“Rituals of Memory” by Kimberly Blaeser (2000)

Memory begins with various wonders. For my friend Mary, it began with hair. Her hair grew tightly curled, so strong the spirals defied taming. Brushing and combing brought tears. When Mary tried to run her fingers through her hair as she saw others do, her fingers became hopelessly captured by curls. Hair, she deduced, must grow in loops, out of our head at one point, back into one another. Because her locks had never been cut, the loops never broken, her fingers became entangled in the loops.

Perhaps that story delights me because it stands as a wonderful example of our always innocent attempts to explain the world or perhaps because it seems a fine metaphor for the looped relationships of family, place, and community, the innate patterns of ourselves that always keep returning. No matter how long our lives, no matter how far our experience takes us from our origins, our lives remain connected, always loopback to that center of our identity, our spirit.

I believe we belong to the circle and, from our survival, we will return in one way or another to renew those rhythms of life out of which our sense of self has emerged. Some of us have a physical place and a people we return to. We also have what Gerald Vizenor calls the “interior landscapes” of our imaginative and spiritual lives. Perhaps our strongest link to the sacred center, the pulsing core of being, is memory and the storytelling and ceremonies that feed it- our own rituals of memory.

My memories entangled themselves oddly among the roots of several cultures: Native American, perhaps foremost in my mind, but also a German Catholic background, the culture of rural America, the close looping of small towns in the Midwest, and what I guess could be called Minnesota wilderness culture. But these several cultures did not always exist in opposition or in isolation from one another. I remember Memorial Day celebrations but my father joined the Legionnaires in their visits to all the graveyards in Mahnomen and Nay-Tah-Waush. Uniformed, sometimes sweating in the early summer heat they marched to the sites, stood at attention as taps was played, and then, as a gesture of salute to the fallen veterans, they shoot over the graves. Each year, through late morning and early afternoon, we followed the men on these tours. We stood, moved to goose bumps by the lonely trumpet tune, scrambling with all the other children for spent casings when each ceremony was concluded.

The last site on their schedule was an Indian burial grounds close to the BAB landing. As a child I saw nothing unusual about a dozen American Legionnaires marching back on the little wooded path and paying solemn respect to those Indian warriors who I would later realize were really of another nation. On this March through the tall grasses and hazelnut bushes that crowded the path, my older brother and I often fell in step. Several times I marched beside Sig Tveit and his trumpet, his arm linked through mine. We stood, all of us-those descended from settlers of Norwegian, and German, or other European origins, and those descended from Anishinaabe or other Indian people. Together in a moment out of ordinary time, we paused in the little opening at the wooden grave houses, oblivious to the wood ticks, which must later be picked carefully from our clothes and our flesh, oblivious to the buzzing of mosquitoes or sand flies, oblivious as well to the more trivial tensions of contemporary politics. We stood together in a great ceremonial loop of our humanity, in our need to remember our ancestors and the lives they lived, together in our desire to immerse ourselves in their honor, to always carry those
memories forward with us, to be ourselves somehow made holy by the ritual of those memories. We emerged quiet from those little woods, from that darker place in memory, into the too bright sunshine of a late May day and the twentieth century.

And then we arrived back at the sandy beach. The men brought out drinks from the trunks of their cars, laughter and talk sprang up, picnic foods came out, and people would disperse again to their own families.

I don't know if the Legionnaire still march back into the woods each year. I like to believe they do. For that kind of experience has helped me balance when the strands of my mixed heritage seem to pull one against another. However unconscious, it was a moment of crossover, a moment when the borders of culture where nullified by the greater instincts of humanity to remember and to give honor.

Perhaps the Memorial Days of those early years have become one of the watermarks of my life because they brought to ceremonial focus the many tellings of the past that filled up the hours and days of my childhood. As children, we were never so much taught as storied. All work and play had memories attached.

"Indians," add custom Ed Castillo says, "can hold more than one thing sacred." With school begin my double life. I went to Catholic grade school, where I earned a reputation for being quiet, obedient, pious, and bright. I learned my Baltimore Catechism- "Who made you?" "God made me." "Why did God make you?" "God made me because he loves me." -learned my singsong phonics- ba be bub a bu, ca ce ci ca cu, da de di da du -studied my spelling- I before e, except after c, or when it sounds like a as in neighbor and weigh. In between school days, we gathered hazelnuts, went partridge hunting, fished, had long deer-hunting weekends, went to powwows, went spearing and ice fishing, played canasta and whist, learned the daisy chain, beaded on looms, made for fish house candles, sausage, and quilts. No one then questioned the necessity or value of our school education but somehow I grew up knowing it wasn't the only-maybe not even the most important-education I would need, and sometimes we stole time from that education for the other one. My parents might keep us home from school or come and get us midday for some lovely adventure on the lake or in the woods. I'm still thankful for low stolen moments, because now I know by heart not only to Hail Mary, the Our Father, and the National Anthem, but the misty prayers water gives off at dawn and the ancient song of the loon; I recognize not only the alphabet and the parts of the English sentence but, the silhouetted form of the shipoke and the intricate language of a beaver's teeth and tail.

My life at school and in the Catholic Church is officially recorded and documented-dates a baptism, First Communion and confirmation, quarterly grade reports, attendance records- just as my academic life is later documented at universities in Minnesota, Indiana, and Wisconsin. But for my other education, practical and spiritual, I have no grades or degrees, no certificates to commemorate the annual rituals. I have some tangibles of those processes- a jingle dress, fans of feathers, sometimes photos- but mostly I have stories, dreams, and memories.