Kimberly M. Blaeser (b. 1955), of German and Anishinaabe ancestry, is a member of the Minnesota Chippewa tribe. Blaeser began her career as a journalist but is now a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Blaeser is also a writer whose work includes poetry, personal essays, short stories, and reviews. Her first collection of poems, Trailing You, won the First Book Award in Poetry from the Native Writer's Circle of Americas in 1993. In her work, Blaeser often alludes to her dual heritage and to the collective nature of the human experience.

**Rituals of Memory**

**Essay by Kimberly M. Blaeser**

**AS YOU READ** Look for evidence about how Blaeser's mixed ancestry shapes her experiences and her ideas on memories. Write down any questions you generate during reading.

Memory begins with various wonders. For my friend Mary, it began with hair. Her hair grew tightly curled, so strong the spirals defied taming. Brushing and combing brought tears. When Mary tried to run her fingers through her hair as she saw others do, her fingers became hopelessly captured by the curls. Hair, she deduced, must grow in loops, out of our head at one point, back into it at another. Because her locks had never been cut, the loops never broken, her fingers became entangled in the loops.

Perhaps that story delights me because it stands as a wonderful example of our always innocent attempts to explain the world. Or perhaps because it seems a fine metaphor for the looped relationships of family, place, and community, the innate patterns of ourselves that always keep us returning. No matter how long our lives, no matter how far our experience takes us from our origins, our lives remain connected, always loop back to that center of our identity, our spirit.
My memories entangle themselves oddly among the roots of several cultures.

I believe we belong to the circle and, for our survival, we will return in one way or another to renew those rhythms of life out of which our sense of self has emerged. Some of us have a physical place and a people we return to. We also have what Gerald Vizenor calls the "interior landscapes" of our imaginative and spiritual lives. Perhaps our strongest link to the sacred center, the pulsing core of being, is memory and the storytelling and ceremonies that feed it—our own rituals of memory.

My memories entangle themselves oddly among the roots of several cultures: Native American, perhaps foremost in my mind, but also a German Catholic background, the culture of rural America, the close looping of small towns in the Midwest, and what I guess could be called Minnesota wilderness culture. But these several cultures did not always exist in opposition or in isolation from one another. I remember Memorial Day celebrations when my father joined the Legionnaires in their visits to all the graveyards in Mahnomen and Nay-Tah-Waush. Uniformed, sometimes sweating in the early summer heat, they marched to the sites, stood at attention as taps was played, and then, as a gesture of salute to the fallen veterans, they shot over the graves. Each year, through late morning and early afternoon, we followed the men on these tours. We stood, moved to goose bumps by the lonely trumpet tune, scrambling with all the other children for spent casings when each ceremony was concluded.

The last site on their schedule was the Indian burial grounds close to the BAB landing. As a child I saw nothing unusual about a dozen American Legionnaires marching back on the little wooded

---

1 Legionnaires: members of the American Legion, a social, service-based organization of American veterans.
2 Mahnomen and Nay-Tah-Waush: cities in northwestern Minnesota.
path and paying solemn respect to those Indian warriors who I
would later realize were really of another nation. On this march
through the tall grasses and hazelnut bushes that crowded the path,
my older brother and I often fell in step. Several times I marched
beside Sig Tveit and his trumpet, his arm linked through mine.
We stood, all of us—those descended from settlers of Norwegian,
German, or other European origins, and those descended from
Anishinaabe or other Indian people. Together in a moment out of
ordinary time, we paused in the little opening at the wooden grave
houses, oblivious to the wood ticks, which must later be picked
carefully from our clothes and our flesh, oblivious to the buzzing
of mosquitoes or sand flies, oblivious as well to the more trivial
tensions of contemporary politics. We stood together in a great
ceremonial loop of our humanity, in our need to remember our
ancestors and the lives they lived, together in our desire to immerse
ourselves in their honor, to always carry those memories forward
with us, to be ourselves somehow made holy by the ritual of those
memories. We emerged quiet from those little woods, from that
darker place of memory, into the too bright sunshine of a late May
day in the twentieth century.

And then we arrived back at the sandy beach. The men brought
out drinks from the trunks of their cars, laughter and talk sprang
up, picnic foods came out, and people would disperse again—to
their own families.

I don’t know if the Legionnaires still march back into the woods
each year. I like to believe they do. For that kind of experience has
helped me keep balance when the strands of my mixed heritage
seem to pull one against another. However unconscious, it was a
moment of crossover, a moment when the borders of culture were
nullified by the greater instincts of humanity to remember and to
give honor.

Perhaps the Memorial Days of those early years have become
one of the watermarks1 of my life because they brought to
ceremonial focus the many tellings of the past that filled up the
hours and days of my childhood. As children, we were never so
much taught as storied. All work and play had memories attached.

“Indians,” Ed Castillo says, “can hold more than one thing sacred.”
With school began my double life. I went to Catholic grade school,
where I earned a reputation for being quiet, obedient, pious, and
bright. I learned my Baltimore Catechism2—“Who made you?”

1 watermarks: marks impressed in paper that can be viewed when the paper is
held up to the light.

2 Baltimore Catechism: a summary of Christian beliefs in a question-and-
answer format that was taught in Catholic schools until the late 1960s.

Rituals of Memory  23
"God made me."

"Why did God make you?"

"God made me because he loves me."

—learned my sing-song phonics — ba be bi bu, ca ce ci ca cu, da de di du — studied my spelling — i before e, except after e, or when it sounds like a as in neighbor and weigh. In between school days, we gathered hazelnuts, went partridge hunting, fished, had long deer-hunting weekends, went to powwows, went spearing and ice fishing, played canasta and whist, learned the daisy chain, beaded on looms, made fish house candles, sausage, and quilts. No one then questioned the necessity or value of our school education, but somehow I grew up knowing it wasn’t the only—maybe not even the most important—education I would need, and sometimes we stole time from that education for the other one. My parents might keep us home from school or come and get us midday for some more lovely adventure on a lake or in the woods. I’m still thankful for those stolen moments, because now I know by heart not only the Hail Mary, the Our Father, and the National Anthem, but the misty prayers water gives off at dawn and the ancient song of the loon; I recognize not only the alphabet and the parts of the English sentence, but the silhouetted form of the shipoke and the intricate language of a beaver’s teeth and tail.

My life at school and in the Catholic Church is officially recorded and documented—dates of baptism, First Communion and confirmation, quarterly grade reports, attendance records—just as my academic life is later documented at universities in Minnesota, Indiana, and Wisconsin. But for my other education, practical and spiritual, I have no grades or degrees, no certificates to commemorate the annual rituals. I have some tangibles of those processes—a jingle dress, fans of feathers, sometimes photos—but mostly I have stories, dreams, and memories.

COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION With a partner, discuss Slaeser’s views on how memories are formed. What does she believe influences her memories? In your discussion, cite evidence from the text.

**powwows**: a celebration of Native American culture in which diverse nations gather for the purpose of singing, dancing, and honoring their ancestors.
The central idea of an essay is the most important point conveyed in the essay. Sometimes the central idea is stated in the first paragraph, but more often, you will need to infer the central idea that is implied by specific details. Here are some ways to understand the central idea:

- Identify the topic or subject of each paragraph
- See how each topic relates to the selection title.
- Look for a topic sentence that states the main idea or main message of the paragraph.
- If there is no explicit topic sentence, infer the main idea from the details presented about the topic.

A metaphor is a type of figurative language in which the author compares two things without using the word like or as.

Rhetoric is the effective use of language that allows an author to advance his or her purpose.

1. Re-read lines 1-16. Where does the author use a metaphor? What is she comparing?

2. Re-read lines 17-24 and identify where the author defines rituals of memory. Re-state this central idea in your own words.

3. Re-read lines 29-45. Infer the author’s purpose. Cite the rhetoric that helps the author advance that purpose.

4. Re-read lines 56-63. Give examples of language that creates imagery.

5. Cite evidence to explain what the author means by “We stood together in a great ceremonial loop of our humanity.”

6. Re-read lines 75-79. Explain how the author develops a central idea introduced earlier.

7. Re-read lines 97-103 and identify two uses of metaphor. How do these metaphors help the author achieve her purpose?