

The following entries are from the journal of Avis Little Wind.

#1- It's been a week since my older sister took her life. My father ignores me, and he's started drinking again. He's been spending time at the tree where she hung herself and I'm scared he'll leave me too. Nookomis, my grandmother, comes over to talk to him, but he doesn't listen to her, he doesn't want to hear her.

#2- I've just returned from my father's funeral. He hung himself at the same tree as my sister, on the same day. My grandmother has moved into my home to take care of me. I wonder how long it will take her to give up on me.

#3- It's been 3 months since my father died. After 3 weeks I stopped going to school. After 5 weeks my friends and my teachers stopped asking about me.

After 2 months my grandmother stopped trying to get me to get out of bed. Now she just leaves a tray of food by the door and hopes that I eat it. She doesn't know but I've been sneaking out of the house every night for a week. I go to the tamarisk tree where my family chose to die. The fact that people have stopped asking about me proves that I'm alone, unwanted. I fear that my only chance for freedom lies at the tamarisk tree. Tonight I will join my family.

Avis Little Wind was a real person. She lived on the Gila River Indian Reservation. She was 14 when she committed suicide. Her sister was 16. 1 month after her sister's death her father also committed suicide. Avis layed in bed in the fetal position for 90 days before she took her life. The three of them all hung themselves at a tamarisk tree on the reservation.

40% of Natives who commit suicide are between the ages of 15-24. Between the ages of 18-24, Native Americans have higher rates of suicide than any other ethnicity, higher than their general population, 3-10x the national average. 1/4 live in poverty, that equals to 13% in the USA. They often graduate with grades 17% lower than the national average. Their rate of abuse and neglect is 2x higher than non First-Nations, they have higher substance abuse rates, and a 2.3% higher rate of exposure to trauma.

Many factors contribute to these statistics. The main 3 are the Indian Act, the many broken promises, and Residential schools. The Indian Act was established in 1876 and it caused the Natives to become wards of the state. Many rules were put in place that banned their cultural practises and caused them to lose their mobility rights. Band councils were put in place, and the

Indian Agents had the final authority. Native people weren't even allowed to vote until 1960.

Most of the broken promises were centred around land and money. They were promised a certain amount of money as compensation for giving up their land and moving to reserves. These promises weren't honoured and, as a result, most natives struggle financially. They were also promised hunting, fishing, and living rights on all of the undeveloped land. As the land was developed they lost more and more land. This forced some groups to relocate. The areas they relocated to didn't allow them to carry out their usual cultural practices, and they were segregated from the rest of the populace. They had little access to things like schools and health clinics.

Residential schools existed from 1880-1997. These schools were created to assimilate the children to English-Canadian culture. The children were often abused if they were caught speaking their own language or practising their spiritual traditions. This school system caused mental issues with the children that followed them for the rest of their lives. It even effected their own children in something called an intergenerational impact. This impact coupled with years of poverty and oppression pushes many people to suicide.

This next set of entries are from the journal of Nina Wynn.

#1- Today I found out that I am not eligible for a scholarship. I fear that I won't be able to go to university now. I just know that my father will be upset with me. I'm upset with myself. I've worked so hard, this was my one chance to get away from this place. When my mother died my father became depressed. Helping me with my schoolwork was a distraction for him. When he finds out that all of our hard work wasn't enough it might set him back again. I'll talk to my grandfather tomorrow, there has to be some sort of healing ceremony he can go to.

#2- We've signed my father up for a sweat lodge. I've done some research on the subject. The people who take part in a sweat spend hours in a wood framed dome-like structure. Once everyone's inside they place red hot rocks in the centre, pouring water on them periodically to create steam. After an hour or so the people let air in and have some water. When they go back inside more rocks and water are added. They do this 3 or 4 times, each time it gets hotter and there is more steam. The people who take part aren't supposed to talk about what they happens in the hut, but they can experience mental,

spiritual and physical healing. I hope this will help my father move on.

#3- My father just returned from the sweat lodge. I know he can't tell me what

happened, but I can see that it really helped him. I'm glad that he was able to find help and solace in a healing ceremony of our culture. I think my next step will be to talk to one of the elders about my schooling options. Maybe he will have thought of something that I haven't.

Nina Wynn and her family are not real, but their situation is. Many Native families live off of a very low income and can't afford proper schooling. Things like this can contribute to depression, and could possibly push someone over the edge, towards suicide. People who turn to their cultural practices often find themselves healed, and their problems put into perspective, they find new reasons to carry on.

Sweat lodges aren't the only type of healing activity you can do. Three other types are making dream catchers, prayer ties, and smudge sticks. Dream catchers are more commonly called Sacred Hoops. The point of a sacred hoop is to allow good dream to slip through the web and into the dreamer, and to capture the bad dreams so they would be destroyed by the morning light. Early dream catchers were made out of willow, sage, and deer sinew. Feathers can be attached to assist the good flight of the good dreams.

Prayer ties are offered to the Great Spirit in exchange for blessings. An alternate name is a prayer flag. The constructing of the ties are a meditative process. You have to keep your prayer in mind the entire time you make the tie. It's very important that you include a pinch of tobacco within the tie. Tobacco is considered to be a sacred herb when it is used as a gift to the spirit world. It has become universally accepted as an offering of gratitude. You can put as many prayers as you want on each segment of string, as long as you never cut the string. A continuous string represents the flow of energy from the beginning to the end of your prayer. Any breaks would interrupt the natural flow of your intention. Once your string of prayer ties is finished you make a final prayer to whatever deity you believe in.

Smudging is a very important tool in many Native ceremonies. The point of smudging is similar to a dream catcher. The smoke is attached to any negative energy, so when the smoke dissipates, the negative energy is taken with it. When smudging yourself you're supposed to fan the waves of smoke over yourself from head to toe. There are no rules as to how often you should smudge yourself. You just do it whenever you feel energetically or spiritually unclean. The same rules apply to your living space, however; the best times to smudge your home are when the seasons change. Another

good time to smudge is if a certain person has visited your home and you feel as though they might have left behind any of their baggage.

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