Working on the Railroad, Walking in Beauty

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In the contemporary world, the dialectic of anchoring and adaptability is a complex one. During my time at Harvard Divinity School, I wondered why, during the span of my life, finding bases for moral or ethical guidance seems to have become more and more difficult for those facing complicated existential or ethical questions. And, once one has committed to a position, sharing common bases seems even more problematic. Are there timeless truths that can anchor our considerations and choices, or is everything subject to contestation? Can any common attitudes or truths be shared by all? The dearth of clear responses to these questions is at the heart of much of the current anxiety in the world, I believe, personal as well as political.

In response to this angst, two competing existential paths are often offered by contemporary society. On the one hand is fundamentalism, in which an inerrant document or set of beliefs is available as a guide for all decisions and life questions. This approach has been dominant in world history and is comforting in many ways. Yet, increasing numbers of people find it ill equipped to provide a consistent touchstone with which to deal with the life challenges of the contemporary world. While this position is most often found in the religious sphere, it operates in the secular public square in the same way. So, even former
touchstones, like the meaning and importance of democracy, appear to be fading into thin air.\footnote{For example, see the debate around the US Supreme Court ruling in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, 130 S. Ct. 876 (2010), involving the rights of corporations and others to monetarily influence elections. Democracy is an uncertain and malleable concept when anonymous money can have extraordinary effects on a voting public.} Given the current political and cultural confusion about what is meant by the competing versions of “American values,” the efforts by the honest Tea Party activists of this period to return to the words of the US Constitution are understandable. Yet, basing sensible and practical actions on sparse words or actually coming to agreement on the meaning of those words is devilishly difficult.

One the other hand is a similarly rigid belief that argues that claiming that anything is fixed or timeless is hopelessly out of date and romantic. Even what is “true” or “real” is up for grabs.\footnote{One of the most contentious areas in this debate involves issues of “truth.” The antiessentialist, postmodern view has been described as a “worldview characterized by the belief that truth doesn’t exist in any objective sense but is created rather than discovered.” It is not hard to see why this is so unsettling. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, The New Tolerance (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1998), 208.} There are reasons to be sympathetic to this line of thought. Much of this view emanates from reactions against the horrors of religious fundamentalism, such as the statements of Pat Robertson that blame the suffering of the Haitian people after the earthquake of 2010 on a “pact they swore with the Devil.”\footnote{See comments of the televangelist Pat Robertson, reported January 13, 2010. “Pat Robertson Says Haiti Paying for ‘Pact to the Devil,’” CNN, http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/01/13/haiti.pat.robertson/index.html, accessed April 4, 2011.} A second salutary reason for this stance is that there can be little doubt that most claims for the timelessness of ideas or systems are simply covers for the naked self-interest of those espousing such positions. For example, in this time of one economic ideology, capitalism, to claim that its permanence is a fundamental fact of the “end of history” is thin gruel for a world straining under climate change
Anchoring and Adaptability, Fixed yet Fluid

and unchecked greed. However, without a place to stand, trying to find one’s way in an increasingly complicated world can be painful. We often feel like a stranger in a strange land, with no home to return to or basis on which to unite with others.⁴

While those in the dominant American culture, as well as people throughout the world, may harbor these concerns today, Navajos have faced an uncertain future over their entire existence as a people. Yet, they have survived and grown. I believe that the openness and flexibility that is at the heart of the fundamental Navajo belief of hózhó deserve much of the credit. It is this combination of the fixed and the fluid that has allowed Navajos to cope with the extraordinary stresses and changes to which they have been subject. While hózhó is basically the concept of balance and walking in beauty in all aspects of life, for the Navajo people, within the fixed heart of hózhó is the core concept that continual change is a permanent factor in all environments. The Navajos see this in material objects, but also in ideas.⁵ John Farella argues that, for Navajos, “a primary theme in their stories is the acquisition and loss of knowledge, the point being that all things that come into existence last for only so long and then cease to exist. The acquiring of wisdom as one ages has to do with the acceptance of this process.”⁶

This is not to argue that adherence to hózhó has produced a splendid life world for all Navajos, as it has not; but this prac-

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⁴ In a speech entitled “The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World,” given in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, July 4, 1994, then president of the Czech Republic and renowned playwright Václav Havel gave a hopeful description of our “postmodern world” as one based on science, and yet paradoxically “where everything is possible and almost nothing is certain.” Havel may have been proposing a concept not completely foreign to that of hózhó.

⁵ Interestingly, in this sense Navajo philosophy shares a kinship with two quite dissimilar worldviews. The concept of dialectical materialism in Marxism and the Buddhist philosophy of dependent origination bear a family resemblance to the core of hózhó.

⁶ Farella, The Main Stalk, 19.
tice and attitude is one reason that the Navajos have remained cohesive and have found a successful life strategy to cope with the forces to which they are subject. In this sense I disagree with the position of Clifford Geertz and Gary Witherspoon that a study of Navajo lifeways doesn’t “represent, stand for, or demonstrate anything.” The very act, which Geertz applauded, of bringing “Navajo thought within the range of Western discourse, so that we might have some conception of the nature and some appreciation of its power,” cannot help but lead to a helpful demonstration of meaning. The story of Navajo railroad workers covers just one group of people, at one specific period in history. Yet there is much to learn from the efforts of these men and their families.

Adaptability has been a constant and fundamental trait of the Navajo people. As major players in the American Southwest, Navajo people have been in continual contact with those around them. Initially a nomadic people, the Navajos took up farming and pottery making from their encounter with the Pueblo Indians. Similar additions to their culture occurred from their contacts with other native tribes and later from their relations with the Spanish. Kinship practices reflect this dexterity. Navajo kinship involves a clan system, in which “almost every single group that the Diné came in contact with through trading, marriage, war or social events is represented by a clan group.”

7 Governance occupies a similar status. Imposed by the United States government in the first half of the twentieth century, the present Navajo system of governance, based around geographically situated chapter houses, is now an important part of citizen participation in the governing of the Navajo Nation. And, as discussed earlier in this work, even in the most important traditional religious ceremonies, like the Blessingway, many claim that “outside” influences are seen.

Navajos, like all people, have had no choice but to adapt. The environment in which human beings live is in constant motion. A small personal story in a short article in the *Wichita Eagle*

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7 Iverson, *Diné*, 14.
tells of one effect of the complex changing cultural mixture on Navajo personal life. The 1990 story featured the life of Navajo trackman Clarence Martinez, who worked on a large steel gang in the Kansas countryside for the Santa Fe Railroad. The article described the concerns of the men as they left the reservation for months, traveling hundreds of miles from their homes. Speaking of family life, the author wrote, “Martinez, who has a wife and two children, tells of the many families that are waiting at home for their men to return. Some of the men, those who have been divorced or remarried, support two families. Martinez has one family, but that’s enough for him. ‘She is getting expensive,’ Martinez said of his 13 year old daughter. ‘She is starting to notice what brands to wear.’ But until he can return to the reservation, his home is a railroad bunk car and his days stretch for miles along the tracks. He is living a history that has become a part of the Navajo people, too.”

A timeless incorporation of hózhó has allowed Navajos to be especially successful in this adaptability. Maureen Trudelle Schwarz’s work on the Navajo concept of the body, which is important to the study of the protection of Navajo railroad workers from work site injuries, emphasizes the “tremendous flexibility and adaptability” of the Navajo “philosophical system.” 9 Schwarz argues that this malleability is facilitated by the centrality of Navajo oral history, which “serves as a philosophic charter with explanatory and predictive powers.” 10 This suppleness in history and philosophy with “multiple levels of abstraction” allows for “great flexibility and adaptability in interpretation.” Ancestral knowledge is considered a fundamental element of present reality. It is alive today, “not an objectified, distant, inert position of wisdom or truth. For Navajos, their history is ‘not an attribute or vehicle of an objectified representation of knowledge

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9 Schwarz, “I Choose Life,” xiii.
10 Schwarz, “I Choose Life,” xvii.
about reality.’ Rather it is a process of what is constantly in the making.”11

Yet, even given this flexibility and fluidity, as Schwarz herself has written, “Despite these changes, Navajo language and culture have proven to be exceptionally resilient over time.”12 Visions of anchoring can be seen in many regions of Navajo oral history, religion, and philosophy. Navajo creation accounts, like those of the Abrahamic traditions, contain a fixed story of the beginning of life on Earth, with a solid relation between the creation account and life today. Included in the Navajo creation account is an essential view of the Navajos’ proper physical location, centered in the current general area of their nation, anchored at its corners by the four sacred mountains.

In addition, it must be noted that the antiessentialist view of the uselessness of “dualities” is not mirrored in Navajo thought. As Harry Walters makes clear in interviews reproduced by Maureen Trudelle Schwarz, Navajo thought is based on dialectical dualities. Walters told Schwarz that “everything is in terms of male and female in Navajo. This is the duality.” In connection with this, Schwarz writes, “pairings such as life and death, night and day, and male and female exist on all levels of the web of interconnection, which is formed by the relationships of persons to each other and to the universe.”13 Writing in 1979, Sam Gill made a useful observation in his story of Navajo traditional religion that helps us understand the relationship of the fixed and the fluid when considering dualities:

In these stories of emergence and creation it is clear that Navajos perceive their world as made up of interdependent and interacting dualities. At the conclusion of the creation era, the balance of the world rests upon the rim of the

12 Schwarz, “I Choose Life,” xiii.
emergence place. It is here that the interdependent parts of the duality meet and interact. At the center of the world all things meet and give definition and meaning to their counterparts: the era of emergence and the era of creation, the lower worlds and the earth surface, *hocho* and *hózhó*, disorder and order, chaos and creation, the outer physical form and inner life form, the earth surface people and the holy people, death and life.\(^{14}\)

Not surprisingly, a robust debate continues between these two positions within the community of Navajo scholars as well. In considering the issue of the existence of “Navajoness,” some have challenged the notion that a general and essential definition of what it means to be Navajo exists at all. According to Navajo scholar Deborah House, “There is no longer, and perhaps there never truly was, a homogeneous entity known as ‘the Navajo.’”\(^{15}\)

Whatever this means, there are distinctly Navajo ways. However, to be sure, like any generalization, the existence of a “Navajo way” does not mean that every member of the Navajo Nation practices these ways. Like the lifeways of the Navajo railroad workers themselves, the Navajo family can be seen as a complex mixture of fundamental “Navajoness” and the ways of the society that surrounds them. The dialectic is constantly in motion.

The issue of the role and solidity of Navajo ways has spilled into court battles in the Navajo Nation. A recent issue in the Navajo courts is illustrative of this tension. In some circumstances, Navajo legal authorities find the Navajo way of life a basis for jurisprudence. In 2010, the Navajo Nation Supreme Court rejected claims from a woman that her former husband purchase an insurance policy to satisfy seriously tardy alimony and child support payments, with the proceeds being paid to her

\(^{14}\) Gill, *Songs of Life*, 7–8.

\(^{15}\) Deborah House, *Language Shift among the Navajos*, xxv. House criticizes the “generalizing scheme(s)” of the work of Farella and Witherspoon, among others.
upon the man’s death. This result, Justices Herb Yazzie, Louise Grant, and Eleanor Shirley said in *Watson v. Watson*, would be “foreign to our *Diné* way of life.” The court wrote:

The use of life insurance as a remedy is foreign to our *Diné* way of life. As both parties are elderly, they were likely raised traditionally, were taught *Diné* values and concepts, and thus would understand and live by the *Diné* values and concepts. To the Appellee (the former husband), it would be uncouth and especially vulgar to demand that he secure a life insurance policy against his will so that the insured amount would be used to pay the arrearages upon his death. According to the Family Court, Appellant should not be given an incentive to wish for an early demise of Appellee. We agree. To demand such a remedy in the *Diné* perspective is *Diné biz nídzízin*, the notion of wishing ill-will or early death on an individual. The negative implication is adverse to the *Diné* way of thinking of living a long healthy life into old age. It is quite different if a person voluntarily obtains life insurance which is then deemed to be a personal choice of the individual.

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17 *Watson v. Watson*, SC-CV-40-07 (Navajo Nation Supreme Court), 17. The court continued, addressing the duality of the roles of male and female. “Our elders have always taught the concept of *T’áá hwó ají t’eeego* (self-reliance). The emphasis of this value is that one must prepare himself/herself for the difficulties in life—one needs to rise early to meet the dawn and be blessed with the desire, commitment and capabilities necessary for a strong positive mental attitude, physical strength and endurance and capabilities in dealing with life’s challenges. Elders often say, *Yáá da bi k’izhgól nidez k’áán*, meaning that one must be aware that he/she will encounter unexpected challenges throughout life and in the face of adversities, he/she must be resilient. These values apply to all; particularly, to a woman who marries and becomes a parent. Should the marriage end, the mother remains responsible for maintaining the home and raising the children despite the difficulties she may encounter. ‘Traditionally, the responsibility for a family whose male spouse either has deserted or is deceased falls upon the family of the female.’ *Johnson v. Johnson*, *supra* at II. The mother must remain because she is the keeper of life and home.”
However, the legal application of the concept that there is a fundamental Navajo way, including the notion of the centrality of hózhó that must be applied in all legal matters, remains in dispute in the government of the Navajo Nation. In the same year as the Watson case, the Navajo Nation legislative body passed a resolution to restrict the use of codified fundamental Navajo values and morals in contested litigation.¹⁸ This stance continues to be debated in Navajo courts and government. Thus, the issue of the application and meaning of Navajo values to legal and other matters on the rez is certain to be a source of contestation for the Diné, as it is for those who write about them.

Finally, we must acknowledge the notion of relationality that has been discussed earlier and is an important part of Navajo views toward concepts such as the meaning of religion

¹⁸ The press release from the Twenty-First Navajo Nation Council, dated January 29, 2010, reads as follows: “Legislation No. 0543-09, sponsored by Council Delegate Raymond Jerry (Tachee/Blue Gap/Whippoorwill), passed by a vote of 56–17. ‘With the amendment, Diné Fundamental Law will only be used in the Peacemaking Courts of the Navajo nation Judicial system. The fundamental laws will not apply to cases entertained by the Navajo nation District and Supreme Courts. ‘The purpose of this legislation is not to change the entire Diné Fundamental Laws, but to prevent the way these laws are currently interpreted, which is against one another,’ Jerry said. ‘We can use the fundamental laws in a proper way with this legislation. The way the law has been interpreted is abusive to our songs and prayers. It’s vital that we don’t abuse these laws.’ Most Council delegates favored Jerry’s legislation as it specified the peacemaking court as the system to utilize the fundamental laws. The specialization to the peacemaking court eliminates confusion with the statute-driven adversarial system. Essentially, the passage of Jerry’s legislation will prevent the manipulation of the fundamental laws in the adversarial system and is a step to help restore a harmonious state among the three branches of our tribal government. Council Delegate Alice W. Benally (Crownpoint/Nahodishgish) echoed words to confirm Jerry’s passage of the legislation. ‘These traditional values from the fundamental laws are morals that should guide us to harmony. I am thankful the fundamental laws will apply to the peacemaking division. In peacemaking, people are restored back to harmony,’ Benally explained. ‘In situations where there is no resolution in normal courts, dispute resolution is another option—it does work.’”
or nature. This holistic view of life, when combined with *hózhó* in Navajo thought and practice, leads to a creative use of foundation and fluidity, anchoring and adaptability. It is a lesson for modern life. The ability to find a core guiding anchor and to put it into practice in a flexible way gives one an ability to find one’s way in the complex life in which we all reside. It is the dialectic of the inside and the outside, the freedom afforded in the understanding and observance of the necessity that surrounds us, that is the true governing principle of our actions and reactions. Interestingly, even the aforementioned critic of Navajo “essentialism,” Deborah House, articulates a concern about the effect of modern society on the Navajo Nation and advocates a “return to the central Navajo philosophical paradigm—*Sa’ah Naaghaii Bik’eh Hozhoon*—which historically and in the present has the potential to provide the key to maintaining personal as well as group balance and harmony in a dynamic and evolving world. It is said that this process was designed by the Holy People to ensure “long life happiness.”[19] This position, while seemingly in contrast to that of those who argue for fixed anchoring among the Navajo people, is still consistent with the concept of *hózhó* that understands that “all that is permanent is change.”

While not as deontological as the Christian use of the Ten Commandments, *hózhó* is a practice as well as a guide to practice. Like Aristotle’s claim in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that one must live the good life in order to understand how to live a good life, one must walk in beauty before one can be in beauty. To do that, each of us must find a core such as *hózhó* that anchors yet is flexible, as can be found in the lives of these Navajo railroad workers.

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