**Millie Benjamin Ojibwe Funerals**

There are several Ojibwe traditions I was taught concerning funerals and death. For instance, when I was growing up and somebody died, my mother would crinkle up a little strip of birch bark like an accordion, and then she’d tack it up by the door. She did this because we believe spirits are afraid of snakes, and that little piece of crinkled birch bark on the door portrayed a snake. I grew up seeing that, and later when I had my own home and somebody died, I made the same crinkled birch bark strip and put it by the door.

My mom also told me if you dream about somebody who has died, it’s okay – they’ll tell you what they want. If they’re hungry or sad or looking for something, they’ll let you know. But then she said, if you dream about somebody who died and they want to take you along, you say no. You don’t go along.

That’s why we blacken the foreheads of babies and young people with ashes when there’s a wake. Our people say spirits are afraid of black, so we were taught to blacken babies and young people to protect them, because they’re vulnerable. If somebody comes to them in their dreams, of course they would come along.

We don’t take little kids to funerals for the same reason. When people at a funeral send the deceased person off, they tell that person, don’t look at anyone who is here with you today – just look at that path ahead of you and go that way. We do this because there’s always the belief that the deceased person might want to take someone with him or her. So traditionally, we don’t take little kids to funerals, although today some people do. When I was a child, we weren’t allowed to go to funerals until we were old enough to ask, "What’s happening here?"

When older children and adults go to funerals, we’re there to be with the family that’s feeling bad. I find it consoling to go to traditional Ojibwe funerals. You can hear the drum, and you can hear the old men talking. I get a very peaceful feeling.

I remember when my mom died, my daughter couldn’t handle it at first. My mom had been like a second mom to my kids because I always had to work, and she helped raise my kids because she always lived with me or I lived with her.

During our traditional funerals, someone will speak to the dead person and tell him or her what to do as they go on their journey. An old gentleman performed the ceremony at my mom’s funeral, and as he talked, I explained to my daughter where her gramma was and what was happening to her. That was so helpful to my daughter to understand the ceremony and what was being said to her gramma. It’s so beautiful the way people who perform the funerals talk. It’s like you’re there – you’re watching the dead person go. That really helped my daughter. It was still difficult for her, but she didn’t cry as hard. Any traditional Ojibwe ceremony, if you can understand it, is just beautiful.