

Masked Gods

by Jim Goodnight

My assignment to Gallup, New Mexico sounded exotic with a remarkable opportunity to grow professionally. But on a hot Sunday afternoon in July 1969, the adjective for that rough old Route 66 town was closer to bleak than exotic. Tumbleweeds and passed out drunks dotted the dusty streets. Bars, liquor stores and curio shops lined the sidewalks. Gallup was the drinking center for 100,000 Navajos scattered across a huge reservation in the surrounding high desert. I thought, "What have I gotten me and my young wife into?"

We had just driven cross-country after completion of my surgical internship in North Carolina. I had joined the US Public Health Service to discharge my service obligation. My assignment was the Indian Health Service Hospital at Gallup.

Life looked better as we drove up to the large hospital complex ensconced on a hill above the town. Stretched before us were gorgeous views of a high desert plain, visible 50 miles in nearly every direction. Nevertheless, the vast terrain was dry and hot, the soil rocky and the vegetation sparse and scrubby. As flatlanders, we were challenged a bit just to breathe at the 6600-foot altitude.

Over the next few months, we did learn to enjoy watching storms approach slowly over several hours. We basked under the enormous open sky and thrilled to dramatic sunrises and sunsets. Still, the stark terrain and what seemed to be general impoverishment reminded me this was not really someplace I wanted to spend the rest of my life. I thought the experience rewarding, but transitional and not one that touched the spirit. I found the Native American people in-

triguing, but distant, and presumed that if opportunity presented, they would seek a better life.

I voiced these feelings to a colleague. He urged me to read Frank Waters' book, *Masked Gods*, a remarkable description of Navajo and Pueblo tribal ceremonialism. Waters was a highly respected writer whose novels richly describe people of the Southwestern United States. He spent several years as editor of the Taos, New Mexico newspaper. Water's father was part Cheyenne and took him often on trips to the vast Four Corners area assigned to the Navajos and the Pueblo tribes.

Reading *Masked Gods* opened my eyes to what I had not seen, the deep spiritual existence of the people around me. Waters combined resplendent imagery with a clear narrative explaining the mysticism and ancient ceremonial behavior of the Native American people. He compared the ceremonies to the mythic and mystic philosophies of

the East. I realized that though my Native American patients were culturally quite foreign to me, the common thread of human existence and human yearning bound us.

I became aware the Native American people of this region have a profound appreciation of every aspect of the land, the rocks, the animals, the air, the sky; they were one with it. All aspects had a spirit. They believed they shared the energy that connected it all.

I became much more conscious of how the colors of the land, the rocks, and the cliffs changed color all day long and with each season. The hourly changing colors seemed confirmation that each feature was not inanimate but imbued with a spirit. The vast terrain was speaking to me. I was no longer a witness; I became a pupil. It felt comfortable. I felt part of a vast striving for existence. The dry high desert seemed much more hospitable.

Waters weaves a remarkable narrative of the Native American peoples' existence in this often very cold barren place. The people, through a variety of intricate ceremonials, affirm and maintain their relation to the cosmos. The rites reflect centuries of striving to understand their place in the uni-

Reading Masked Gods opened my eyes to what I had not seen, the deep spiritual existence of the people around me.

verse and maintain the balance of this relationship.

The people sought balance, not necessarily morality. There was cruelty in their world; the Navajos had come to the Southwest as raiders, with a life dependent on preying on others. Their world was harsh; there is no word in Navajo for thank you. Nevertheless, they held a deep reverence for the world around them and a deep need to

keep it in balance.

A Navajo Sing, a gathering on a lonely plain in freezing winter weather, a ceremony for a sick woman, might last nine days, and be attended by 1000 people coming from all over the 25,000 square mile reservation. The family would have saved for years to manage the expense. The Singer had trained from childhood, learning and knowing all aspects of the intricate ritual from memory. It was his life work. The attendees, each bringing a deep sense of aloneness and remoteness, chant and dance with the Singer nightly. The Singer creates a new sand painting each day, critical details handed down from antiquity. It is drawn on the buckskin of a deer, ceremonially killed without bloodshed. At the end of each night the painting is erased.

I spent enough time in the lonely bone chilling darkness of this vast land looking at the unblemished sea of twinkling lights above me to appreciate the intent of the Singer, chanters and dancers. I felt their need to couple man's existence with the universe dramatically visible above. I shared the oneness the people felt with the mountains, the dark cloud of dawn and the evening twilight.

With my consciousness raised, the occasional dances and ceremonies I witnessed seemed more sophisticated, a song directed to a transcendent life and force, no longer curious entertainment. I did not learn all the intricacies, but I understood enough to be very respectful. Simple things such as when we did surgery following a sing, to erase only a bare minimum of the skin markings, just enough by our rules to prep and perform the procedure. Patients made gifts of sand paintings to me, beautiful decorative art, but I had learned enough to know these could not be perfect representations of the ceremonial paintings. Those must not be

copied outside of the ceremony.

What had seemed a life challenged by poverty and harsh living conditions, transitioned in my mind to a culture with a rich spiritual life concentrated on living in harmony with the world. The impassive faces of family members, inquiring about their loved one, seemed friendlier and less foreign. Much clearer was how threatening the



Artwork by R.C. Gorman

I shared the oneness the people felt with the mountains, the dark cloud of dawn and the evening twilight.

Western European invasion and world-view the White Man brought to this world. Perhaps the life these people were living was going away, but it would be a casualty of a cruel evolution, something beautiful lost.

My patients, the people of this land became figures in a grand passion play I was privileged to witness. I now felt a part of the play, not merely a passing audience member. It was not a religion for me to embrace, but rather a world-view I should be cognizant of in my material and scientifically grounded existence, recognition of what power might lie beyond.

I had arrived and lived in Gallup seeing the place as needing to evolve, to get better, surrounded by a nation of people who needed to do the same, to evolve, to reach something more sophisticated. The experience made me realize that I was who needed to evolve and get better.

At the end of my two-year stint in the Public Health Service, we left Gallup for more professional training. As we drove out in mid-morning, the sun turned the dry red rocks a golden color. Two years before, I surely would have thrilled to the scenic splendor and no less so on

this departure. But my perception was enhanced. I am not a religious man, but for me this well-known Navajo prayer had become personal:

*With Beauty before me, I walk
With beauty behind me, I walk
With beauty below me, I walk
With beauty above me, I walk
With beauty all around me, I walk
In the house of long life, there I wander.
In the house of happiness, there I wander.
Beauty all around me,
In old age traveling, with it I wander.
On the beautiful trail I am, with it I wander.
In beauty, it is begun,
In beauty, it is finished.*



Jim Goodnight is Professor & Chair Emeritus of the Department of Surgery at the UC Davis School of Medicine, and former Associate Dean. He grew up in South Texas and now lives in Davis with his wife, Carol. They have three daughters and three grandchildren.

Published by OLLIMemoirs, the publication of memoirists in writers' workshops given by the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. All rights reserved by the author. Contact: info@ollimemoirs.org. May, 2019.