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Introduction

Entering the Táchééh

As I completed this manuscript in mid-July 2011, two seemingly unrelated items to most people came to my attention. The first was the containment of Arizona's largest fire in the history of the state, recently burning in the White Mountains of the Bear Wallow Wilderness. The blaze eventually dipped into part of western New Mexico—scorching over 538,000 acres total, destroying seventy-two buildings, and at one point causing the evacuation of 10,000 people.¹ Started on May 29 by an abandoned campfire, the conflagration eventually required 1,700 firefighters to suppress the blaze, burning 841 square miles of rugged territory, primarily in eastern Arizona. By July 3, 95 percent of the fire was contained, with mop-up crews extinguishing remnants in isolated pockets. A related concern was the damage summer rains could bring as they washed over the charred areas.

The second occurrence was not nearly so dramatic. I received a copy of *Bitter Water: Diné Oral Histories of the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute* compiled by Malcolm D. Benally.² The editor of the *Western Historical Quarterly* invited me to review this monograph, which I happily agreed to do. Once I opened the book, I encountered interviews with four Navajo matrons who had no desire to comply with the federal mandate that removed them from Hopi Partitioned Lands (HPL). After years of litigation that involved the best minds of both tribes as well as the federal government, the expenses to relocate Hopis and Navajos had mushroomed from the initial estimate of \$30 million to today's \$400 million.³ Still, the Navajos living in the HPL area had no desire to move; in their minds

the entire issue boiled down to Washington's insensitivity to traditional Navajo practices. The voices of four angry elders rang loud and clear.

In both the instance of the wildfire and the relocation, something more caught my attention. It was not the events but their interpretation. Looking first at the fire, one finds that although the flames never touched the Navajo Reservation, the *Navajo Times* featured its spread and eventual control on the front page for three weeks running. Of particular interest was the June 23 issue with its banner headline "Unnatural Disaster—Disasters Signal Imbalance in the Natural World." The two previous issues (June 9 and 16) discussed primarily the fire's physical spread, where crews were operating, and the logistical support necessary to contain it. A short section in the second issue entitled "Praying for Dził Ligai [White Mountain]" told how Apache prayers for their sacred mountain tempered the destruction and kept the fire away from important cultural sites.

In "Unnatural Disaster," it was the Navajos' turn to interpret the event. As the tribal newspaper, it not surprisingly expressed views far different than those filed by other press agencies. The thoughts of "traditional medicine people" opened the article, which then focused on the comments of "a traditional Navajo practitioner and faculty member at Diné College, Avery Denny." The article warned that Mother Nature was upset, and this was her way of making necessary corrections. Here, Mother Nature was not figurative but literal. Denny stated that the exploitation of resources and contemporary Navajo lifestyles were angering the orb and that the four sacred elements of fire, air, water, and earth controlled by holy people (Diyin Dine'é) were providing this and other lessons. Fires, tornados, tsunamis, earthquakes, droughts, blizzards, extreme temperatures—the list goes on—were physical manifestations of the spiritual sickness now pervading the earth and plaguing its people.

Avery commented, "As humans, we do not look at what we are doing to the natural world. We share this world with other beings," specifying plants and animals that were the first holy beings to live on the earth.⁴ Ramon Riley, cultural resource director for the White Mountain Apache Tribe, chimed in: "Even our children are going crazy—they are not who they are. Their identities are going away. We used to massage our mountains with our ceremonies. Every day we did that."⁵ Denny later added that there was no ceremony to cleanse a person feeling the effects of

a manmade fire. This was obviously a different situation than the one full-blooded Navajo Larry Garcia had encountered a month before in Joplin, Missouri. A devastating tornado that demolished two-thirds of the town was heading toward Larry and his wife, Rachel's, home. Two miles away, the "Big Wind" veered in another direction, according to Larry, because of the traditional house blessing he performs every year before tornado season: "We do it the old way with sage and tobacco. I think it saved us."⁶ To readers unfamiliar with traditional Navajo beliefs, the connection with fires, tornados, holy people, massaging mountains, existent and nonexistent ceremonies leaves one wondering. Further, what does this have to do with how children act?

One of the criteria I used when reviewing *Bitter Water* was its ability to communicate beyond cultural boundaries. In some instances the book generated more heat than light if one were looking for some type of resolution that allowed Navajo elders to stay on Hopi Partitioned Lands. But one of the work's strengths is the thinking and metaphorical language so familiar to those who have worked with and studied the Navajo. For those unfamiliar, however, a lot was left unclear. How is one to understand these quotes given by various elders: "The mountains were placed here so we could travel."⁷ "The fireplace has stories that can be told. I mentioned some. I can tell you the sun does not walk on this ground. The moon does not walk here on this land."⁸ "Hantavirus happened because of the government, because of politics."⁹ "We carry a Mountain Soil bundle and an arrowhead. These are the tools you have so you can herd sheep, ride horses, and herd cattle."¹⁰ There are others, but this group suffices to make the point that learning a traditional Navajo worldview takes time and explanation. The speakers who gave these quotes assumed the listener understood, so no further explanation seemed necessary.

The purpose of this book is to share some of the insight I have gained over thirty-plus years as I worked and conversed with Navajo elders. Their teachings are perceptive, opening up the world to a very different set of understandings and assumptions not found in the dominant society. They are all connected and framed in a rational network of ideas that, when taken in their entirety, not only make sense but serve as a guide for daily life from birth to death. When heard in isolation, as with the earlier quotes, they are difficult to interpret and in some instances appear to have no connection with concrete, physical reality. Therein lies part of the

problem. Where Anglos understand the world in a very physical sense based on the laws of science and other academic disciplines, the world for the Navajo is framed in a religious context that explains how and why certain things happen. It is just as rational as Western thought but is based on different premises, which will be explored in these pages.

As with science, the foundation of this belief system hearkens back to operative principles set in motion at the time of creation. Just as rules of biology, geology, physics, and chemistry explain what occurred eons ago, so do the rules and actions of the holy people who formed the earth spiritually. These gods clearly defined principles and practices as they planned and then prepared the world to be inhabited by the earth surface, or five-fingered, people. Water, plants, insects, and animals—everything found in this world today, as well as in previous worlds beneath this one—were part of the plan. Holy people such as First Man, First Woman, Talking God, House God, Black God, First Boy, First Girl, and many animals in human form met in the *táchééh* (sweat lodge) and later the first hogan to voice their thoughts about the future and how things should operate. They created everything spiritually before it was made physically; for everything the Navajo people were to encounter, there would be an answer, a place for it to fit in the divine scheme as they lived on this earth. Each disease would have its cure; each problem its answer; every plant and animal its place, power, and teaching; and each its own prayers and songs for communication. All was harmonious as long as every creature abided by the rules established by the holy people. As they thought, prayed, sang, and planned, the physical world with its inhabitants began to take shape.

Only the holy people, as they sat in that first sweat lodge and hogan, could manage the complexity of the creation of the worlds discussed in Navajo mythology. That mythology provides a blueprint that outlines how people should act, based on divine rules and principles. No individual will ever have all the knowledge of the holy people, but individuals will have enough to know the general guidelines for life with the help of specialists—medicine people—who control supernatural powers and know how to apply them. Thus knowledge is power, thought opens the door to knowledge, and once it has been gained, knowledge is shared through teachings. This understanding frames the context for that which follows—the different applications of some of those teachings in daily life.

The unifying theme that runs throughout this work is the role of traditional Navajo thought in daily life, its pervasive interpretation, and incidents that fostered its change. The topic is impossibly broad to cover completely, since Navajo life centers around thinking and reasoning in accordance with traditional teachings. Many academicians have provided excellent, though partial, insight into different aspects of this thought—Washington Matthews and his initial recognition of mythology and its connection to those teachings; Gladys Reichard, with her encyclopedic knowledge of Navajo religion; Father Berard Haile, who had a vast understanding of traditional practices and beliefs; the Franciscan Fathers, who tied culture with language in their dictionary; Clyde Kluckhohn, with a broad understanding of Navajo culture along with specialized topics such as witchcraft; and Charlotte Frisbie and David P. McAllester, who showed how traditional teachings are lived by a medicine man.¹¹ The list goes on, with dozens of other significant contributors in the field of Navajo studies. Also apparent is that most of those mentioned did their work long ago and would be considered by some to be “dated.”

Two more contemporary anthropologists have made important additions to understanding aspects of traditional teachings. The first, John R. Farella, wrote *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy*, published in 1984.¹² This book explores the meaning of “*Sq’a naghái bik’e hózhó*,” which has been glossed any number of ways but which generally refers to the concept of long life and happiness as an empowering force in one’s life that harmonizes with elements of the universe. Farella’s work moves deeply into aspects of Navajo teachings and uses the voices of medicine people to clarify a series of complex thoughts. Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, author of *Molded in the Image of Changing Woman, Navajo Lifeways*, and *Blood and Voice*, also depends heavily on interpretation of events or situations as seen through the eyes of the elders.¹³ She uses the ethnographic present to bring the reader into contemporary Navajo culture while explaining why the elders feel as they do. The texts are heavily laced with direct quotes embedded in anthropological analysis.

Missing from this recognition are the names of Navajo cultural or historical specialists who have published on their own in this field. Times are changing. The Navajo Nation actively conducts research and the collection of traditional information that is preserved at tribal headquarters

in Window Rock, Arizona. There are Navajo elders anxious to share their knowledge out of concern for its loss and for the benefit of the younger generation. Some of these men and women have either written or coauthored writings about traditional teachings.¹⁴ There has also been a resurgence of historical crafts, such as weaving rugs, making baskets, and producing high-quality silver products—the beginnings of which harken back to an earlier time but that are now created with ever-increasing sophistication. All of this stimulates discussion about what it was like in the old days, which in turn evokes teachings from that past.

A sub-corollary to this book's main theme is the impact the loss of these teachings is having in contemporary Navajo culture. The reader will find a mix of both historical and modern examples of cultural change—sometimes short and violent, other times long and imperceptible—that has shifted traditional views and practices. It is hoped that these examples will give younger generations cause to reflect on what has been lost as well as what is now available. Paul G. Zolbrod, author of *Diné bahane': The Navajo Creation Story* and a longtime student of Navajo teachings, said it succinctly in a personal communication: “The threat to traditional Navajo lifeways functions as a microcosmic index to what is happening in the macro cultural arena of cultural attrition where ethnic and regional enclaves are similarly undergoing the loss of teachings that help maintain a distinct identity. This is a significant point to make at a time of drastic cultural leveling everywhere, even in the mainstream, where the loss of embedded traditions is deeply felt but not always articulated.”¹⁵ Perhaps what is contained within these pages will serve as an “articulation” that will be helpful in the preservation of what is still present.

The genesis of this book occurred in the mid-1970s but continues through today. As a teacher in southeastern Utah who has worked with Navajo people for many years, I quickly embraced their fascinating history and culture as they opened their homes and minds to my desire to learn. The late 1980s and early 1990s proved particularly rich in working with them, but many of these people have since died. History mixed with culture as I wrote about the people in the Four Corners area. Elders asked that I assist them in recording their life stories, three of which have been published with a fourth under way. A county history for Utah's centennial celebration provided another reason for me to find out what the Utah Navajo experience was like from their perspective. The fact that I teach

Navajo students became another reason to understand the people sitting in front of me.

Motivation for those who shared their lives and culture came from a growing concern that the younger generation was losing its understanding of what their grandmothers and grandfathers, and to a lesser extent their mothers and fathers, believed and experienced from the past. The people I befriended and others I simply interviewed expressed intense anguish at having the traditional teachings and history lost. To them, it seemed the youth were buried in a contemporary blizzard of activities sponsored by white culture that made the old ways seem arcane, outdated, and impractical. This is not to suggest that members of the younger generation did not respect their elders but only that, from a perspective of navigating through daily life, it was difficult to use much of what the old ones taught and believed. In the elders' terms, the youth had been "captured" by white society. The difficulty of understanding and practicing beliefs such as those expressed previously by the women of the HPL became an increasing concern. Science, geography, and algebra seemed to make more sense as the two worldviews battled each other in the minds of children and youth educated in the white man's world.

What the reader encounters within these pages is a return to the thoughts, practices, and beliefs of today's elders raised during the first third of the twentieth century, when livestock and agriculture provided a satisfyingly cohesive way of life. This time period serves as the baseline for the elders who shared their understanding of the world. While each person's life is different, it is not surprising to see how similar many of their experiences were; although the heart of the oral testimony here comes from the people of southeastern Utah, the same teachings and historical events are shared by many throughout the reservation. This does not mean, however, that one size fits all. Specific teachings for a geographic site, a community's condition, or a family's experience are unique to that situation; but the principles and beliefs underlying them are generally held in common.

I have not tried to tackle a large philosophical concept, as did Farella. After listening to the elders, I felt comfortable sharing their words about specific topics that continually surfaced. The unifying theme that unites the diversity found within the various chapters is that of Navajo traditional teachings (*Dinéjí na'nitin*) and history as seen through their eyes. The first chapter looks at different forms of divination, how they work,

and what the practitioners see and feel. Hand trembling and crystal gazing are the most common, both crucial in specifying what ails a person and which ceremony to use to correct it. The second chapter examines a historic incident—the 1918–1919 Influenza Epidemic—from a cross-cultural perspective. For the Navajo, this pandemic was one illness for which the holy people had not prescribed a specific cure. The results were devastating. Chapter 3 covers witchcraft from the perspective of its being not only on the dark side but also sacred and a necessary part of existence. While knowledge of this practice is seldom revealed in detail and rarely confessed, there were those in history—Ba’álílee from the Aneth area, for example—who used their understanding of it to control local Navajo people and confront the federal government. It was also eventually Ba’álílee’s undoing.

The next four chapters discuss different aspects of Navajo thought and language. The first takes a lengthy look at traditional metaphors. The Navajo language is replete with ways of describing everyday objects and events that are tied to the culture and that teach important values. The following chapter is about Father H. Baxter Liebler, Episcopalian missionary to the Navajos in southeastern Utah who understood this principle and adopted the symbols of their religion to express values from his own. He did this with respect and was accepted by many of the people he taught, yet this undertaking was not without surprises. Next is the history of the Pectol shields that were eventually repatriated through NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act [1990]) because of the knowledge of a Navajo medicine man. More than ever, an increasing respect and value is placed on Native American oral tradition, as proven by the Navajo Nation’s ability to provide sufficient evidence that these hotly contested items should be repatriated to their tribe. The fourth chapter in this series returns to examine older Navajo metaphors, looking at how they operate within the culture. Today, however, different ones are replacing them. As traditional teachings provide a diminishing base for metaphorical expression, a new type—still dependent on keen observation and wit—is becoming common. The final chapter concludes with the elders’ beliefs about the end of the world. While many cultures have such teachings, the Navajo, because of their view of historical cycles, discern a pattern of what happened in the past that explains what will occur in the future. There are well-acknowledged signposts along

the way that warn the people today that the time is soon approaching when a “changeover” will take place, destroying this world just as the worlds beneath this one were obliterated for indiscretion.

A final word about words. This book is about words and thoughts, and so I offer an explanation as to why I have chosen certain terms. Scholars often work with well-defined vocabularies specific to their field. I have chosen to use some expressions that have been discussed by scholars yet found wanting in meeting particular criteria. I have elected to adopt the vocabulary I hear the Navajo people speak—many of whom are well-educated, holding higher education degrees. There were also those immersed primarily in the learning of traditional ways who likewise used these words. For instance, the word *hataali* has been translated as healer, chanter, singer, medicine person, and ceremonial practitioner. When I listen to Navajo people speak, they use the words *medicine man* or *medicine woman*; that is what I have used here. The same is true with *Ancestral Puebloan*, which is preferred by those of puebloan descent, but the Navajo use their term *Anaasázi*. While no offense is intended, I have chosen to use the latter for ease of discourse, general recognition, and because that is what the Navajo say. The same is true with the words *Diné* and *Navajo*, which I use interchangeably. While the People often refer to themselves as *Diné* in formal discussion, the term *Navajo* is still the one most often spoken and written. Official titles such as the Navajo Nation, the *Navajo Times*, and Miss Navajo indicate that there is no problem in still using that word.

Other terms are a little more problematic because of the cultural baggage attached to them. While I have already defined “traditional” as those teachings and life ways practiced in full force during the first third of the twentieth century that continue today through the elders, it seems appropriate to recognize that the term is on a slippery scale. What is called traditional here would probably have been considered radically new by a person born in the 1860s. Navajo people who use this term now have a clear understanding in their minds of how a traditional person dresses, talks, and thinks.

Less clearly defined are the terms *myth* and *supernatural*, although I find both words used by Navajo people in conversation and written in the *Navajo Times*. The term *myth* is particularly problematic because in English discourse it can be used to mean something untrue, a fable or



Courtesy, Utah State Historical Society.

The Navajo sweat lodge (táchééh) is a place of thought, planning, and action and has been since the time of creation. Earth surface people use the lodge for cleansing and prayer and to teach important aspects of life.

fictional story, or an outright lie. Nothing could be further from the position taken here. When used in this text, it refers to a sacred explanation as to how the holy people created an object, ceremony, and so on for the benefit of the People. The teachings derived from these explanations are driving forces within the culture that provide stability and coherence in an otherwise chaotic world. If one wants to learn what makes Navajo culture unique and vibrant, then one must eventually turn to the myths

for those answers. The holy people who set all of this in motion have “supernatural” powers, in other words, an ability beyond what is considered normal human capacity. Again, no slight is intended by using either of these terms, and since I hear informed Navajo people use them, I am comfortable doing so, too.

At this point in most introductions, the author makes a disclaimer assuming full responsibility for errors of fact or interpretation in what the reader is about to encounter. I will not break with that tradition, especially since I am writing about another people. I would like to add in my defense that I have a very strong respect for the Navajo people and their traditional teachings and history. Over the years I have tried to listen carefully to what they say and have transmitted what I have heard through the words they spoke. Extensive quoting throughout the text does not remove my responsibility for maintaining correctness of presentation or interpretation. It is hoped that all readers, regardless of ethnicity, will find pleasure and accuracy in the teachings presented.

As at the time of creation, our discussion begins in a cultural “sweat lodge” or “hogan” of the mind. Before a ceremony starts, the hogan is prepared by hanging a blanket in the doorway, serving as a signal to the holy people. They see it and say, “Let us go down. There is a ceremony of our children.”¹⁶ The medicine man cautions, “Don’t you dare be leaning up against the wall. Move forward. All of you. Move forward because the holy people are going to walk behind you and take their place with us.” That is why the Navajo word for a ceremonial sand painting is *iikááh*, meaning “the coming in of the holy people.” So as one turns this page, drop the blanket of the mind over the door and let the holy people enter.

NOTES

1. “Latest Update Wallow Fire,” <http://www.kvoa.com/full-coverage/wallow-fire/23fanchor>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wallow_Fire.
2. Malcolm D. Benally, *Bitter Water: Diné Histories of the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011).
3. *Ibid.*, xiii.
4. Alistair Lee Bitsoi, “Unnatural Disaster—Disasters Signal Imbalance in the Natural World,” *Navajo Times*, June 23, 2011, A-1.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Cindy Yurth, “Mo. Tornado Spares Diné Man’s Home,” *Navajo Times*, June 2, 2011, A-3.
7. Benally, *Bitter Water*.

8. Ibid., 51.
9. Ibid., 52.
10. Ibid., 75.
11. All of these authors have lists of publications too lengthy to outline here. One book by each author is provided as a brief reference as to which I feel is most significant, given the topic of this book: Washington Matthews, *Navaho Legends* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994 [1897]); Gladys A. Reichard, *Navaho Religion: A Study of Symbolism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950); Father Berard Haile, *Upward Moving and Emergence Way: The Gishin Biye' Version* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981); Franciscan Fathers, *An Ethnologic Dictionary of the Navajo Language* (Saint Michaels, AZ: Saint Michaels Press, 1910); Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946); Charlotte J. Frisbie and David P. McAllester, eds., *Navajo Blessingway Singer: The Autobiography of Frank Mitchell, 1881–1967* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978).
12. John R. Farella, *The Main Stalk: A Synthesis of Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984).
13. Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, *Molded in the Image of Changing Woman: Navajo Views on the Human Body and Personhood* (1997) and *Blood and Voice: Navajo Women Ceremonial Practitioners* (2003) both by (Tucson: University of Arizona Press); also *Navajo Lifeways: Contemporary Issues, Ancient Knowledge* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).
14. Three examples give an idea of the type of writing being pursued to preserve traditional teachings. There is also a growing field of other types of Navajo writing in literature, political activism, and shared contemporary experience. That is left for another time and place. John Holiday, an elderly Navajo medicine man, wished to share his knowledge in *A Navajo Legacy: The Life and Teachings of John Holiday* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005) and sought me out to assist him. The result is an autobiography that stresses life in the “old days.” Walking Thunder, with editor Bradford Keeney, wrote *Walking Thunder: Diné Medicine Woman* (Philadelphia: Ringing Rocks, 2001). Featuring glossy pages, color pictures, and a CD with prayers, songs, and stories, this book meshes personal contemporary experience with traditional practices and is packaged to sell. Malcolm D. Benally, author of *Bitter Water* (see note 2), has recorded the thoughts of four Navajo elders who protest their eviction from Hopi land. The book is politically motivated to win support for their resistance. The interviews are written in both Navajo and English; the metaphorical expression of thoughts captures the traditional worldview with themes as contemporary as those today.
15. Paul G. Zolbrod, *Diné bahane': The Navajo Creation Story* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984); personal communication with author, December 15, 2011.
16. Don Mose interview with author, June 7, 2011.