

Physicians Alike

Long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing...things which don't shift and grow are dead things...I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong...Witchery works to scare people, to make them fear growth. But it has always been necessary, and more than ever now, it is. Otherwise we won't make it. We won't survive. That's what the witchery is counting on; that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more...THE NAVAJO MEDICINE MAN BETONIE TO TAYO, Leslie Silko's Ceremony

Unflinchingly, my Navajo friend advised: "We've got to get you to a diagnostician right away. It's best not to delay." I had been getting sick for quite a while, so I was easily convinced. She knew where to look. In a few days, we were at a lady's house. She began to chant, then began to place the sacred corn pollen on my head, my shoulders. She held it before my face. I finally got the idea: "Mouth?" "Yesss!", she answered.

She saw visions, made strange noises, moved her hand back and forth. Then she spoke to my friend in the native tongue. There was some disbelief, further discussion and then clarification. It was a certainty. I had drunk water that had been struck by lightning. There was only one way out. I was in for the Lightning Way and the Male Shooting Way. A hero long ago had come down with similar symptoms and he had been healed through a special encounter and blessing by the gods. My turn now. Just follow the ancient prototype of tradition and all will be well.

In Cove, Arizona, the medicine man was a whole lot less certain about the whole thing: "Where are your sheep to bring for the feast after the ceremony? No sheep, no ceremony!" "What about your extended family? Will they all be able to attend?" "I don't have any family. Lost them long ago. A few stragglers around New York City." "We can't do this ceremony." The potential practitioner virtually winced in his final comprehension: "Your family must be there to support you: to cook the mutton, to chop the wood, the make the supplications to the Holy Ones." "Mr. Begay, I know some hippies up around Durango. They're pretty good people. They don't have any sheep, but they'd probably be willing to bring some pretty good pot luck dishes, lasagna, and some smorgasbord stuff." The healer just stood, studying me, a blink now and then, no other expression but pensive astonishment. He just turned away and walked off. Not having been out of sight long at all, he returned and simply said, "You are one of the five fingered people. Alright, bring your hippies. Bring your lasagna. We will all do what we can; we will make it right. We will perform the ceremony. You will be well. All will be well."

That must have been a first point of departure for the elderly singer. It certainly represented the tolerant commingling of cultures. Culture change is slow to come, yet inevitable. In

rethinking all of this, I am always brought to recall the observations of wisdom on the part of Betonie, the legendary medicine man. How hard we all fight to keep culture “pure”, to render the push against change so there will be that familiarity we can all depend upon, so we can close our eyes to inevitability embracing complacency’s logical promises, feigning the faith that eternal endurance exacts in our blind denial of death. There never was a pure and changeless culture and there never will be. What one can come to love from the Tao is the eternal kaleidoscope of the infinite variety scattered out by time and place, those stars scattered by the reckless randomness or chaos of that old trickster, Ma’i, the coyote. How we all long to be frozen into nouns, while yet living in the verbal fluidity of diverse pleasure and necessity. In fact, the wisest of the hatali understand the manifestation of that desire to be a form of witchcraft, itself. Alas, fundamentalism as the demonic, oh, ye of little faith!

Out in the desert, the old man instructed me to place the sacred stone at each of the four directions, positioned appropriately around a juniper bush. I thought of Moses and conflagration without consumption. It’s kind of what we all hope for, I reflected. Such consideration directed me into the area of faith and the connection between belief and subjective reality: “Let this be true for me, and it is so.” I was awakened out of my ever active cognitive gymnastics through direct address from my guide: “It doesn’t matter if you believe this or not, it will still heal you.”

The ceremony, itself was classical, traditional, impressive, powerful. The Ph. D. anthropologist, husband of my friend who had gotten all of this going, was shaking a rattle and swinging side to side along with it, just pouring out the old chants: “----- na sha do.” “In beauty shall I walk”. The hippies joined in as best they could, and the choruses to the holy ones swelled and extended, in all the grandeur and style of “Grand Opera, psychoanalysis, and the Roman Catholic Mass”, as Robert Bergman, once director of mental health across the reservation was moved to observe in the famous BBC film “Navajo: The Fight for Survival”.

And so it went; I sat in the middle of the sandpainting in a bathing suit, silently as the others sung for me to the gods. I was removed from profane time and entered the timelessness of the legendary hero as the foundations of this universe were being laid. My physician, understanding the healing of body to be best approached through the archetypes of the mind that underlays us all, in the endeavor to realign the conflicting drives of the unconscious, culturally symbolized by the drinking of the water struck by the lightening of the gods, offered me the sacred preparation out of a sea shell, four times. The chanting went on. The gods were appeased. A way had been found for me to carry this newly encountered lightning energy. Had grown stronger, rather than being destroyed.

My entire body was painted by the assistant in ways that symbolized the struggles of humanity for its vision, its will, its thought, and its sanity in divinity: “In beauty shall I walk, in beauty shall I walk, with beauty all around me shall I walk, In beauty it is finished, in beauty it is finished.” Finally, the spirits had been coaxed, cajoled, entreated, even threatened into retreat from the strange patient’s psycho-soma, and all was once again rendered well. Not a question of sin, but

one rather of balance and harmony. I had been the focal point of reestablishment of well being at that moment for the entire universe, and had trodden the path of a legendary hero who once had suffered a malady similar to my own. The chorus of hippies belted and blurted out repetitiously, not knowing the meaning of the strange sounds, but intent, none the less, upon participating: "On an old age path of beauty may I walk, on an old age path of beauty may I walk. In beauty it is finished, in beauty it is finished!"

All was silent as we regarded each other, mud and paint, turbans and bandanas, bell bottoms and sandals. It had been the most overcoming light show they had ever attended, and they had gone right through it straight.

I was left alone in the temple of turf and timbers to contemplate the holiness of the experience. To sleep in the center of the ancient sandpainting after such an ordeal is to experience realignment at the deepest levels and to experience the associated symbolic imagery of the dream. Dismembered and reconstituted, I slept face down on the earth, not to awake till it was time to face the dawn through the entrance to the east. I was on my way to wellness.

The medicine man afforded his complements to the chef on the lasagna. The fry bread and mutton stew brought by my Navajo intercessory was hailed by all the alternative lifestyle yuppies as a great culinary discovery. The feast transpired and all was well.

I was instructed to allow no one to touch me for the four-day rebalancing period. I was not to sleep with my wife, not to hug my children, nor to shake hands with anyone. I slept in my back yard for four nights under the stars. The ensuing morning, my crazy buddy awoke me with the garden hose, chasing me, giggling, as I ran about the yard in my under shorts, howling from the sting of the freezing new found cleansing ceremony. The paint I had been wearing was sacred and to be returned to the earth, and not to be relegated to the sewer.

My friend locked up the house and my family and I were off in our Chevy wagon to encounter our old friends in Topeka. They, in turn, had been invited to the Memorial Day blowout of the Menninger Clinic and we were invited to come along. A sudden Kansas rainstorm had chased everyone for the park. Four year-old Josh and I had been practicing our archery when the skies opened up. The site of reconvention had been designated at the head psychiatrist's home. Those guys knew how to party! A couple of beers shifted the tale of healing from memory to the coffee table. It was a multilogue of honesty, respect, genuine comparing of notes, and final philosophizing as to who we really are, using the two cultural points to direct a straight line. The healers of another culture, who had learned to address the private rather than the collective dream, to enter the mind through another door, found my travels fascinating and resolved to study Navajo medicine. Eclecticism was emerging ubiquitously. I encouraged it.

The next day, our family pushed eastward to the National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar on "Psychoanalysis, Shakespeare, and Literary Criticism" at the University of Massachusetts. The summer was 1984 and cultures were exploring everywhere.