

## **Ties that Bind: The Back Story**

I once met a Navajo woman exactly my own age, who bore my own first name. I met her on a scrabbled hilltop above Phoenix one Saturday at dusk, just as the wick of the city lit up under the palm of twilight. She had already put her truck into gear to leave when she saw me shift my car into park. She waited. I got out and proceeded toward the trailhead, which prompted her to get out and follow me. She caught me just a few yards up the trail.

"You can't do this," she said.

"Do what?"

"Hike alone after dark," she said. "It's not safe. I'll come with you." Without waiting for a reply, she

pulled out a flashlight and began her second hike of the evening, moving in tandem up the hill with me. She readily confided details about herself, her love of reggae music and the retinue of younger men who took an interest in her merely as a Navajo guide to view the petroglyphs in Canyon de Chelly. She shared her aspirations and the discrimination that tainted them, and she spoke of the parents and many younger siblings she had left on the reservation, to which she eventually, happily, returned.

We sat on a high mesa and swung our feet over the snags of cactus and cat claw beyond toe's reach, and I watched the city lights bronze her face as she urged me to meet her often on the fringes of

the new world, at the edge of the old, on the border of what we both considered a more civilized civilization, where the pace of lizard and hawk drew the eye away from the traffic beyond.

This gesture initiated a friendship so guileless, I will always remember its beginnings. A sense of oneness with all of nature drove my friend to the hills each night to watch the darkness fold over the stones, to watch the stars blossom from their black night soil and to wait for the scent of creosote to percolate. That same sense of oneness triggered a protectionism that encompassed me, a Scandinavian stranger, in its fearless, trusting embrace.

Those of us whose obsessed rendezvouses with a mountain ridge at times earned us the label of "antisocial recluse" know the real truth—that communion with creation rejuvenates our passion for all things, human or otherwise. Ecstasy experienced in nature's cathedrals expands the capacity for joy, for love, for the recognition of nobility in life itself, and therefore, in every life form. It tends to free the transcendent self from attachment to ego and bonds it instead to a global identity. The meditative process of sucking in mountain air and squinting at a distant horizon clears the vessels of not only the lungs, but the heart.

Trust of nature's power to heal and consequently, of hearts to bond—both intrinsically figure into a life patched by periodic communion with nature. This book invites readers, hikers and meditators of all traditions to embrace the spirit of this particular time-honored tradition, to capture or strengthen the reflective respect for nature that forms the spiritual marrow of Amerindian life. All who walk the good road quietly, with alert ears and eyes, will hone their capacity for love of all creation.

Pilgrims in California's wilderness of sanctuaries can accept this challenge to renew old ties without trying to mimic or mock the protected sacred ceremonies and sites of people who never lost them.

We can learn this intimate relationship with creation that native peoples preserve without either idealizing or demonizing tribal history and without ignoring the conflicted integration of ancient customs and modern conventions.

The expression *human nature* recognizes the innateness of the traits of living things, as elements of the broader nature, not entities that dominate it. A special peace emanates from cultures that never chose the distractions of urbanity but joyfully bared their souls to the elements. America's indigenous people chalked up centuries of outdoor living, including outdoor worship. Their understanding of astronomy and science implies that ignorance had

nothing to do with their lack of interest in conquest, development and manufacturing as the Europeans knew it during the Industrial Revolution. Early observers failed to give them credit for their choice in the matter of revering the natural world over the technological one. The volition to do so laces together all Amerindian spiritual traditions. It unites them regardless of dialect or region. Although inter-tribal battles may have subdued the overall victory and eminence of any one First Nation during the period of Manifest Destiny, the West offers many examples of clans who lived in peace with one another as well as striving to live in peace with nature.

The two-Creator myth, widespread among Native Californian religions, establishes the contest between the powerful forces of nature that brutalize human existence and those which bless and sublimates it. This contest resurfaces in the oral mythology of each tribe.

The following creation myth employs two creators who work in concert, but whose use of nature as a third partner and whose relationship with the First Nations identity exercises a unique pull on the Cahuilla people. The myth appears in *Stories and Legends of the Palm Springs Indians*, published by Palm Springs Desert Museum.

*The Creation*, as told by Chief Francisco

Patencio, Cahuilla

"In the beginning there was nothing but nights, and other Indian words call them the two nights—man and woman...They tried to produce a child, but the child was lost before time for its birth. For four times the same happened and then with a flash of lightning came strong twin boys.

The name of the first one was Mo-Cot and the name of the second was Tem-Ma-Wit, meaning Creator. These were the first people. They were sitting in the air. There was no earth, no water, no light, nothing but darkness; so they

could not see each other, but they could hear each other. They did not call each other 'brother,' but 'my man.'

Now this Mo-Cot, he asked, 'What are we going to do, my man?'

Tem-Ma-Ya-Wit answered, 'You should know, my man.'

Mo-Cot said, 'We must create now.'

Then Mo-Cot created first tobacco. And Tem-Ma-Ya-Wit invented the pipe and gave it two names; Man and Woman . . . together they made a 'who ya no hut.' This is like a bishop's staff, which is carried in the church today. This they tried to stand up, but it could not stand,

because there was nothing for it to stand on. So they put a tem em la wit (bedrock) to steady the 'who ya no hut,' and yet it would not be steady, for it was growing up all of the time.

Now this was the first beginning of the earth. It was the foundation stone, and is in the middle of the world today. Then they created two kinds of snakes to hold it, but they could not hold it.

They made a big pile of stones and put them around the who ya no hut, and yet it was not steady so they created great spiders, black ones and white ones (not the spiders of today, but the ones that live in the ends of the world), to weave threads to help hold it steady. . . . So then they

made 'al no cit, the water ocean. Then they turned up the edges of the earth, so the water could not run over, and the earth became steady, as we see it today.

Tem-Ma-Ya-Wit asked Mo-Cot, 'How are we going to make no cot em (people) like ourselves?'

Mo-Cot answered, 'We have made the earth, two kinds: fam av sil (meaning moist earth) and pal lis ma wit (meaning damp earth). Also the u le wit (meaning the clay earth), the ta vi wit (meaning the white clay and also the black clay, the yellow clay and the red clay). Of this earth, which we have made will we make the people.'

....Then Mo-Cot and Tem-Ma-Ya-Wit saw all the people that they had made, and they called them No cot em and Ta ba tem, which mean, 'those that have been created.'

....Now, after everything had settled and become quiet again, the people could see well, and they saw that they were of different color. For the white clay had made white people, and black clay aadViilade black people, and yellow clay had made the yellow people, and the red clay had made red people, and each color of people went together.

Then it was that the white-clay people were not pleased about being the only ones without color.

They cried to be dark, like the rest. They put different clay on themselves, but it was not good. It came right off after a while.

Then the people called to Mo-Cot that the people were going away. The white people went first, and Mo-Cot said, 'Let them go. They are different. They will always be different.'

Then Mo-Cot saw in the daylight that the colored people were fast going from him. He reached quickly behind him and grasped the red people. These were the people that he kept with him.

His creation children left him and so it has been to this day, that the children go on away,

instead of staying with the parents. As things were done in the first beginning, so they have done ever since."

Multiple themes make this Cahuilla legend an insightful commentary on environmental outlook, perception of race, and perception of spirituality. The parallel which relates most directly to the sanctuary seeker is the reference to a quest for independence and a journey into the unknown, coupled with a knowledge of the intrinsic dependence on Creation. The description of white people running away directionless, without a sense of belonging, undoubtedly stems from the contact of indigenous people with whites traditionally more interested in

materialism and conquering the land than paying homage to its creative force.

Thankfully, tribal groups in many parts of California frequently unite in their effort to appreciate and protect natural resources as common gifts that transcend human ownership. Changing weather patterns in California due to environmental transgressions illustrate how nature metes out punishment for those who lack such respect. The modern sanctuary seeker, in her own way, reconciles the twin forces of struggle and sublimation. The morning drive away from a sprawling city to a trailhead initiates a slow process of detachment.

This unraveling of urban clutter continues throughout the walk, until its zenith, the arrival at a destination—sometimes physical but almost always spiritual—where alignment with the silence opens the door to unspoken inspirations.

This can happen while one sits quietly on a rock, emptying the mind of all conscious thought to make room for subconscious impressions. It can also happen with the cadence of a hiker's footsteps, which may pump out the flood of worldly concerns. Exhilarated yet exhausted by this detachment process, one begins the return journey back to civilization ready to wrestle its negative forces with renewed strength.

All this can happen without undue analysis or planning. A pair of new shoes, after a great deal of walking, become one with the feet and no longer tug at toes or cut into ankle bones. The same thing happens to a soul engaged in the rhythmic pulse that defines hiking, where the cadence of limbs ticking against the wind creates not a sense of time but timelessness, where a week's worth of stress evaporates into a trail of vague memories. Walking a good road enlarges one's sense of self not by destroying it, but by putting self into perspective as part of a massive network of miracles in which the birth of a primordial rock fascinates as much as the survival of a primordial people. In this realm, disintegration of the individual ego and the

embracing of a broader identification with the universe becomes the most sublime form of self-fulfillment.

This transcendent flight from urban struggle to global oneness (similar to what Maslow called self-actualization) frames the search for the ideal through reflection, rewarding the physical struggle of the journey and mirroring a spiritual struggle as ancient as mortality itself.

In a wealthy Southern California community, rich in natural resources once shared by villagers, a modern woman recently remarked that she had never met her neighbors, nor learned how to exchange simple courtesies with them, such as

bringing in food for the sick or gifts for a newborn, or extending simple introductions or housewarming gestures. Perhaps at times, an overemphasis on possession stills the life of the greater union with humanity, just as it stifles the relationship with the land.

Life for America's indigenous people, however physically difficult, ensured the reconnoitering with both nature and humanity. Tribal people saw the community as a single entity, in which the group adopted individual needs as their own and human life took its place as one single element within the ecosystem. In California, some clans established interdependent relationships from one village to the

next. Antiquated as it seems in a society where community achieves intimacy mostly online, through the computer, the perspective that preserved the spiritual life of the indigenous people can also save the urban dweller from those material walls that dislodge our souls from a connection to the natural world. We can strive to unbind and reconnect by seeking out the sanctuaries of the sages.

## Chapter 2 –California Peoples, Past and Present

Five hundred Indian nations, each with a few hundred people, once seeded the California landscape with communities as adaptable as its variety of indigenous plant communities. The nations

originated from at least 45 early indigenous tribes, present in full force for at least 4,000 years of history, with some evidence of civilizations 40,000 years old, according to historians. Archeological digs commonly uncover arrowheads 12,000 years old. When California was "discovered" by the Old World, it had already existed for centuries for its 70,000 residents.

Great confusion arises in the effort to classify California's many indigenous groups. The Spanish names of the groups used in most text books—and for the most part, in this book—derive either from geographic region or language group, with seven language groups encompassed in California. In

reality, locales changed over the centuries, and language or dialect differed from village to village. Among the many California peoples bilingual since early childhood, classification became even more difficult.

Religious membership also proved more elusive than among many other cultural groups. The close relationship of clans freely encouraged religious intermingling, making it common to find one group visiting the ceremonies of another. (This may also account for the California tribes' initial acceptance of the Spanish padres without fear of forfeiting their own religious and cultural identity).

Socio-political classification poses equal problems, because villages and clans were often self-governed even when they shared customs, language and heritage. Even on comparable maps and in text, a group may be called by two names, i.e., Diegueno or Kamia; Tipai or Kumeyaay; Costanoan or Ohlone. A resurgence in the return to names of the native tongue often eludes readers faced with non-Indian produced maps.

The word "Pomo" denotes earth-people in various languages. In fact, several of California's aboriginal tribes translate their original name as "people of the earth" or something similar, because of the belief that their first ancestors emerged directly from the soil of

the surrounding environment. Although the number of registrations based on heritage determines a nation's federal recognition and funding as a tribal group, even those unregistered groups—many of whose populations dwindled due to slavery, genocide or assimilation--still maintain a strong identity as a “people,” a term that can refer to a tribe, tribelet, band or clan.

When the conquistadors redubbed some of the tribes with the names of saints, they could not extinguish the elemental oneness with the earth that still characterizes their identity, their worship and their philosophies; nor can American law and urban life squeeze this spiritual essence out of indigenous

culture. Many Indians today reject the label "Native American" as a denial of their early origins and national autonomy, and prefer simply to be called Indians or indigenous people or called by their tribal name. In Canada, the term First Nations people became the preferred term by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Membership in a tribal group differs from one region to another. Mexican Indians gain recognition by lifestyle, but categorization by skin color prevails in the United States, where claiming an Indian identity often requires ancestral proof. The Bureau of Indian Affairs requests 25% Indian blood for qualification, but some tribes prefer to use the Mission records to

determine who has made the sacrifices of a traditional California Indian.

Nomadic desert dwellers, prosperous seaside villagers and traders of acorns, steatite and shells all set up a system for co-existence that weathered the centuries until the Spanish invasion brought disease, the uprooting of cultural and spiritual life, and downright slavery. After the mission period, the U.S. government relegated the Indians to pueblos, presidios, rancheros and reservations.

Some books flatly declare that certain tribes have entered the murky territory known as "extinction." Modern-day explorers learn otherwise. Although they generally choose more less publicized

gatherings than the powwows of the eastern Southwest and Great Plains, most California tribes still actively hold ceremonies, sweats and celebrations, passing down Indian wisdom from the elders to the young people, whom they see as important new tentacles of an endangered-but-alive tradition. In some regions, California peoples have become significant forces in local environmental movements and certainly in the struggle to protect sacred lands.

Indeed, California's Indian groups may dwindle in numbers in comparison with their past populations. (One elder remained as the last pure-blooded survivor on her family's Miwok Rancheria at this writing.) Yet despite the invasion of interlopers on

Native Californian homelands, California still maintains the largest Indian population of any state in the union, with more than 50,000 natives living in the Los Angeles basin alone. California also hosts 92 museums and countless interpretive centers, archeological digs, missions and state park exhibits with Indian artifacts and information on the native people.

One hundred thirty-six reservations and rancherias still exist in California. However, in other Southwestern states, distinct geographic separation and strong tribal identities and autonomy tend to generate greater awareness of tribal ways among non-Indians. Urban sprawl has engulfed California's

indigenous people, and this forced integration into the broader community has diminished awareness of the vitality of the indigenous communities.

What does a California tribal member look like today? She might work as a photo refinisher or a museum curator, a lawyer or a doctoral student. He might pursue goals as an actor, an art scholarship recipient or a long-distance runner. The new prototype replaces old stereotypes and, hopefully, allows individuals to let their artistic expression, their ideas and their character define how each one adapts to post-modern culture and what each will uniquely preserve from his or her personal heritage.

Tribal communities experience conflicts of opinion in determining the best method of preservation. Some Indians fear that the more the media extrapolates, romanticizes and exploits early history, the less it will validate today's Indians. They also express concern that the more non-Indians learn about the sacred ceremonies and traditions, the less sacred they will become, and the less power they will hold over the younger generation. Others maintain that at least this attention has made it more socially acceptable, and therefore attractive, for young tribal members to attend ceremonies and participate in community life.

The situation requires sensitivity on the part of those who do want to explore indigenous traditions. Express courtesy by asking permission to repeat a sacred story, and always wait to be invited to join in a ceremony. Examine your own motives first, and make sure they involve the same inner search for truth shared by those present, rather than mere curiosity.

Awareness leads to empathy and empathy to understanding. The respectful observer can tap this understanding by learning to appreciate the culture; not to mimic it, but to draw from it the essence of its strength, the simplicity of its material needs and the sensitivity of its spiritual-environmental equilibrium, its sense of the oneness of things.

One day, I admired a large turquoise necklace that my friend had made. Without a word, she lifted it from her neck and placed it around mine. Years later, I had little choice but to bequeath it to another in the same way. Incidentally, I had noted a small red bead strung up with the turquoise. Teresa explained that every piece of art must bear an inconsistency, for only the Creator makes a masterpiece.

Thus, we improve on our own traditions through bonds melded with friends from whom we derived so much wisdom. Thirty-five years later, I'm still learning



from such memories. From one Teresa to another, I say, "Thank you."

The picture below reminds me of a powwow I attended with Teresa Gilmore near Chinle around 1988. She had spent months preparing, as she hand-sewed hundreds of beads on her dress. She could weave a rug, crochet a blanket, retouch professional photos, guide tours, ensure health services on the reservation, work as a mounted policewoman, speak three languages, lead her family, and organize the Diné community.



Photo from Palo Alto Powow, 2015

What impressed me most, however, was her kindness as she reached out in friendship to share a sunset with a new friend. This forever changed me.