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PAYING RESPECT:

THE CEMETERY IN CETONON GUATEMALA

Mary Beth Danielson
Maya Works

It was Sunday afternoon and I was staying with a family of twelve in the highlands of Guatemala. The mother and daughter-in-law are MayaWorks weavers. When they asked if I would like to go with them to the cemetery, I responded enthusiastically. I've known since I was a teenager that Latin American cultures have many traditions built around visits to cemeteries. And now I was being invited, by a Maya family, to go with them to their town cemetery!

Adults and kids piled into the cab and bed of a truly worn-out pick-up truck. Twenty jouncing, spring-less miles further into the mountains, we piled back out at the side of a dusty lane.

The small cemetery was nestled into the wooded side of a mountain. Straight ahead, over the edge of a cliff, was a blue-misted valley. The sky was azure above us. The air was warm and breezy. Maybe there were a hundred graves, maybe less; it was just the right size for a family reunion. Many graves were simply humps of dirt covered with blankets of grass, marked by painted crosses announcing the simple poetry of loss. No granite tombstones, no urns, no statues, no pageantry. Just hillocks of graves.

Other resting sites were a bit more formal. Stucco finished slabs and uprights marked the grave, most were painted vivid blues and greens. It was to two side-by-side turquoise graves that we all gravitated. These were the graves of the mother and father of my hostess, Señora Sepet. Today was an anniversary of the passing of one of them, so adult children, their spouses, children, and grandchildren (and unexpected visitors) all attended the cemetery to clean and decorate these graves of the heads of this family.

Other family members arrived. The women wore their Mayan clothing; hand woven jaspe skirts (jaspe, or ikat, is a weaving style that creates repeated designs from tie-dyed threads) and tunic style blouses, called huipils. Huipils are handmade by Maya women on a backstrap loom and may take month to complete just one. Lusciously colorful, woven with roses, birds, zigzags and stripes.

The women walked across the grass, in their colorful clothes, carrying heavy armloads of flowers. Pink, lavender, yellow flowers - along with dozens of the creamy calla lilies that are native to Guatemala. The beauty was stunning.

The women worked smoothly together (the way my mother and aunts did when they cleaned up a kitchen after a holiday dinner). They swept the flat graves while men cut and stripped pine branches. When the graves were cleaned, the fresh and fragrant pine needles were laid on the tombs. The masses of flowers were arranged into huge bouquets at the head stones. Candles were set into clear plastic soda bottles that had been rinsed, trimmed and filled with a little water to keep the candles safe.

The graves were completed. People murmured respectfully, said quiet prayers, and the next thing I knew, snacks were being handed out to everyone. Grape soda and wrapped packages of wafer cookies. Sugar is apparently the universal language of togetherness.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in that quiet cemetery. Kids played with their cousins. Men talked to each other, then went over by the various trucks to look at engines and tires. One boy had a new puppy that all the kids adored. A baby was held by everyone, including me.

It's curious, isn't it, how much strength and identity we find when we get together? The stress we feel in our individual homes is released for a few hours; we stop thinking about all the things we have to do. We relax into shared conversation. We tell the stories of people who aren't with us. We meander in our spirits, as we become community.