

Brandon Yarns  
Summer Enrichment 2008

I drove through the veritable Martian landscape. Past Meteor Crater, the largest of its kind in the world, a mile in diameter. Past the myriad hoodoos, tall rocks reaching nimbly to the skies like so many inflexible blades of grass. Through the sage and scrub, the yuccas with their knifelike leaves jabbing into the cold desert air. A deep gray thunderhead on the horizon. A dust devil kicking up the red sand like the rollicking horses that roam free in the streets of Window Rock. I was returning to Phoenix from the Navajo Reservation and thinking. In all this harshness, the barrenness, the inhospitable and feral landscape, it's sure a strange place for an intersection.

It is the only long-stay, inpatient adolescent psychiatry unit in the Indian Health Service. Twelve young Natives between the ages of thirteen and seventeen stay at the ACU for eight weeks per cycle. They are immersed in group therapy, individual therapy, math and social studies, English and science. They are also immersed, perhaps for the first time in their lives, in their own culture. They are taught the Navajo way. As well as the American way.

The ACU is an intersection of childhood and adulthood. I first met the kids of the ACU through words and pictures. Every morning ACU staff gather in the Unit's own dining room for a "treatment team meeting" to discuss the progress of the twelve patients. The previous night a nurse had shown the patients a picture of a man throwing something away. The patients, in turn, were asked what they themselves would like to throw away. Marijuana. Cocaine. Alcohol. Anger. These words led me to create pictures in my mind of rough and road-weary little adults that had seen the world ... and mostly the bad parts.

That afternoon I went to the Wellness Center where the male patients were working out. There, I saw a picture completely different from what I had pictured in my head. These patients were boys. Kids. Children, who shouldn't know those words marijuana, cocaine, alcohol, much less have those words in their possession, wishing to throw them away.

Two asked me to spot them at the bench press, and I went over. After a few minutes, a thirteen year old asked me what I like to "jam" to. I grinned and replied, "Well, anything I guess." His look betrayed quite quickly the fact that I had failed the first "cool kid" challenge of the day. "Anything?" he replied gloomily. "Well, what do you like jam to?" I said. "Death rap."

I had another startling encounter with this intersection of childhood and adulthood. One night, I attended a traditional Native American Church drumming session. As the singer sang and the drummer drummed, a sixteen year old sitting across the room from me played peek-a-boo. He would peer around his folded up knees and when I would look over, dash his face behind them. I thought of a toddler I had played this game with in a restaurant in Phoenix a few nights before, the little boy poking his head over the banquet seat until I made a funny face.

The next day was family day at the ACU. The sixteen year old announced that his family was coming to visit him—his family that included his nine month old son. At first, I thought I hadn't heard him right, but so excited was he that he mentioned it several times, and when the afternoon came, he showed his son to me, the smiling likeness of his boy-father.

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Most overtly, the ACU is an intersection of Western psychiatry and Navajo spirituality. They have some dozen therapists and social workers trained at universities like ASU and UNM, a clinical psychologist who acts as the administrator, nurses and a nurse practitioner, and a psychiatrist who was my direct supervisor. They also have a full time medicine man on staff who leads a morning prayer or Beauty Way Ceremony, invites numerous Navajo guests from the community to help educate these kids about their own culture, and conducts a weekly sweat lodge.

The only piece of advice the medicine man gave me before entering the sweat lodge was to have an open mind. Fortunately for me the clinical psychologist had given me several more “practical” tips such as drinking LOTS of water before going in, keeping your head low as hot—not warm, hot—air rises, and being careful when you are passed the pipe because it can burn you if you grab it at one end. (*Unfortunately I did forget this last tip and typed my first draft of this with seared fingertips.*) But at any rate, what does that mean: have an open mind? I could not be expected to actually believe that when the water is placed on the hot rocks the spirits of our ancestors join us. Or that uncircumcised men must tie their foreskin closed with string in order to protect their ability to reproduce. I could not be expected to *believe* that stuff myself, but I don’t think that’s what having an open mind is. In order to have an open mind, one must accept that *others* believe, and not be critical or judgmental of those people’s beliefs.

The sweat lodge is a dome-shaped frame of juniper branches, covered in animal skins and blankets and bits of carpet. Inside, more carpets are laid around in a circle for seating purposes, and a circular hole is carved out in the middle where rocks heated in a clay outdoor stove are placed. The sweats are segregated by sex, with women using a slightly different type of sweat lodge. When you go into the sweat, the flap is closed and you are in total darkness, just your men and the spirits. The sweat itself consists of four “rounds,” each of which has certain rituals and songs associated with it. The first round uses nine rocks which represent the nine months that a person is in the womb. In a clockwise direction beginning with the person closest to the door, each person introduces himself in the Navajo way which contains the person’s four clans, or families of origin.

In the second round, twelve more rocks are added which represent the first twelve years of a boy’s life until his voice changes. At the ACU, the person leading the sweat asks his “little brothers”—the young patients—to share what is on their mind. If anything is bothering them, the sweat is the time to talk about it, get it out in the open, bury the hatchet so to speak, rather than worrying about it in the outside world. The sweat is a time to heal physically and mentally. The first two little brothers said glumly, “Nothing’s on my mind.” And I feared that the sweat was not having its desired effect on healing and cleansing the young men. But then the boy-father who had affected me so greatly began to speak. He said he just hoped that he could be a good father to his son. After a few affirming shouts of “Ho!” from the elders, the young man went on. He also wanted to forgive his own father for running out on him. He hadn’t seen his father in seven years, and he said he wanted to be better for his own son, be there for him, and that that was why he was at the ACU getting treatment. After that, words began pouring from the mouths of these young men as the sweat was pouring from our bodies. One boy’s father died when he was only eight months old. Another boy’s father had left him before he was even born, but three days before the boy was to enter the ACU, the father

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returned to town, and the boy met him for the first time. The round went on so long that halfway through, the elders opened the flap to let in some air. And at the end, each boy had discussed his father and, I think, healed that relationship within ... if perhaps just a bit.

The third round was the time for the staff to speak. I was asked to speak first, and I told what I had been doing prior to visiting the ACU. For five weeks, I accompanied my mother to chemotherapy and radiation treatments following oral cancer. I told how following the first brutal year of medical school, nothing but studying and going to class, I was down on being a doctor and thought seriously that maybe I should drop out. But seeing how caring my mom's doctors were re-energized me in recalling why I had wanted to be a doctor in the first place. I could be that kind of doctor who cares for the whole patient and not just make a career out of data collection and treating diseases. I told them that each of us in our lives could make our lives either about caring for others and helping people or just about punching numbers and "phoning it in." We then sang a Protection Song, protecting us from all of life's ills from cancer to apathy.

At the beginning of the final round, we smoked the tobacco pipe. It was explained that this tobacco is not like the tobacco that we normally have. It is made of natural herbs taken from a sacred mountain. The purpose of the tobacco is to break up any tension that lies deep within us and breathe it out with the smoke. While we were passing the pipe, an elder began to speak to me about my mother's cancer. He told me to touch her where it hurt and say, "Mom, this one right here doesn't belong to you anymore." Then, go out and touch a tree and come back and touch my mother again and say, "Mom this one belongs to you now." And just see what happens. He thanked me for my story and told me that he knows that I will be the kind of doctor I want to be, and that part of my training is being at the ACU with them.

As we left the sweat lodge, I was told that I do indeed have an open mind. I thought about the spirits and wondered whether they had joined us to heal us as the Navajo believe. With or without the spirits, I truly believe it was the most compelling event of my entire experience—and the most effective. Not only did the boys open up and speak about their own lives, but they got to see something that perhaps they did not have much of an opportunity to see outside the sweat, outside the ACU. They saw real Navajo men, uncles I believe the Navajo would call them in keeping with *K'e*, acting as role models.

Not every intersection of East and West is as obvious and overt as the sweat lodge. One day in social studies class, the lesson was on the Boston Tea Party. The instructor grabbed their attention with a question: "What is particularly messed up for you about the Boston Tea Party." After several grumble-mumbles, a seventeen year old boy said, "They dressed up like Indians." "Exactly right," replied the instructor. "We're going to have our own Boston Tea Party today, and lucky for you, you don't even have to dress up like Indians." She passed out tea bags and sugar (some kids swiped two sugars, of course) and filled the mugs with hot water. "We have to be very hush-hush about this because the tea has *caffeine*," the teacher said, whispering the word "caffeine" for emphasis. Caffeine is technically not allowed at the ACU. This was followed by a brief discussion of the original Tea Party. After all the tea was dumped in Boston Harbor, the British completely cut off imports to the colony of Massachusetts. People from around all the other twelve colonies pitched in and helped out the shunned Massachusettsers, creating for the first time a certain unity in the colonies. She explained that this unity would be a good model for the Navajo Nation at

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this time. Although I hadn't really thought about this before, the Navajo are actually not a very unified people, those from Chinle and Kayenta and Gallup and Tuba City having their own structure within the tribe that has precedence over the central leadership in Window Rock, the closest big town to the Ft. Defiance Indian Hospital as well as the capital of the Navajo Nation. The teacher said that only when the Navajo from all over sit down and write a constitution together—like the colonists did a few short years after the Boston Tea Party—will prosperity really come to the Navajo Nation. She told the kids that it was their generation who could come together and make this happen for their tribe. That hopefully a few short years after this Tea Party, these Navajos can sit down and write a constitution together. It was then that I saw that sometimes the cross-cultural intersection of the ACU can simply be mixed in with a history lesson.

The Native American Church that I have mentioned is itself an intersection that is brought to the ACU. Only four tribes around North America use a water drum for their ceremonies. The drum, along with the staff, the gourd, and the feather fan, are filled with symbolism. Everything has a meaning—every bead, every feather, every piece of hide, or rope. The drum recalls the Little Drummer Boy who was too poor to bring the baby Jesus a fine gift. All he had was a small trough that he used to water his animals. So he strapped a hide across the top of it and made a drum so he could beat it for the newborn Savior. The drum has seven stones to which the hide is tied, representing the seven days it took the Creator to make the earth. The hide is strapped to the stones with a rope that is woven in such a way as to recall the thorny crown Jesus wore on his final days....

I must say that I did not expect a *Native American* Church service to contain such a detailed homage to Christianity, but very soon the Christian elements intersected with something else when the leader stopped singing and told a story.

A while back, an old Lakota Sioux man lived way up in the mountains near to a pond up there. This man was always sick, always felt bad, and no matter what he did, he could not get better. He went to the Native American Church, he went to the hospital and even took medicines from a doctor. But no matter what, he could not feel any better. Eventually, his family got tired of the man always being sick and they left him all alone up in the mountains. The man felt worse and worse and so one day he decided he would just return himself to the Creator, give himself to the Holy Mother, and would go ahead and commit suicide. He thought about how he would do it. Maybe he might hang himself or maybe he might slit his wrists, but he decided he didn't want to have his body all broken or cut up when he returned himself to the Creator. So he went on to sleep that night, but he woke up at around midnight. Everything outside was completely calm. No wind. Nothing. Completely still. The man got up and walked outside. Still everything was completely calm. The man took off his clothes. Took off all of his clothes and folded them nicely and walked out to the pond nearby where he lived. He stepped into the pond and started wading out to the middle, step by step by step. See, the man had decided he would go ahead and drown himself and that's how he would return himself to the Holy Mother. The man kept walking, and the water got up to his waist, then higher and higher. When the water got right up to his chest, he took another step and the water was freezing cold and the bottom of the pond was slippery! The man slipped and fell backwards right into the water. As he did so, he startled a whole bunch of ducks and they took off to the air and started calling out, "Quack! Quack! Quack!" The man stood up and listened to the ducks and their quacking, and he started

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walking back up out of the pond. This whole time the man was walking, the ducks kept quacking and quacking, and in the man's head the quacking turned into a song. The man got out of the water and was singing this song the whole time, and the song from the ducks' quacking healed the man, and the man became one of the most powerful medicine men ever.

When the leader finished the story, the room was completely silent. Everyone, including myself, stared at him with rapt attention, wondering, waiting, perhaps hearing the song of the ducks in our heads. And then he sang the Duck Healing Song that the man had heard walking out of the pond. The leader concluded by saying, "Anytime you might think about committing suicide, you think about this man, and you can sing this healing song." It was a powerful message, and I saw how it affected each and every person in that room.

The ACU is an intersection. Or perhaps it is like so many intersections, all on top of one another, more of a web or spokes on a wheel. Maybe these would be more apt descriptions, at least according to the Navajo. The Navajo have a word *K'e* which describes the interrelatedness of people. And the ACU is an outstanding model of the interrelatedness of people, ideas, and cultures. It is about spirituality, which the medicine man defined not as religion but as believing in yourself.

I have to admit I was a skeptic when I arrived at the ACU. What had attracted me was primarily an interest in psychiatry—Western psychiatry. And although I was interested in the Navajo culture, I must say I did not exactly think it could compete with the illustrious likes of Freud, Jung, and Skinner. However, I was missing the point. The flecks of Navajo spirituality mixed seamlessly with the spots of Western medicine all on the same canvas. There was no competition but rather collaboration, and at the intersection of the two they worked together and they worked. I started out a skeptic, but I sure left with an open mind.

A non-Native staff member at the ACU told me he was constantly asked, "Come on, man. Thirty years on the Navajo Reservation? What are you thinking?" He said he had lots of answers for this, but the one he told to people who really cared was that he was simply trying to learn the Navajo way. He was living the intersection of his American upbringing with his Navajo adoptive culture. I will return to the ACU. Perhaps I need to learn more of the Navajo way.