

Walking On: Indigenous Perspectives on End of Life

J. Neil Henderson, PhD

(Oklahoma Choctaw)

Professor Emeritus

Department of Family Medicine & Biobehavioral Health
University of Minnesota Medical School, Duluth campus

INDIGNEOUS CULTURAL VARIETY:

1. 574 Federally recognized American Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages & 175+ languages.
2. Inter- & intra-tribal heterogeneity.
3. There is no one way.
4. Cultural pluralism: a mix of tribal and colonial beliefs.
5. Mix of Christian and tribal beliefs.
6. Indian church in Oklahoma: grave/sunset.
7. Indian church funeral at graveside: one singer reading words from iPad while others used the tribal hymn book.

AN INDIGENOUS EXPRESSION OF DIFFERENCES IN WHITE AND NATIVE MORTUARY PRACTICES:

1. Playwright William Yellow Robe wrote, "Sneaky" about three brothers who steal their dead mother's body from the funeral home to prevent a White funeral and replace it with a traditional Assiniboine process.
2. Reflects the presence of a difference between White culture and native culture regarding body prep and other mortuary practices.

IMPENDING DEATH BELIEFS & PRACTICES AMONG MANY TRIBES:

1. Intact body (effects on brain donation; Little Big Horn)
2. Ancestors coming to get the dying person.
3. Relatives sing death songs.
4. Content is welcoming of the ancestors.
5. My mother and her sister singing their mother over to the other side.
6. Bones as valuable connectors to those who "walked on."

How to learn about a person's or tribal EOL beliefs and practices?

Sincerely seek that information by asking:

1. Can you help me understand your ways of believing about the end of life?
2. Would you teach *some* of your beliefs about EOL, Earthly death, the other side?
3. Ask if there is a traditional healer or elder (male or female) that should be contacted.