff that I'd never tell anybody, but that wasn't intrusive for me because you allowed me a lot of freedom. Their [questions were] really structured and they always have a way of letting you know, 'that isn't the right answer.' They look at you, so then you stop. But you're still pleasant and you're still kind and you never change the expression in your voice, but 'Well that's about it,' you know... Because they want the right answer, they don't want the truth. They want the right answer. And that's totally different between Indians and non-Indians. And it's so sad... but it's real because that's how they talk to us. I get real tired of people who always go, 'Oh... you're so spiritual.' And I'm just like, 'Ri-i-ight.' I worked real hard to even find anything spiritual. Because I didn't know what that meant. I thought it meant religion, just like they did."

May continues: "One of the things I couldn't understand in terms of recovery was, they talked about a spiritual program and, and words like 'God'... and what I thought [was] religion. And [understanding what spirituality was] didn't happen for me until two years into my sobriety, when my mother died."

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I had not been formally trained as a young woman in the culture that follows certain traditions, follows certain protocols when it came to a death in the family. But all of a sudden all of those things just came to me. I knew where she was to be buried. I knew the name of the place. I knew the name of the cemetery, I remembered where it was. And I knew who to hire to do the dressing service and the [funeral] service and knowing I had to find a gatherer [to gather berries and roots] and what I needed to do in terms of hiring cooks and hunters and fishermen and it just went boom, boom, boom.

"And I had not been formally trained so it felt like, 'Ok. I have a spirit that's telling me in my spiritual part.' And I wasn't thinking in terms of God. I was thinking in terms of maybe a creator, or I don't know, but it was there. It felt really good. It kind of gave me some comfort to know that I was doing the things that I needed to know how to do, as the eldest [woman] now. And it was my place to take care of all of this. My brothers had nothing to do with it because I was the one that's supposed to do this. And I did it. And the old people came to me and told me, 'Yes. Yes.' I didn't have to stand around and not know what to do. And all of a sudden people started turning toward that part of me to take care of other things that might go on like an illness or whatever."

**The Second Circle: Child Welfare**

May's history is one of separation and attempted reconnection, a pattern common for many Indian youth in her generation and the generation before and the generations that follow. Before she was five, she spent some time with an elderly maternal great aunt and uncle, grandparents from an Indian perspective. Eventually her grandmother went blind. May vaguely remembers that she might have been sexually molested by a grandfather but doesn't really remember. Could this be why May was removed from her grandmother's home at age six and placed in a Christian mission boarding school? Or was it her grandmother's blindness? She only remembers that she was never allowed to go home, carried away in a common practice that pre-dated by 32 years the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, legislation designed to keep Indian families together. May would be placed in a series of foster homes all within a hundred miles of her family and her tribe, but May would not see her grandmother again. May did not see her mother again until she was 21 and pregnant with her first child.

"They just came in and said they were going to take me, and they did. I don't remember the story or anything. I remember one day I was at my grandma's and the next day I was there. And I never saw my grandmother again."

When May was taken away at age six, she was ill most of that first year away from home. Mumps, measles, and whooping cough swept through the common living quarters of the Indian children at the Yakama Indian Christian Mission.

May sighs as she begins her story. "It was the First Christian Church that sponsored it. All the little girls stayed in one end of the building and the boys stayed somewhere else. We went to a public school and they would hit us every time we'd try to talk our language. The principal would hit us with flash cards if we talked and...he was always hollering at us out on the playground if we talked. And I couldn't understand where everybody was, like my mom and everybody, my grandma. And I really hated going back and forth on the buses [from the mission to the public school in town]."

"From there I went to town the beginning of my second grade [to live with Mrs. King, the 55-year-old matron of the boarding mission]. And I was the only Indian in that school so I got a lot of name calling. There were a few kids who were nice to me; they seemed to be the ones that went to the church that Mrs. King went to. She made me get baptized at eight. And she would say, when she would beat me up, she would say, 'We're going to take that heathen out of you, that evil
out of you.'

"But the hardest part was when people would tell me that I was dirty or I wasn't as clean as them 'cause, 'Look at you!" I'd look and all I could see was the brown and they had white skin. So I'd go wash and wash and wash. Then when I was in [another placement] my sixth grade year the same thing went on... the feeling I always had to go into the school prepared to take somebody's stuff that day. It was usually the boys... and then the girls would say it too. And so I usually ended up just going off by myself. So I did a lot of daydreaming and... wishing for things. I'd read the signs on the cars at the car lot and they'd say 1995, and I'd count my dollars. And I'd count 19 dollars," May laughs, "and 95 cents and that's not what they meant, you know. But I thought as a kid, if I can buy one, then I can go home. You know, I should show more respect for these people because, after all, they took me in.

"But nobody would talk to me about all the [foster care] checks they took either... nobody mentioned that. And I was the one that went to jail, not Mrs. King... when I ran away when I was in 5th grade. . . Later I went back with Mrs. Baker, my case-worker, to pick up my clothes and... nothing was mentioned about [the abuse]. Mrs. Baker was just this cheery... I thought, 'Geez. Why don't you go in there and punch her out or something, you know.' . . . I know I'd get beat almost every week."

"You didn't eat with the family?" I ask.

"No," says May.

"Do you think if you were in another place, not in... those small little towns, you would've been treated differently as an Indian person?" I ask.

May was not part of an Indian family that had prestige, and she had mixed blood. Yakama, Quinault, mixed German and French. "I was a breed. And my mother was with... a black man. There was that element of [she sighs] prejudice. "I don't know if I would've been treated differently... if I'd been in another city or a bigger town... All I know is that during that time I learned how not to like leftovers, because I always ate when everybody got done, especially through the 6th to 9th grade. . . I was always the outsider and everybody was telling me how grateful I should be because they let me live there. You know, I should show more respect for these people because, after all, they took me in.

"You didn't eat with the family?" I ask.

"No," says May.

When I heard these stories, I was catapulted into my social work practice as a child welfare worker on a reservation. In the mid-80s, a group of five children were in our care and I interviewed a childless Indian couple that was willing to serve as foster parents for all five children, in shifts. The first two children, ages 18 months and three, were placed in the couple's small, two-bedroom apartment. Later, when the couple was able to rent a large trailer with multiple bedrooms, the other three siblings, ages four, five, and six were placed.

I was the original case-worker and, over the course of a year, talked with the birth mother of the children about the sexual abuse experienced by the five- and six-year old girls. I talked with the mother's sisters and their mother about the future of these children. None of the relatives were able to care for the children; the patterns of drinking and drug abuse continuing...
ued in this generation, as they had in the last. And the sisters agreed that they were unlikely to change their habits while the children were still small. The mother came in and talked with the couple who had decided, by then, that they could adopt and raise these children. Eventually, the mother relinquished her rights.

In the meantime, the school-age children were being seen by the school psychologist. The new family was seen by a contracted team of white therapists who specialized in treating sexually abused children and who worked with the foster parents as well. The children had a new Indian social worker who was monitoring the case and I was completing the adoption study.

Here was a model case, an Indian child welfare agency with 80% Indian staff, working with an Indian foster/adoptive home, good therapy resources. The formal adoption would go before the tribal court in six months. So when the oldest child was taken to the emergency room after being beaten by the foster father, we were all in shock. When the child told about the sexual abuse by the foster father, we were sick. Bad things happen to children even in foster care and even under watchful eyes. Hindsight unmasked the red flags that could now be seen by the therapists. “She drew pictures about someone watching them while they took showers, but we thought it was when they were in the home of their biological mother.” “Ah yes,” said the non-Indian group home director sanctimoniously, “The wife bears all the symptoms of a battered-woman.”

And as I listened to May tell her story, I reviewed my own role as protector. In my heart I held the young May in my lap and I rocked her, just as I had rocked the child who had been beaten: “I am so sorry. We’re the ones who are supposed to watch out for you, to protect you, and this should have never happened.” And the seven-year-old raised her hand and wiped my tears away.

The Third Circle: “... my spirit is starting to come back”

“Zero to five years old is when we learn all our values and our morals and it’s from our environment and it’s... set in us” May says. “And no matter what else transpires, no matter what else happens, that hope, you asked me about, somewhere in there, in those first five years there was some hope that it didn’t have to be the way it was. ...In those first five years I was with my grandma, and she taught me a lot of things about...living and being, being nurtured and being cared for. I don’t remember my grandmother hugging me or kissing me or anything, but I knew she was always there. And she would always protect me. So I’d find myself... slipping back, going through my turmoil and chaos and dramas...I created because of alcohol... There was that hope that maybe I could feel this way again some day. And I didn’t know why I wasn’t feeling it out here. But there was always that link...that would draw me back to...‘this isn’t right.’ Because here I learned yes, no. . . .What is right and wrong and out there, I didn’t have those boundaries and I didn’t have that stability that dictates limits. ...I didn’t know how to [limit]. I did everything in excess.

“But back here, there was always...that comforting feeling and I always strove to try and find that. And I think to this day that’s why I’m not in prison or that’s why I didn’t kill anybody. There was always somebody that saw good in me, because I was here and I had this good...

Most of the time I was a very honest drunk, I was a very honest thief, I was a very honest liar,” May chuckles. “That sounds contradictory but what it means is this piece of me was always with me, but I didn’t know how to recognize it.”

“Is that what you felt when you were doing things for your mother’s funeral?” I ask.

“Yes. That completion of, ‘Yeah, this is what I’m supposed to do.’ And I was able to, to feel ah... in touch.”

“In touch? Have you felt that way at any other time besides your mom’s funeral?”

“When my granddaughter was born I was in the delivery [room] and watched her being born and was able to be with [my daughter], and I felt that then. Because there’s always
that beginning. Even the time I
lay my mother to rest... all of a
sudden I could feel new life in
terms of... I was sober, and I
wasn't going to get drunk that
day... And I was going to be
ok... That's what it was, that
feeling of comfort and knowing
I did all I could and I'd done it
the way I was supposed to do
it. And it felt complete."

May continues talking
about memories of her grand-
mother: "I can smell the sage
burning and I'm back there... I
could smell the beeswax. I can
see the oval rug that I sat on by
her big, over-stuffed chair. And
she'd do beading and rubbing
the wax on the thread and she'd
be talking to me, telling me sto-
rries and I'd just sit there."

May responds to a quick
memory about getting her
grandmother tea. "And that sau-
cer being so huge, with her cup?
My mother showed it to me and
it was a little tiny saucer, a little
tiny thing," May laughs. "And
I'd watch her pour the tea in the
saucer and pour it back in the
cup to cool it off...

"My grandma was going blind... but when we'd go
up to the mountain and spend the summer, she'd take me out
and she was zipping around and she was walking everywhere
and she'd go, 'Ok, Isha [granddaughter] there's some.' And
I'd climb the tree and get this black moss to make coom, which
is a pudding... And she'd say, 'Well, bring it down, fill up the
gunny sack.' Then we'd go back
and she'd wash it and pick all
the sticks out and rinse it and
rinse it and boil it on the stove
and it was pudding. And I'd put
sugar in it and eat it and she'd
always make that for me... And
watching when they went and
got honey. And watching her
when she'd go out and get the
[dried] meat hanging outside... it
was just part of what she did.
You learned a lot and it all comes
back at some point. [For ex-
ample,] I didn't know how to
butcher. One day my son, my
oldest boy, brought in a half an
elk. There I am, zip, zip. I had
watched it somewhere in my life
and it just all came back.

"For so many years it's
been so clouded and so frag-
mented... a big collage that
there hasn't been a real picture
that's formed that I can look at.
... and have all those images... that are clear enough... that I
can make some kind of sense out
of. I've always had to live at
somebody else's beat of the
drum and I've always had to
live at somebody else's will.

"And...even at 52, I am
coming from puberty to woman-
hood to know who I am inside,
finally. Because all that alcohol
fog is now lifting, and all of that
despair and... all of that life that
was ebbing out of me. The light
that I have is still there... and I
can see that there is worth in
here now. And I don't always
have to look to other people for
validation, because my spirit is
starting to come back.

"And as an Indian
woman at 52, I'm an elder," May
whispers. "And I need to look
at who I am, because people
come to me to be taught... What I'm saying is that the mod-
eling that I do in my behavior
in all areas, in my profession, in
my social life, in all of those
things, people see me. Espe-
cially on the reservation, they
used to see this drunk May; now
they see this sober May... I can
see my color now. I can stand
up and be counted... [I can]
lead, and not always be on the
fringe looking in. We're taking
back our culture, we're taking
back our traditions and they fit
very well."

May concludes: "There
was a lot of hope in watching
my mother and grandmother
when they [did beadwork]. I
watched them interact with
other people and saw the respect
that was given to them. I know
that I came from that same lin-
eage and maybe I can achieve
that, too."

The Fourth Circle:
Coming Home

Long ago, before I was four
years old—when my family, like so
many other young Laguna and
Acoma families in the 50s relocated
to Barstow, California, so my father
could work for the railroad—I
learned that everything had a spirit,
that everything had a place, that ev-
everything was connected.

I was surrounded by many
brown grandmas, women with
lights in their eyes and busy,
wrinkled hands. I remember fresh
corn and melons from the fields,
dried deer meat hanging on the
barbed wire fences, deer stew din-
ners with green jello for dessert, red
chili and fresh tortillas, peaches
drying in the sun, the smell of
warmth coming from the old wood
stove, and hot oatmeal with canned
milk. I "helped" my grandpa
butcher sheep and chop wood, and
helped my grandma rescue brown
mountain bread from the hot outdoor ovens. I remember the excitement of preparations for welcoming the deer that the hunters would bring; the peacefulness of my grandpa praying out by the woodpile at sunrise; the sound of the village crier giving instructions and calling out news; and nights so full of stars my grandma got tired of counting them for me.

"Grandma, count the stars for me."

"There are too many to count, Gya-oh [A Laguna word meaning both grandmother and granddaughter]."

"How many are there?"

"More than a hundred, hundreds and hundreds..."

"Grandma, what's a hundred?"

On some nights when my grandma was not too tired, she actually counted to a hundred for me. Some nights, we both fell asleep before we got halfway there. She would start... 1, 2, 3... We slept back to back and I could feel her breathing, her counting vibrating through that permeable spirit membrane that was me and her... 28, 29, 30... We slept in the room that served as living room and bedroom in my grandma and grandpa's pueblo house in Paguate village. The room was warmed by a large wood stove that glowed with a red-orange light in a darkness that was cold on the edges; the kind of cold that made you pull your head under the covers in the early morning when the fire had long cooled... 53, 54, 55... I'd watch the shadows swallow the fading light in the stove. My grandma's voice would fade with the light, drowsy... 72... 73... Grandma! Are you still awake?... My grandpa would stir in his bed across the room and mutter, "Ah-ya-ah!" The counting would gain new strength... and soon, 88, 89... 90. I knew 90, this was my signal to pull my pillow closer, to enjoy the full warmth of my grandma's body, to draw in the smell of pinon wood embers, to close my eyes and to sleep... 98, 99, 100.

Mother

"My mother... was really excited when Linda was born and so she did a lot of... buying clothes and [baby] Pendleton blankets... and always giving me money... for the baby... And then she really loves Linda, because Linda was full-blood. And that's something that a lot of tribal elders hold in high regard, that someone be full-blood. And Linda is probably the closest to full-blood 'cause I have like White, German, and French in me."

May sighs and talks about the relationship with her mother. "We got along by talking and she might need to go somewhere and she'd come by and use the car. John [her husband] would drive it. And a lot of times if there was a funeral, I'd take her and we'd visit and she'd tell me stories about when she was young and how she was a jockey and we just talked and visited and laughed. She'd always come by when my daughter was like... 8 or 9... and take her up and dig roots and taught her how to clean roots. And then we'd go up and pick huckleberries..."

And she never, ever said anything about my drinking. She'd just see I was drinking and she'd say, 'Well, I've got to go now. I just came by to see how you were and how the kids were.' And she'd always bring lots of food to the house... And when I got [my first] house I was able to invite her to spend the night every once in a while. And I would get up early to make her oatmeal and get her 7-Up and all that stuff, and have it there for her when she woke up. And so she always enjoyed those things but there was never any touching. We never hugged. We never said, 'Hello' a greeting or anything. She'd come in and we'd start visiting..."

"How would you describe your relationship with her?" I ask.

"Well, I think we were more... real good acquaintances," May chuckles. "I think we were friends. Toward the end there, she was really trusting that I wouldn't drink and then she started having these strokes. Then she deteriorated until she didn't know who we were. And she thought my [granddaughter] Stacey who was probably about 11 months was [my daughter] Linda. We went to see mom at the nursing home and mom said, 'Oh Linda. You're so cute.'"

"One of the things we never did do was touch. I kissed her just before she died. My children, they were in there when she was dying and they kissed her. They always had a
good relationship with her."

"A touching relationship
with her?"

"Yeah. She'd kiss them
good night when she was at our
house if they were at her house
because they were very insistent, you
know. 'You will kiss me
and that's it.' And so she
would, and she'd always
seemed a little surprised,
you know every time they
would do that. They'd
just look at her husband John
and nod and he'd go, 'Ya. Good
night.'"

"How did you feel about
her when she died?" I probe.

"I felt that we had really
reached an understanding. I
think I finally understood what
she'd gone through with her al-
cohol. And that she understood
my alcohol. And that I was so-
ber now, and I had a feeling that
she felt that I'd never drink
again. I mean it was sort of in
the present, and I don't know
how to explain it, but it was sort
of there. And so she'd come by
and she'd hand me money to get
something 'cause she knew that
it wouldn't go for [drinking]...So
the trust was getting better.
And I cared about her a lot. I'm
sure love is probably the word
to describe that, but I'm still not
sure how to separate all that
feeling out, in terms of talking
to my mother and about my
mother."

"Is there still some... anger
toward her or..." my question
fades.

"Well, it's not anger neces-
sarily anymore. It's just the
UNKNOWN. I don't know all
the details and nobody ever told
me all of them, or if they did
they were all one-sided and I
never got to hear her side. And
we never talked about it. It was
nothing we ever talked about.
We never talked about
her drinking. We never
talked about any of that.
"What she talked about
to me was when I was little and how my uncle
was really proud that I
could write my name at a
very young age. One
thing she did was to save all my
little dishes that I used to play
with. They were that amber
glass, and it wasn't necessarily
amber colored. There would be
blues but it would be that really
thick [glass], different cups and
glasses that I had. And she
saved them all and I got them
when I was 22 years old. So she
saved stuff for me.

"I haven't done that for
my kids. I had a trunk with my
kid's stuff in it but my ex-part-
ner wouldn't let me have them
back. I have my son's vest, his
buckskin and beaded vest and
when he was a little tiny guy
and my daughters [traditional]
fan up here so..." May sighs.

"You said that you and
your mother hadn't touched and
you said the same thing about your
father..." 

"Uh-huh," says May.

"Were you expressive with
your children?"

"Quite a bit when they
were very small. Older, we
didn't do that much. Now,
when we see each other we kiss
and when we kiss, we hug. I
was very demonstrative to my
grand-daughter. Her and I were
[close]...before her father's fam-
ily took her, before she was
taken away."

After two troubled
years of adolescence, May's first
contact with other Indian people
since being taken from her fam-
ily would be in Kansas at
Haskell Institute, an all-Indian
boarding school, when she was
17. Here, she trained in dining
room management and learned
to dance. She discovered that
the dating interests of young
men left her confused and un-
comfortable, while her crushes
on two or three female class-
mates were accepted and far
more satisfying. For almost two
years, she felt acceptance.

And here, despite dormi-
tory restrictions and drinking
prohibitions, May also learned
to drink every chance she got,
and when she could get it, she
drank it all. Her attraction to
alcohol would be solidified be-
fore her senior year in high
school was finished. Her first
blackout would occur the first
time she drank. She remembers
her peers coaxing her to take
that first drink of vodka, but she
doesn't remember the basketball
game they went to see. What
she liked was the feeling she got
when she drank.

"I thought I could do
things better. I became a little
more bold especially around the
girls... And so, I could maybe
dance closer... Because when I
drank then I could do whatever
I wanted to do and... say 'ex-
cuse me'... 'cause I was drink-
ing. 'Cause nobody really got
hostile about it... besides the
girls that I picked weren't push-
ing me away."
She drank heavily to cloak her heterosexual encounters so she consciously wouldn’t remember them; her drinking excused her rage and periodic drunken announcements that she was homosexual. Her binge drinking exposed her to rapes, fights, and illegal activity while psychologically shielding her from responsibility. She would drink through her pregnancies with her two children, a son and a daughter. Sometimes, she would place them with people she didn’t know when she was drinking; she’d move from place to place, with her children in tow, while maintaining her addiction.

“And I’d find myself in situations that I couldn’t figure out how I got there. And...the FBI was after me because I’d sold [liquor] to an agent [on the reservation]...because we were wards of the federal government, so the FBI was involved in dressing. And in our family, it wasn’t the thing you did. You didn’t go in and dress your family. You had somebody else do that. Others would cook; we were not to cook. We were not to handle the food because we were contaminated by death. I was able to sort that out and I had not a concept of it before. All of a sudden my role changed. Because everybody was talking to me about what needed to be done...And people were saying that I didn’t get drunk because my mother died.” May stops and sighs as she remembers her uncle’s funeral several years before. “I forgot all about Uncle Jimmy. I went to his funeral and stayed for the give-away, but I didn’t stay any later than the beginning of the give-away because I wanted to go get drunk....That was my mom’s brother.

“And we have lessons that are always there,” May continues. “It’s just amazing, that stuff, and it’s very natural. I always remember my grandma’s altar. I always remember my mother’s altar. And that’s why I have an altar. I am not a bonafide, died-in-the-wool Shaker [Northwest Coast Indian religion] because I haven’t been baptized or any of that. But I’m very much in the belief of what she did and I honor that. And the cross there,” May points to a small alter, “the little gold cross is my mother’s. They blessed it and they gave it to me the day of her funeral. The white cross behind it is when we blessed the house. The Shakers, one of the men who was officiating, made the cross for me...it’s out of cedar, and he painted it, and that’s where I put it, so...I don’t know why I have that up there other than...that’s where it’s supposed to be,” May says. “And I tell people, ‘Well, that’s what’s supposed to happen.’ And they just go, ‘Ri-i-i-ght. Talkin’ that AA talk.’ Well, that might be so, but the other part of it is the Native American, I know when things happen.”

May talks about her color in relationship to her growth. As a child, she responded by washing vigorously when her classmates called her “nigger” or told her she was dirty because of the color of her skin. When she was a 9th grader, boys in the physical education class refused to dance with her because of her skin color. And when she had five years of sobriety, the doctors and staff at a local hospital assumed she was an alcoholic and put off treating her until she required emergency surgery for gall bladder problems. “I was Indian, wasn’t I?”

May made three attempts to quit drinking: 28-day inpatient treatment programs at ages 34 and 35—this followed by 18 months of sobriety and a relapse—and again at 40. May quit drinking three months before her first granddaughter was born and two years before her mother died. AA meetings were the “drug” she substituted for alcohol. She would attend meetings seven days a week, sometimes twice a day, and she opened the doors for a women’s AA meeting in her Yakama community. Her two children complained that they saw more of her when she was drinking than during her first year of sobriety. It was clear that she could be excessive in other things.

“Had you observed other funerals so that you had an idea of what [was to be done]?” I ask.

“I had been to dressing services, but some of them were different in terms of, the family was involved in dressing. And in our family, it wasn’t the thing you did. You didn’t go in and dress your family. You had somebody else do that. Others would cook; we were not to cook. We were not to handle the food because we were contaminated by death. I was able to sort that out and I had not a concept of it before. All of a sudden my role changed. Because everybody was talking to me about what needed to be done...And people were saying that I didn’t get drunk because my mother died.” May stops and sighs as she remembers her uncle’s funeral several years before. “I forgot all about Uncle Jimmy. I went to his funeral and stayed for the give-away, but I didn’t stay any later than the beginning of the give-away because I wanted to go get drunk....That was my mom’s brother.

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In response to racism, May tries a balanced view. "White people can’t understand racism because they don’t wear skin color for a lifetime," she asserts. "I can’t always spend all of my time educating people about who I am. I’m learning about me right now. But I am very fortunate in being able to do some workshops and things for people. It just sort of offends me when people presume they can tell someone else about me, because they don’t know me. Every phrase, every hesitation, every accent I use in my description is mine. It can’t be anybody else. They haven’t experienced that. That’s what I mean about color. . . . how do I wear my color?

"I have found a place that I can call my own... Belonging is being accepting of me and knowing that I’m ok. And I don’t have to be anything more than that for anybody. As long as I can deal with May on a daily kind of voyage, then that’s all I have to do. I don’t have to be out there for anybody else in terms of ‘let me rescue the world.’ But I can be there as a teacher and a leader [by] just being who I am and letting people know that alcohol does kill. I’ve lived through it and I can walk on and talk about it and let people know that there is, there is a way out. And it doesn’t have to be. . . a total, devastating, out-of-the-reach kind of hope."