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Tribal Affiliation Presented: Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (Lakota)

Introduction:

This cultural lesson will provide an understanding as to how some Lakota people use their awareness and knowledge to help them in their considerations as how best to proceed.

Burial Sites and Sacred Places

All around changes happen that affect the decisions people make. In the natural world, having an awareness of what to consider when making a decision can be very important.

For example, having the awareness to know whether it is safe to cross a river during the spring runoff when the snow is melting, can keep a person safe while travelling. Another example could be determining whether it's safe to cross ice in winter when the ice on a lake or river may not be thick enough. These are examples of situations where it's important to be aware of physical surroundings. What other awareness could be beneficial when making decisions?

Some Lakota believe respect and awareness for a place where death has occurred or where the dead are buried, could be taken into consideration when choosing to inhabit or travel through a space. A space with a history of violence inflicted upon others like a battlefield or where a murder has occurred, can be a space in which one does not want to spend time or would want to avoid if possible. A belief in spirits of the dead, spirits that have stayed and possibly inhabit a place, are considerations to be aware of or to keep in mind for some Lakota people when choosing to inhabit or spend time in a place.

One story told by an elder, recalls a grandmother's guidance and teaching about a place that should be considered and evaluated before passing. "When we were little kids, we would ride our horses through the hills picking berries. On one occasion we had gone out picking and returned. When we returned from our ride, my grandma spoke to us. She had seen where we had ridden and she told us that there were two people buried on the hill where we'd been picking berries and that was a place we were not to visit again. And we never returned to that spot."

Another space where consideration and respect are given is a burial ground or cemetery. Traditionally for the Lakota, once a person died, their body would be prepared; possibly washing, cleaning, dressing, and smudging would all be part of the preparation. The dead were buried on scaffolds which were probably built by the men. Bow and arrows and shields would be placed on the scaffold as well, if it was built for a man.

In the past as today, people are buried with their personal belongings including; moccasin and traditional dress. Possessions are considered personal belongings which could possibly be used in the process of crossing over in the afterlife. Pipes and feathers are not buried, they can be passed on to friends or relatives.

Traditionally at a burial site, once a person was placed on a scaffold, the place became sacred and people would not return to this space as a sign of respect. Also, because some Lakota believe once people are buried they no longer exist, cemeteries on the reservation aren't always cared for like they are in Western culture.

However, May 30 is when Native Veterans that have passed are honored by families at the cemetery where they are buried. Some people will spend time caring for the graves of other family members at this time as well. Some families may have a number of burial sites they visit. They could be a cemetery near a church or community, and it could be a family gravesite in the country.

Flag poles that stand without a flag year-round at a veteran's gravesite, fly a flag at this time in honor of the veteran. A family member could take responsibility to keep a flag and hang it at the grave of the family member on this day. Some people keep multiple flags for their veteran family members that have passed. On this day flags fly at cemeteries on the reservation, and the living use this time to honor those that have passed.

Questions:

Does your family honor veterans on Memorial Day?

Are there places or spaces you are aware of that are sacred or where spirits preside?