

When You've Walked a Mile in Their Shoes

By Grace Halsell

WASHINGTON — When I went to live among the Navajos on their vast Southwestern reservation in early 1972, I packed very lightly, but immediately felt weighted down by my own values and conceits.

I wanted to go among the Indians, free of my past, an empty vessel, a clean slate, to be nothing and absorb everything, to see, hear, understand only that which was disclosed to me.

But one can't obliterate his past, his conceptions and habits of a lifetime. So the harsh adjusting was a ceaseless struggle, while the Navajos around me had an unknowing acceptance of their lot.

Being a product of a uniquely modern country without roots in its own continental past and with cultural traditions brought from Europe, I tend to view life "rationally," as a cause-and-effect phenomenon, supported by rationales and logic. The Indians, who came here from China and Tibet, on the other hand, have a different heritage and approach life instinctively or intuitively.

In our "discovery" of the New World, we treated the Indians as obstacles to be overcome or subjugated, not human beings to be understood. They were offered two choices: yield to our dominance or perish. The tyranny was total, and now after cen-

turies of lordly domination, not even a belated sense of guilt and contrition has produced the understanding that is essential to all human relationship. The Indians are still misunderstood.

I tried to understand them through an action. I recalled my meeting Chang in Korea and attempting through a love for him to love Korea, and I asked myself: why not "love" a Navajo? As if through that physical action, I might weigh more accurately and measure more fairly what I would learn. But who of the bleeding hearts, those who "love" the Indians, has ever come to understanding? This kind of "love" only separates people.

When I slept on dirt floors, I nagged myself constantly: these people are dirty! And when I saw their poverty, I berated them silently: Why doesn't that old woman weave another rug? Why doesn't that young Navajo go out and get a job, use his back and his hands, to better himself? Why do they refuse to assimilate?

It wasn't long before I felt that many Navajos still retain a precious quality that I, have lost: they are "connected" with all of creation. They possess, as Baudelaire phrased it, the "genius of childhood."

The primitive sees, smells, hears, tastes—with a directness of perception. Modern man, although he too feels somewhere deep within him a link to nature, has "disconnected" from creation, and busied himself with

his machine civilization. Technologically we have very nearly perfected the knack of arranging the world so that we don't have to experience it.

When we move away from small primary groups, we no longer enjoy the kind of intimate relationships that are possible among primitives who live in dirt-floor huts.

One's social world enlarges. Yet, as my number of acquaintances increases, the depth of relationships decreases. I have "many friends" but the nature of urban friendships is commonly superficial, symbolized by telephone numbers and zip codes.

Because modern man no longer lives intimately, one with another, as many Navajos continue to live, sleeping on sheepskins in dirt-floored hogans, and telling stories late at night, by the fire, he turns his lonely spirit and his lonely body more and more to other lonely bodies, with less and less intimacy and understanding. The flesh-against-flesh does not cure our loneliness.

Our alienation is from our "mother" earth. And to find "me" I must find myself in the totality of the universe that allows me to identify with God. Or, whatever name I give Creation-Creator.

Many students, in their "new naturalism," are seeking a recognition of the values of the Aboriginal World. They are saying: let's reject mastery over nature, let's live close to nature, in the open, off the land, stressing

cooperation rather than competition. They are saying: let's reject mastery experience ahead of conceptual knowledge. They are saying: it's not true we live because we consume; we don't. It's not true that we live because we are celebrated, "established"; we don't.

They reject Napoleon and Alexander as "heroes." And many are beginning to doubt that Galileo, Watt and Edison contributed as much and as lastingly to human advancement and happiness as Socrates, Lao-tze, and Francis of Assisi.

When I first went to the reservation, I felt very much a "white" looking into the Indian world. I met an Indian woman, Bessie Yellowhair, and after we became friends, I asked if I might borrow her clothes, her name, her identity. I went from the reservation to work in a home for a white family in California. Then in Bessie Yellowhair's clothes and her frame of mind, I became "Indian."

I went to the Indians, not to teach but to learn. And I learned much from them: the use of silence as well as words, the beauty of simplicity, the honesty in their lives. And I learned much when I "passed" as an Indian among whites. Most of all I re-learned the truth of the saying: don't judge me until you've walked a mile in my shoes.

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