

Spirits on the Peaks

“Take me to the top of the highest peak on Navajoland!” The fancy white lady with the concho belt of gold had approached me in private. Her head silversmith, she said, had urged her not to return to Albuquerque without ascending the highest peak in the Lukachukai Mountains.

Her tasteful adornment was truly jolting. Each of the disks of the Goddess’ belt was made of solid gold and displayed a scene of the advancement of the Navajo people from the first through the fourth worlds: the traditional creation story: the evolution of “the people”. She had described her attire to me as appropriately worn to affairs with suggested attire acknowledged as “Southwest Elegant”.

The journey promised to be auspicious but, sadly, I had to inform her that no one could go up there without an authorized Navajo guide. She persisted. Maxine and I had become friends. She disclosed her husband to be an authorized guide. That day, the four of us left in Herman’s pickup: the fancy lady, her buddy and the guide in the cab, I on the back deck.

At the peak, the two ladies disappeared. I had no idea where our guide had gone either, and so I sat and stared out in solitude at a vast panorama across the terrain of the American Southwest. I must have fallen into a sort of reverie; before long I noticed that I was thinking that what I was viewing had not changed appreciably since the conquistadores had marched across its landscape and soil. Then the view regressed. I somehow knew of the topography populated by only the indigenous ones. And, then again slowly, there disappeared the *homo sapiens*, leaving only the “animal people” practicing what the old Navajo hunters referred to in their “legends” as prehuman flux: each day, the critters got up and put on a different costume. Man and beast were one. Then, I experienced no life at all, just the land in total silence, but for the wind spirits, the N’lchi.

A long time staring, I suppose; I was awakened by a presence. Herman was addressing me, but not in English. He was extending himself in Navajo. I heard and understood and responded in kind. We spoke for a time, and then he disappeared once more. Looking back, how could this have been possible for a person of my level of lexicon?

Without speaking, everyone seemed to have assembled at the truck simultaneously. Again, the others rode in the cab, I on the rear deck. And it was then that strange things began to happen. A extraordinary sort of fog seemed to have drifted in. Shortly after departing the peak, we were encased in a blanketed world of grayness. We had to drive very slowly. I was just sort of staring aimlessly and then: shumm! It was sort of a diorama that appeared as the gray parted. A group of Navajo people were all squatting around a fire, a tripod holding a coffee pot. All turned, in a strange sort of slow motion, slowly regarding me as I drifted by back into the fog. But, they did not seem to be contemporary, live human beings – more phantasmagoric images, perhaps of people who were already deceased – or not yet born! I was roused into a sort of impacted state, sitting upright in response to a kind of adrenalin hit. Catching my breath, slowly putting this appearance together in some way, I turned and, shumm! another window appeared: a

family of Navajo people seemingly walking in slow motion with their flocks. Slowly, slowly, in their gait, they turned their heads and regarded me with eyes of empty stare, not even reflecting the mildest of curiosity. An elderly woman with a purple "squaw" skirt, long streaks of silver in her hair, looked me straight in the eyes, even from that distance, and as she danced, she uttered one word. They turned and they were gone. Again and again. A primeval feeling of all this struck me intensely, as if the timelessness I had experienced at the peak had been entered in not only the sense of the absence of history and what it implied at that moment. What also began to be drawn into my intuition was the timelessness of these indigenous people. Time was always with them. They lived in the heart of eternity, in the timelessness of God, as the Tao says, in the center of the circle, where these opposites we suffer from were regarded as illusions by them. They lived without the fear of death. There was no end, no beginning. They just moved on.

I clamored out of the truck, leaving with no valediction to anyone. I needed to just be in solitude. I began to think of Seattle's disclaimer to the strange man from the east: "Your destiny is a mystery to us." Where is it that we think we are going? What gives us any idea there is any place but here? We've imagined history. We've denigrated tradition in favor of progress. We've even been so bold as to imagine evolution when, perhaps within the circle of planet and their orbit, within the cyclicity of time, everything is, all at once. Everything always was, always will be. How did we manage to have stepped out of the all?

"Cover thy body, renounce the abhorrence of thy polygamous ways, denounce the demonic of thy medicine bundle, throw it into the fire and confess thy sins". We have had to strike the Red Man down, as with the indictment of Eden: "Thy sin is thy innocence. Oh, sinner, repent and know thy transgression. In contrition, step out of the center of the circle and we will show you the forgiveness of civilization!" But what was that word, what was that word?