

Sundance

There we women were, standing on the side-lines, just outside the arbor, pouring rain, occasional lightning strikes, observing the men at "Sundance" trying to raise the tree of life; a 90 foot cotton wood upright into a prepared hole dug into the ground. The "tree" was glorious with all its colorful prayers ties and ribbons, gargantuan ropes hanging from the top reaching all the way to the bottom. We could see the men were having difficulty trying to raise the tree, maneuvering; moving from one side to another, positioning themselves to pull on the ropes, putting boards underneath the tree each time the tree moved up an inch, you could see their struggle trying to raise the tree, all of a sudden, one by one, the women ran into the arbor, each taking a place on the ropes helping to raise the "tree"; young women, young girls, mothers, and old women taking up a position. The rain came down harder and the wind started blowing and nobody moved from their position. We stood in our positions, drenched by the rain for a long-time as the men shouted instructions; pull to the south side, hold steady on the north until finally the "tree" was raised. I found myself crying, struck by this simple yet powerful demonstration of community; a sense of accomplishment and belonging. This was my first day of the "Sundance".

It is difficult to express in words on paper, what it is that American Indian and Alaska Native people are looking for in relation to awakening inside us that which defines what it is to be "Indian". This is the closest it gets for me and the understanding that we as Indigenous People need to return to our traditions and ceremonies; they have purpose and are medicine for the spirit; these ceremonies are the sustenance that inspires us to live in a better way, restoring traditional practices that shape who we are as "people".

June 2011