Working on the Railroad, Walking in Beauty

Youngdahl, Jay

Published by Utah State University Press

Youngdahl, Jay.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/10577.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/10577

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=271301
Foreword

I met Jay Youngdahl at Harvard Divinity School in 2004. Jay had taken a sabbatical from his work as a labor lawyer to consider several pressing questions that had arisen in the course of his career. In our numerous conversations, the Navajo experience held a particular fascination for Jay. It was not only the heartrending history of dispossession and violence that Navajos had endured as a nation or the high rates of life-threatening injuries that Navajo workers suffered on the tracks of the southwest United States. It was the cultural invisibility of these people—written out of the consciousness of contemporary Americans, and often written off—that Jay refused to accept. Legal representation was well and good, but if these people were to be made more visible, Jay would have to avoid the pitfalls of construing them as victims and explore lifeways that demanded deep familiarity and firsthand knowledge. Above all, he would need to give voice to the views and visions of Navajos themselves. Jay chose to pursue this project in a divinity school because he was convinced that the ritual and religious life of Navajo railroad workers was basic to understanding how they responded to the hazards of their work; sustained themselves during long periods away from home; achieved a sense of emotional and intellectual equilibrium in the face of danger, degradation, and adversity; and remained resilient despite injury, impoverishment, and loss.

As Jay observes, there is no word in Navajo that directly translates our word religion. Even words like cult and spirituality suggest activities and orientations that transcend the everyday, referring to extrasocial domains or "higher" powers. For Navajos, however, life is a constant struggle to countermand largely external forces that threaten the integrity of both persons and communities.
One accomplishes this perpetual remaking or reordering of the world through actions that reintegrate, balance, bind, and replenish. Perhaps the term existential best covers the many situations in which this struggle for integrated and balanced being is enacted and experienced. But we have to be sensitive to the culturally specific ways in which Navajos understand existence—the emphasis they give to connectedness with ancestors, land, and language; the creative integration they seek of old and new lifeways; and the deep sense of responsibility they feel for keeping a world of centrifugal forces, plural values, multiple personalities, and different religious traditions in balance. Yet even in practices that might appear strange to us—railroad workers applying corn pollen before starting work, filling their bunk cars with the smoke from aromatic herbs, taking peyote, or carrying “medicine pouches”—we may discern echoes of our own precautionary actions in preparing for a perilous journey, a new undertaking, or a difficult encounter (though in embarrassment we might dismiss these as superstitions). Indeed, some of the most arresting moments in Jay’s conversations with Navajo friends are when the seemingly exotic proves to be familiar—the Navajos’ impish sense of humor, the sharing of a smoke, the trembling or laying on of hands, the recourse to prayer even when biomedical treatment has been sought, the recitation of an origin myth of creation in which order is imposed on chaos, the use of song and chant to lift one’s spirits, the invocation of nature as a way of drawing the beauty of the physical world into the social spaces of hogan or house. I think here of Buffy Sainte-Marie’s compelling lines:

You think I have visions
because I am an Indian.

I have visions because
there are visions to be seen.

Some might have difficulty accepting such an assertion or taking seriously the words of the Navajo healer who told Jay that “crystals serve the same purpose as the white man’s computers.” But such
views seem mistaken or irrational to us only when we focus on the essence rather than the outcome of the claim. For it is not the essential difference between a crystal and a computer that is at stake, but the capacity of both objects, when in the right hands, to produce positive effects in the consciousness of someone who is ailing or alienated—to restore a sense of confidence and hope, renew one’s faith that life is worth living, and feel that one is in good hands. Faith may have no place in science, but in the face of all that we do not know and can never know, faith in the guise of the absurd is an inevitable dimension of all human existence. As one man told Jay, “Your belief is your pride.” In the same vein, Navajos who attended Native American Church ceremonies felt that attending these meetings always “helped them out.” As with other Navajo religious practices, faith in the efficaciousness of the activities seems crucial to their success.

Without faith in their own capacity to endure, it is hard to imagine how Navajos could have survived a history of colonial violence, vilification, and dispossession, or the social violence that still marginalizes them. With cultural resourcefulness and an eclectic spirit, a determination to retain their autonomy in the face of forces that have stolen, eroded, and denied them any real determination of their own destiny, and a resilience that often defies belief, Navajos—along with other Native American peoples—have kept their integrity and assured their continuity. In documenting some of the hardest times that Navajos have been through, and interlacing archival research with the stories of individual Navajos themselves, Jay Youngdahl has restored one of the many missing pieces to the jigsaw map of America, making visible the discrimination, misunderstandings, programs, acts, regulations, and laws that, even now, circumscribe or compromise the rights of Native American citizens, while testifying to the struggle for well-being in the shadowlands of America.

Michael D. Jackson
Harvard Divinity School