

## 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  
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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 rep-

resented 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 says in the fourth interview, "and it's growing and there's a lot of people that are coming in, like you. You're coming into my circle and my world and I find that I'm not hesitant or ashamed to talk about some real personal things. I don't know you," she adds.

"I know!" I exclaim.

"...yeah, and that says a lot about...your being able to present trust and my being able to accept it," she continues.

"This is the one thing that has amazed me," I start. "And I mentioned this to one woman [I was interviewing], and I said, 'You know, you don't know me. I'm literally off the street.' And I'm walking in..."

"But you're a native woman," 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 cliché," 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 think-

ing, 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 free-

dom. 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.





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

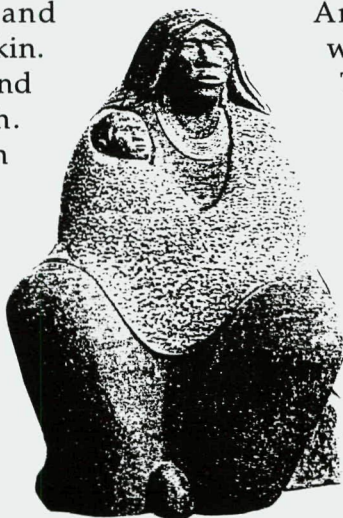




out of you.'

"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 place-ment] 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 day-dreaming 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. But I never did ever get one so... I always was able to be by myself and I could do things alone.

"I used to envy people being white because they always got everything. And no one necessarily called them names unless they really looked different, were like funny or something, then people would call them names."

*"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.

"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 caseworker, 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."

May was removed from Mrs. King's and placed in an-

other home. "[This] time they treated me fairly decent in terms of not beating me up," May says. "But I was 12 and I took care of Donna who was two and they called the baby Baby June, who was like eight months or something. And I took care of cleaning the house and doing those things. And mealtimes, I ate leftovers. I ate what was left on the table. But I had to hurry and eat real fast because then I had to do the dishes. And I had to have them done before a certain time."

*"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 caseworker 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 contin-



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 feel-

ing 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 sup-



posed 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 grandmother: "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 stories and I'd just sit there."

May responds to a quick memory about getting her grandmother tea. "And that saucer 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 example, ]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 fragmented. . . 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 womanhood 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 modeling that I do in my behavior in all areas, in my profession, in my social life, in all of those

things, people see me. Especially 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 lineage 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 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 dinners 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 or 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 alcohol. And that she understood my alcohol. And that I was sober 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 necessarily 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-partner won'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 family 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 uncomfortable, while her crushes on two or three female classmates were accepted and far more satisfying. For almost two years, she felt acceptance.

And here, despite dormitory 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 before 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 'excuse me'. . . 'cause I was drinking. 'Cause nobody really got hostile about it. . . besides the girls that I picked weren't pushing 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. They were looking for me and they couldn't find me. I didn't have to go to jail [because] the time had run out. Those are really tough times to remember. It was, it was so mixed up. And so much alcohol... because I didn't want to feel any of it or deal with any of it."

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."

"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 altar, "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?"



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. . ."□





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