

O'odham Family Healing **Melissa T. Norris (Pablo)**

This ethnographic reflection in no way, shape, or form refers to all O'odham families and their ways or traditions of burial, rituals, or any forms of coping with death. These actions, opinions, and coping methods are based on my own perceptions and do not reflect or speak for neither the Tohono O'odham Nation nor any of its sister tribes.

Death is a sensitive subject in any culture. There are many terms used to describe death, some are blunt and others are words or phrases usually expressed with soft tones. In any sense we all deal with the loss of a loved one. But it is how we deal with those complex and difficult situations from beginning to end - our grief - that is rarely talked about. But it is remembered.

Most times people avoid confronting their emotions because it is a hard thing to do, and easily overshadowed by day-to-day activities. Some people are accepting over time; some seek professional guidance, and others have personal ways of healing. Each achieves survival in his or her own way.

Over the years our family has lost many close relatives; in some instances we were given time to prepare ourselves for what was coming, but with others were unexpected and sudden. Our families and communities come together to help the family prepare and fulfill the deceased's wishes as much as possible. We all share the preparations for the wake and/or funeral.

In reflecting on how my family has dealt with these losses, it seems as though the emotions are still there for each individual family member. The longer the time has passed, the easier it seems to be less of an emotional subject. During our family conversations, I learn more from the memories and emotions shared, particularly when we recalled times leading up to family member deaths. In my family, we all seem to be at different levels of coping with those deaths. It is easier to talk about the good memories of that person. We have all admitted to shedding secret tears at some point. The important thing is that we are able to laugh and enjoy the good memories we shared.

We realized that we all have gone through a phase of depression in our grief - deeper for some of us, with a few still in that state. You cannot help someone who is not willing to accept the help, but the struggle to move forward as a family will continue until we are all on the same level and are able to accept and move on with our lives.

I can reflect on the traditional "Man in the Maze" symbol with all its twists and turns in the maze, its mysteries, struggles and joys, which strengthen us. At the top of the maze is I'toi, our creator, who is there to guide us in our journey and waiting for us as we complete our journey.

Along the way in our journey we all come to that point in life when we lose someone. Moving forward does not mean that you have forgotten, it simply means that you realize you have to continue your own journey of life. For us, we will never be 100 percent healed from the losses we have encountered. The pain remains. There are those days that we stop and remember-birthdays, holidays and death anniversaries. When those days come, it ignites that spark of sorrow for those lost, but at the same time we are able to appreciate the loved ones we still have.

We visit our lost loved ones frequently. With respectful distance I have photographed this place of rest, in memory of those who have completed their journeys. Knowing that this is where I will be laid to rest someday gives me peace because I will be with my family.