

## Last on the Land

“We are the sons of Father Sun and with our religion we daily help our father to go across the sky. We do this not only for ourselves but for the whole world. If we were to cease practicing our religion, in ten years the sun would no longer rise. Then it would be night forever.” ...conversation of C. J. Jung with a leader of the Pueblos named Mountain Lake

I awoke slowly in my mummy bag to the cool morning air on a mountain that had been on Native land for far longer than I can now imagine. I had awakened to chanting, the kind of rhythm that is so typically Navajo. An old man, well into his eighties stood facing the rising sun and it was only later that I understood that he had been chanting a hymn to the earth goddess as she was once again warmed by the rays that had in primal times, and eternally, impregnated her so that she might give birth to all life. Sexuality is everywhere for the Navajos, unlike the Christians.

The old man had been a hatali, literally, a “singer”, a wise man, philosopher, and healer, since 1935, and he was the last of a rapidly dying breed. Later that morning, Winston introduced himself.

Months later, I met him again at a seminar and he had explained many things freely about the synthetic knowledge of his culture, in the hopes that someone, Navajo or no, would have the interest to hold it safe and pass it on after he was gone. After the seminar, I went home and wrote three chapters for a book, letting thoughts go and words flow, and afterwards I was surprised. A comprehensive vision presented itself. But there seemed to be a piece to the picture puzzle missing, a piece about the warrior. Who is he? I kept pondering, wondering, thinking. I hunted to find Winston. Finally, on a tip, I had written him a letter, general delivery, in care of a trading post, in the remote desert of Arizona, down near the Grand Canyon. He had actually acknowledged my message, something rather uncommon with traditional Navajos who generally believe that synchronicity or the Holy People or cosmic waves, or the wind spirits will either bring the two parties face to face or they won't, but interference with the Tao is not generally practiced. I always felt there were a lot of parallels between that tradition and Taoism: “Go with the flow. Don't interfere, don't micromanage. Stay at the center of the circle.”

When Winston wrote back, he merely indicated that he had the information I required and would meet me at the Lukachukai camp where I had first encountered him. Obviously, with a lot of forethought, I intensively prepared for the rendezvous. I had driven up in my 4-Runner. It rained like hell for almost 2 days. I slept and ate in the back of the vehicle. I had seen a few other vehicles, here and there in the distance, but not long after the last drops, people were out there building a bonfire. Where they got the dry wood from, I don't know. I think I was the only White there, huddled around the fire, warming up, drying out. I felt a presence, suddenly, and I turned around, nose to nose with Winston. He merely looked me in the eyes and uttered with

the traditional Navajo glottal stop: "I brought your answer!" He handed me a single typed piece of paper and turned away:

Sa'ah Naaghei Binehadzidii...may perhaps be translated as, "One who shields for prolonged life." Through living in accordance with the teachings that protect one, one may develop strong personal qualities that earn such high respect from others that one is perceived as a shield against harm or disharmony (naayee') and is sought out for advice, counseling or other forms of help. Such a person is firmly grounded in strong values for coping with daily problems. When used in association with the word, "na'abaahk'ehgo" ("the warrior way), the resulting phrase "na'abaahk'ehgo sa'ah naagháii binehadzidii" refers to the strength derived from the teachings and the wearing of symbolic protectors (turquoise, arrowhead, bear claw, etc.) which shields one from injury or death in war.

Everything in the whole mystery coalesced. I understood the position of the human in the larger system. Once again, it was very Asian. Humanity had a responsibility to develop psychospiritually and was not required to look outward in order to find the full life. It was as around that time that I recalled an anthropologist's argument that the Athapascan speakers had been the last over the land bridge. Interesting, I thought, there are only two cultures on the planet which endeavor to rebalance the infirm through the ceremonial use of paintings constructed with sand measured out on the floors of houses. Some Navajo friends of mine had journeyed to Tibet and come back to notify me: "They looked just like us!"

The days and months coalesced and a documentary video corporation out of Trento, Italy got a hold of me, wanting to do a treatment of Navajo medicine men. I talked to Winston. He was agreeable. We started at Winston's hogan where, with his assistant, we got into philosophical considerations as to man's place in the universe. Finally Winston announced: "If there are no other questions, let's go film!" We were on the road in a big R. V. heading for the sacred western peak: two young Italian dudes, an older one, this crazy Bilaghana, his son, and the priest of the earth, all off in a wooden shoe.

Soon, however, Winston called everything to a halt. It was time to shop at the upcoming trading post. He went in by himself and came out to the motor home carrying paper sacks. It was obvious. It was party night: bags of whiskey and beer. Then all the shit broke loose. As we proceeded down the highway, his conversational topics, speech, and general comportment radically transformed.

The temperate Italians had begun to freak – big time. All had been lost: the transoceanic voyage to let Europe know about those left in touch with the earth, all the profits, the total package of schemes and plans. I began to run around reassuring everyone that somehow, with the grace of the earth goddess, all would end well with this intercultural collision.

We camped in a campground, one of those forest service things with the "put your money in the metal pipe" routines and settled down. Winston accelerated with the bottle. His verbiage had become wilder and more incoherent. The Italians were starting to hate me. I had brought them

here to destroy them. They were truly a bunch of primadonnas; I'd had a fight with one of them already over my suggesting a gratuity to a lady who was a wonderful informant and a personal friend. And now this! They started shouting and gesticulating in Italian. Some of the gesticulations seemed a little obscene to me. The Athapascan tongue grew wilder. The Romance language grew more and more furious. I began to think of grabbing my son and making a run for it in the darkness, just flee into the night of the Arizona mountains, and escape.

People yelled and screamed more frequently and louder. Everything hit a pitch for some sort of final crescendo and, then, all was still. We just looked around at each other. Winston quietly stood up and announced that he was retiring for the night and that we were to get his bedroll and set it up "in the front yard".

Then arose more surprises. He lay down on his bedroll and we were to pull off his boots. All sorts of small objects came shooting out. They were small bottles of whiskey and vodka. We tried for the pants, too. Winston looked up at me and entreated, again with that typical Navajo glottal stop: "Don't touch my pri". Oh, what a letdown, and after an entire night of preparatory priming, too!

Winston off to sleep on the lawn, the rest of us reentered "the house" and crashed out solid. When the chimes awoke us we all looked at each other, knowing that the opportunity had not been seized and all was lost for the future of the Wild West show, me being Buffalo Mischke. We piled out on the lawn anticipating Winston hung over and incapacitated. He was standing in the dark, completely sober, awaiting our arising. He'd been ready for some time, awaiting us. Eighty some years old: "Come on, let's get going." The Italians were thrust into silence. Not one word was uttered after Winston's admonition.

The sun was to rise soon. The cameramen worked feverishly to build the set. They were no longer running against alcohol, now the universe.

The sun from the east began to cast its light on the San Francisco Peaks to the west. Winston quietly produced a pouch containing corn pollen and strode out to the clearing to begin an act of reverence which had been enacted on that land far, far, before anything in living memory. Reverently he chanted, moving his hand in an arch with the sacred substance. It was all on camera. It had been captured, just as Edward S. Curtis had done a century before. It would not be lost from human culture. It was indeed documented; it had been rendered reality for those doubters yet to be born.

And then, Winston came back to the cameramen and with the customarily appropriate gesture demanded; "Alright, out there, get out there and you do it now. Do it!" The Italians were horrified, struck dumb. They had no idea what he meant to convey. They just stood there with their arms straight down, just staring. He jerked the pouch at them and he meant it. Slowly, the Europeans awoke to something they had never imagined in their corporate documentary anticipatory repertoire. One slowly reached for the pouch, staring into Winston's eyes. He was

no longer a viewer, now an actor. Winston's intention was to convey that this ceremony was not just for Navajos, but for all the world, all the universe. It was catholic.

The Italians, as in a trance, ambulated out and blessed themselves, not just stunned at the opportunity, but at a meaning which was only then becoming marginally apparent. The pouch was offered to me and I followed suit, and afterward, I fell to the ground and wept. What I had been given had been on this land for millennia, and I had, essentially, seen its termination - the end of an era, never to rise again.

Winston flew away shortly thereafter, and with him, the death of an epoch; I had seen it, the last of it, on that sacred land.