

Pieces of White Shell

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Prologue: A Sprig of Sage

Out of my pouch falls a sprig of sage. I can crush its leaves between my fingers and remember who I am. I belong to the Great Basin. I feel most at home in the sagebrush plains of Utah. But I haven't always been able to say this. I hated sagebrush as a child. On every family vacation, whether we drove to the California coast or to the Tetons in Wyoming, we stared hour after hour out the window at sage. Nothing seemed to move. The color seldom varied. It made me feel very ordinary.

There was another side to sage. Wood ticks loved it and so did rattlesnakes. Parents warned their children and children warned their friends. Since sagebrush covered our foothills like fur, I had encounters with both tick and snake. After a while, you just learned to put them out of our mind. Pretty soon, sagebrush didn't even exist.

Things change. Sometimes you have to disclaim your country and inhabit another before you can return to your own. Now, there is nothing as dear to me as the smell of silver sage after a rainstorm.

This book is a journey into one culture, Navajo, and back out again to my own, Mormon. I am reminded by a Shoshone friend that I come to the Navajo as a migrating bird, lighting for only brief periods of time. This is true. But it is also true that the lessons I learn come from similar places. No one culture has dominion over birdsong. We all share the same sky.

The path I travel is the path where my ancestors' bones lie: in the fourth corners of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona. Navajoland stretches thousands of miles across this region, encompassing over sixteen million acres in all. We are neighbors.

We are both relative newcomers to the land. Navajo migration patterns appear from the late 1300s to the 1500s, with Athabaskan ancestors coming into the American Southwest from an original homeland in western Canada and Alaska. My people's genesis is in the early 1800s, with pilgrimages from New York to Nauvoo, to Utah.

As a result of our histories, we both have a strong sense of locale. The Navajo's world emerged with each living thing bearing a record of the next: All were relatives, the land their Mother. Brigham Young in 1847 stood on the threshold of the Salt Lake Valley and spoke four words: "This is the place."

There are problems. Navajos find themselves caught between modernization and tradition. So do Mormons. People question us. There are tensions. Self-preservation fosters naiveté and shrewdness.

We are a spiritual people, Mormon and Navajo. We believe in a power that moves us, directs us, cares for us. We are taught to listen. The Navajo have their sacred mountains and we have our sacred groves and temples. Family ties are extended and strong. These are not exclusive characteristics. I merely highlight similarities of background.

But there are major differences, primarily in the stories we tell and the way in which we walk upon the earth. It is here that I am most aware of leaving my own culture and entering another. I take off my shoes and walk barefoot. There are risks, I know. My feet have been cut many times, but I am learning to pay attention.

Of the Navajo Way, Gladys Reichard says in *Navaho Religion*, “It must be considered as a design in harmony, a striving for rapport between man and every phase of nature, the earth and the waters under the earth, the sky and the land beyond the sky, and, of course, the earth and everything on and in it.”

Navajo stories have been my guides across the desert. I have trusted them because I could find no others. They are rooted in native soil. To these people they are sacred. Truth. To me, they are beacons in a nation suspicious of nature.

A story grows from the inside out and the inside of Navajoland is something I know little of. But I do know myself and if I begin traveling with an awareness of my own ignorance, trusting my instincts, I can look for my own stories embedded in the landscapes I travel through.

A story allows us to envision the possibility of things. It draws on the powers of memory and imagination. It awakens us to our surroundings. I can follow an owl into a cottonwood grove or listen for Kokopeli’s flute. I can sit in the crepuscular hours of a day or imagine a snake uncoiling from a basket. It is here, by our own participation in nature, that we pick up clues to an awareness of what a story is. Story making comes out of our life experiences. And there are many, many layers we can penetrate.

Storytelling is the oldest form of education. It is the power of image making. Among Native Americans the oral tradition of a tribe is its most important vehicle for teaching and passing on sacred knowledge and practices of the people. Luther Standing Bear, a Lakota, recalls:

Lakota children, like all others, asked questions and were answered to the best ability of our elders. We wondered, as do all young, inquisitive minds, about the stars, moon, sky, rainbows, darkness, and all other phenomena of nature. I can recall lying on the earth and wondering what it was all about. The stars were a beautiful mystery and so was the place where the eagle went when he soared out of sight. Many of these questions were answered in story form by the older people. How we got our pipestone, where corn came from, and why lightning flashed in the sky were all answered in stories.

Maria Chona, a Papago woman, explains how a child learned among her people:

My father went on talking to me in a very low voice. This is how our people always talk to their children, so low and quiet, the child thinks he is dreaming. But he never forgets.

And then I asked Harold Drake of Navajo Mountain why stories are told.

“I will tell you this: They are for the children generation after generation.”

I am not suggesting we emulate Native Peoples – in this case, the Navajo. We can't. We are not Navajo. Besides, their traditional stories don't work for us. It's like drinking another man's medicine. Their stories hold meaning for us only as examples. They can teach us what is possible. We must create and find our own stories, our own myths, with symbols that will bind us to the world as we see it today. In so doing, we will better know how to live our lives in the midst of change.

We have a tradition in our family that centers around the Christmas tree. It began with the birth of the first grandchild.

In 1955, my grandmother placed an angel with gossamer wings on top of a tiny tree. Other angels were hung on lower branches, along with a menagerie of beaded animals and a red bird made of ash. She hung the little bird on an outside limb to give it the appearance of flight. These were the "original" ornaments.

As the family grew, the tree grew. In the next few years, other grandchildren were born – seven boys and a girl. To accompany the angels and animals, my grandmother introduced clowns, elves, harlequins, and varieties of Santa Claus. The tree slowly became animated, so much so that the children would often ask each other if they had ever seen it move.

Each year new ornaments were added – picked for a particular child or event. Crocheted pandas were placed on the tree to symbolize endangered species, an alligator was sent from Florida by a grandchild who was living there, and gold bells hung on the branches to celebrate our grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary. Wooden stars, satin moons, saw-whet owls, skiers, a llama from Bolivia, and angels from every country – all held special significance. Other ornaments represented the darker side of life. As my grandmother would explain, there must always be two poles. And so every year we would look for the new "voodoo" as well as the "saint".

The Sunday following Thanksgiving weekend, that magical day, is "the day the tree goes up." As each ornament is taken out of its box and unwrapped it is like seeing an old friend. The women sit on the couches and talk, fixing broken treasures and supplying hooks for objects that need them. The men stretch out on the floor and sleep, occasionally opening their eyes to see how things are progressing while we children hang our personal histories on the tree.

After the last angel is placed, the boys stand back and throw ribbon-birds (blue, pink, and purple; green, orange, and yellow) onto the tree – the reckless, spontaneous finish.

Today the tree is an internal tree as well, our family tree. It continues to grow as we grow. My grandparents are in their seventies now. Last year, I asked my grandmother if she would write the saga of the tree, what story each ornament told. "We could do it together," I said. She smiled and said, "Yes, let's do." But I knew that behind her twinkling eyes she had other thoughts.

In 1982 the tree went up just as it had done for almost thirty years. The candles were lit. The fire was burning and Leontyne Price sang "Ave Maria." As we nestled into our chairs, my grandmother began to tell her story.

"You see, this tree is alive..."

And she went into the layers of memories. I could feel the heat of the fire massaging my back. I marveled at her animation.

While my grandmother spoke of blue-eyed zebras and quail, I thought I heard the fluttering of wings. I didn't pay much attention until I heard them for the second time. I interrupted to ask if anyone else had heard the sound. Everyone just laughed, saying, "You always hear wings." My grandmother went on. "So you see why we think this tree is alive –"

Just then, a small bird flew down from the chimney, through the flames of the fire, and onto a branch of the tree. It was a weaver finch. No one could speak. A living ornament. He stood on the bough as though it were his favorite perch in the forest. He then circled the tree three times, flew over to the corner of the living room, hit the copper chimes, and landed back underneath the tree with all the animals.

By this time, we had acknowledged the bird's presence and were concerned about getting him back outside. Instinctively, I knelt under the tree with cupped hands and coaxed the bird into them. My fingers wrapped around him and I could feel the rapid heartbeat moving his feathers. There were several quick chirps but no singing wings. I forget who opened the door. The next thing I remember is crouching barefoot in the snow with the finch underneath a yew bush. I waited for some time, softly speaking to the little bird. And then he flew. The night was crystalline. As I walked back into the warm house, my grandmother put her arms around me as my grandfather quietly said, "The story's been written."

I offer you a sampling of the Navajo voice, of my voice, and the voice of the land that moves us. We are told a story and then we tell our own. Each of us harbors a homeland. The stories that are rooted there push themselves up like native grasses and crack the sidewalks.

A few years ago, my cousin Lynne Ann moved to Boston. She could hardly wait to leave Utah and plunge into city life. I told her, "One day you will miss these foothills." We laughed. That Christmas I received a card from her. It read: "Please send me some sage –"