

# Walking Thunder

Diné Medicine Woman

EDITED BY BRADFORD KEENEY, PH.D

Photographs by Kern L. Nickerson

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It is *Walking Thunder's* request that in  
keeping with her traditional way, *Diné*  
is used in place of *Navajo* in this book.

Notes in the margin are by the editor.



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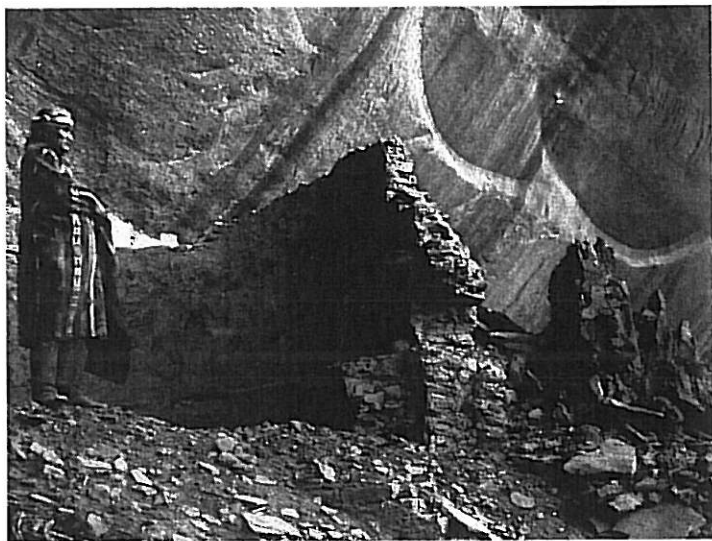


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# Diné

**M**y nation, the Navajo Nation, is located in the southwestern United States, with land stretching from the northeast corner of Arizona into Utah and New Mexico. It is the largest reservation in the United States. We call ourselves Diné, meaning "the People." I was born on May 8, 1951, in the old hospital at Shiprock, New Mexico. A black nurse looked at my black hair and called me, Juanita. That name stuck with me ever since. On my mother's side, my clan name is Hashtł'ishnii, referring to the Mud People, those who came back with muddy water during the time of origin. I have never known who my father was so I cannot say anything about his side. I grew up in the Two Grey Hills area where a respected man in our community named me Walking Thunder because the name fit my personality and how the people see me. You can call me by my medicine name, Walking Thunder. Welcome to our sacred land.

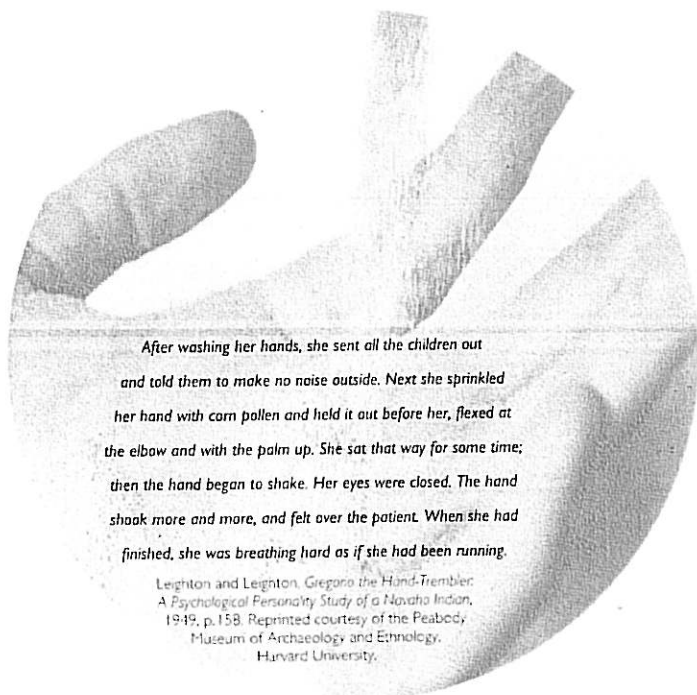


PHOTOGRAPHER: J. R. WILLIS  
DINÉ MAN AT CAÑON DE CHELLY RUINS, ARIZONA, undated  
NEGATIVE 90519



PHOTOGRAPHER: TIMOTHY H. O'SULLIVAN  
WHITE HOUSE RUINS, CAÑON DE CHELLY, ARIZONA, 1873  
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# Early Memories of Traditional Medicine



After washing her hands, she sent all the children out and told them to make no noise outside. Next she sprinkled her hand with corn pollen and held it out before her, flexed at the elbow and with the palm up. She sat that way for some time; then the hand began to shake. Her eyes were closed. The hand shook more and more, and felt over the patient. When she had finished, she was breathing hard as if she had been running.

Leighton and Leighton, *Gregans the Hand-Trembler: A Psychological Personality Study of a Navaho Indian*, 1949, p. 158. Reprinted courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.

**HAND TREMBLING** is one of the major modes of diagnosing illness for the Diné. One becomes a hand trembler when they are spontaneously seized by the uncontrollable trembling and shaking of their right arm (and sometimes their whole body). This is seen as a sign that the person is possessed by the spirit of the Gila Monster. Then a ceremony must be performed so that the trembling is transformed into a manageable experience used to diagnose illnesses. Hand trembling is also used to locate lost objects, identify witches, and to find an enemy.

A Diné medicine person may be a *hand-trembler* and use their hands for healing, or they may limit their practice to dispersing herbs, or to chanting or singing the sacred prayers and songs. The singers who preside over major ceremonies are called *hotoók*. A ceremonial or a performance refers to a complex system of rites and ceremonies typically performed over two to ten days.



**HOGAN** A traditional Diné shelter—the most common version today is the female hogan—a six-sided dwelling made of logs, with a doorway facing east and a smoke hole in the center of the roof. Traditionally, the hogan is thought to be a microcosmic reflection of the universe.

**CEREMONIES** Also called ceremonials or performances.

**WITCHCRAFT** is believed to be widespread among the Diné. Witches or *chindi* are called “skinwalkers” because they go about at night clothed in the skin of a coyote or wolf. The Diné believe that skinwalkers can turn themselves into other creatures and cause illness or death to their enemies.

I remember when I was about six, one of my relatives became sick. She talked about going to a *trembling hands* person. That’s my first memory of traditional medicine. We were eating tortillas with melted grease when my family talked about getting her help. I left the house and when I returned later, I saw a medicine man singing over my relative in a ceremony. I came in and he told me not to touch her food. “She’s going to be treated as a holy person so please don’t ask any questions.” But I kept looking at the food. There was a rib as well as peaches and others foods specially made for her. It all looked delicious and I wanted to eat it, but I didn’t touch it. They finally told me to stop looking at it.

When I settled down, they did a performance on her. She was sitting up and they painted her body. They took off her blouse but left on her skirt. Then the medicine man smeared stuff on her body. All the while he sang with great intensity. I sat staring at her until they told me to leave. I couldn’t see clearly the design they had put on her body. They warned me not to look at it because it would make me blind in the future. That’s why I left the ceremony.

Years later, when I was about eight, another ceremony took place. For the performance a small hogan was prepared. My stepfather, who didn’t want me to attend, slapped me in the back when I walked into the hogan. He told me that I didn’t belong there. I left but immediately crawled back inside and hid behind people who were sitting on the ground. They quietly shuffled their bodies to keep me hidden from my stepfather. As I sat there, I heard people discuss how difficult the situation was and the certain way the patient should stand. Then a medicine man jumped up and declared that they weren’t conducting the right ceremony.

Finally they discussed how the sick woman sitting in front of them was no longer in this world. She was very sick and had come to my mom’s house for the ceremony because people didn’t want any witches to find out what was going on. At the time there was a skinwalker causing a lot of trouble, so ceremonies were hidden for protection. Many medicine men from different areas came for that ceremony. I was curious so I crawled in and listened to their

discussions. They talked about how to *backfire* the situation in order to save the woman. My mother said that the woman's body was choosing to die. She was also concerned about witches and said she didn't want to deal with any witchcraft.

It was decided that a particular medicine man would perform a ceremony to help her die. That was when I started to suspect witchcraft was going around. I asked my mom, "Did that medicine man put her away?" Everybody shushed me about it. That's the only time I ever witnessed a performance like that. I kept asking why they put that lady to death and they answered, "She chose it."

I don't know what was in the small pouch they used, but I know they used it to do something to her. I also believe that it was her choice. Her husband didn't want it to happen, but in respect to her intentions, he okayed it. Everybody was respectful of the outcome and the lady went home and died four or five days later.

My very first experience of seeing a skinwalker was when I was ten. I was in the house one evening and heard a door squeak. I figured it must be a cat or dog. I opened the door and saw this huge monster. It scared the hell out of me. It had brown hair and a black face. He also had pouches. This thing almost knocked me out right there. That was my first sight of a skinwalker. After that, I began seeing many of them. There are different kinds of skinwalkers with various shapes and sizes. They can fly, jump, and move fast. Now, I can smell and hear them. I can even feel them. I'm that kind of person. We believe that if you catch a skinwalker and reveal its identity, it will die in three days.

## Finding My Voice

After my first ceremony, I started asking a lot of questions about traditional medicine. Why this? Why that? I deeply wondered about what happened when certain practices took place. I even tested things myself. Sometimes I went into the fire to find out things. Sometimes you have to experience things firsthand in order to find out if it's true or not.

For example, when I was about 12 or 13, the community held a

### BACKFIRE

A kind of polarity response in which one brings forth an outcome that is opposite to what appears to be the intended goal. This may be purposefully achieved through ceremonial means or accidentally caused by ceremonial or daily mistakes.

performance on my aunt and I decided to test what was going on. I asked why they said and did certain things. For this performance, they were making all kinds of dolls. Without thinking, I automatically took one of the dolls and broke it in half. I thought that a doll was just a material thing that had no power. Although I had been told that the doll was supposed to be a holy person, I went ahead and broke the doll in half. I also broke a whistle and smashed the arrows that came with it. I didn't stop with that. I went on to examine the yucca soup and threw it out. The medicine man said to me, "Since you did these things, something is going to happen to you."

I didn't believe him. I shouted, "Nothing's going to happen to me!" But within two weeks, I became very sick. I couldn't move. When I tried to walk, I just keeled over. People thought I was crazy. During that time I wanted to murder my stepfather and almost did it. I had discovered a mean streak in my body. I ached for worse things to happen and my body felt like it wanted to hurt something. I was told that I was sick, handicapped, retarded, and crazy. Everyone rejected me. That's how I stepped into the fire.

My mom took me to a medicine man and asked what was going on because I was not myself. I drooled and twitched a lot. All the hurt around me made me angrier and angrier and I wanted to do away with somebody. The medicine man did a performance to find out what was happening to me.

He conducted a Talking Back Ceremony where you examine your past and talk back to it. He dressed me up as a bear symbol and painted my face black. He placed many things around my waist and herbs around my body. While he did this, he told me things. He put a band around my head and blew a lot of whistles around me. When he blew those whistles, I felt a wound opening on the top of my head. I felt him take something out of my head with his mouth. He growled, pulled it out, and spit it into the fire. The flames immediately jumped in a frightening way.

What he destroyed was a curse. I learned that my aunt got sick because people had witched her. Those little dolls they made for the ceremony were actually the images of sickness that they put in her. Although they said the doll was a holy person, it was actually a curse.



Symbol for a Talking Back Ceremony



The medicine man went on to tell me, "For some reason you didn't like the dolls. You automatically destroyed it and that's what got you. Now we know that you're not on the bad side." He explained that there are good medicine people as well as bad medicine people. "Because of this," he added, "you should never trust anybody. Trust only yourself. You have no friends and you have no one you can truly rely on. You are your own friend. And your mind and your breath are yours."

He said many more things before he let me out of the hogan. Going home, I fought for my voice. If he hadn't done those things for me I'd probably have died a long time ago. I had been cursed because I destroyed that doll and smashed those arrows. Instead, the medicine man helped me regain my life and gave me a Warrior's Shield.

At my ceremony the medicine man said, "Now you can start visioning the future. You'll be surprised and you won't believe what's going to happen to you. Also, you're going to have two minds about these things, but in the end you'll get it." That's what he told me, and it was true. He finished by saying, "I will never see you again."

I wondered why he had said that, but sure enough I never saw him again because he died soon after. While he was alive, my family had gifted him with sacred things. We had given him two Navajo baskets full of corn pollen. With those gifts, my mother had begged for my life.

Although we sometimes disagree, when I think back to what my mom did, when it comes to traditions, I know she's on my side. In the details of everyday life, she's often against me, but in our traditional ways, she would never say anything that would harm me.

All you can do is pray for a person who is very sick. Sometimes they get well, but sometimes you can't get them well. You always have to leave things to the Creator. When I destroyed that doll, it was inevitable that something was going to happen to me. The medicine man, who helped me explained how I could overcome it, but he advised me to be careful if I decided to learn how to *backfire* (i.e. reverse) things. He explained that a medicine person had to choose whether they would backfire in a good or bad way. My husband, David, learned the positive way of backfiring. He was good at backfiring things. For example, if a judge or a policeman or enemies came against you, he could twist

Inset: Walking Thunder and her mother.

#### WARRIOR SHIELD

Believed to be brought about by performing a Warrior Prayer. This prayer helps you to not hesitate in doing the things you want to accomplish. It strengthens you against evil and protects you from things said against you. The Warrior Prayer fights for you. It makes you a shield and makes you strong.



everything around in his prayers and backfire it. Then things turned out with a good outcome. He could turn things around and win. It's a powerful thing to work with and he didn't use it in a mean way, but he used it to win or to get what he wanted. I remember a woman who lost her driver's license because of a DWI and the policeman was ready to testify that she was guilty. My husband performed a ceremony and switched the situation around thereby freeing the accused. My husband sincerely asked the Creator to give the person another chance. Then he made her smoke a sacred tobacco and pray on her own.

### Learning from the Elders

**D**avid's grandpa was the best medicine man around and all his uncles were also medicine men. His side of the family was all medicine people, going way back. The person they learned it from was called Wind Singing Man. That's who my relatives learned it from and they passed it down. I learned from many medicine people. Sometimes I saw a medicine person in my dreams and then I went to find them.

Also, when I was young I would run up to any elder medicine person and start asking them questions. My sister was ashamed of me for doing that. She would say, "Why do you ask all those questions?" It seemed obvious to me—for me to find out. In these ways I learned our traditional Creation Story. I was also taught sandpainting and what to do in traditional performances. I now do these things in the correct traditional way. Some people add their own stuff and do it their own way, but I do it the traditional way. Among the traditionals, we support others who do it the right way. If someone starts doing it their own way, we don't say anything, we just walk away. It's not wise to criticize another medicine person. They might be practicing witchery. You never know what you are up against. You never question; you just walk out. That's what I was taught.

One of the beliefs we, the Diné, have in our healing tradition is that you have to mean it when you help a person. When I was a young girl, there were many medicine men. Also, many people did the



From top to bottom  
Begin the composition.  
Stay focused.  
Erase painting at end of ceremony.  
Mix all the sand.  
Pick up the sacred sand.  
Return the sand to Mother Earth.

## Traditional Sandpainting





trembling hands and there were many vision makers.

However, there weren't as many medicine women. I remember a few ladies around our area who were medicine women, but they did hand trembling or charcoal visioning. I remember one who was called White Shell Dawn Lady. She was very tiny and she used to give advice to the councilmen. She gave advice to other medicine men when they got into problems. She was there for them and I used to envy her.

Then there was another lady, called Singing Woman from the South, who used to perform in the Native American Church. I admired her. I liked her teaching, her talks, and her jokes. She was my main aunt. Two weeks before she died, she realized how much I admired her and said, "You should have talked to me before, I would have taught you how to bring the eagle to the ground." She could call an eagle down from the sky and pluck out his feathers while the eagle sat on her. She had that kind of a gift. I admired her because she could call an eagle down.

In the last two weeks of her life, Singing Woman from the South was sick in the hospital at Gallup. We went to visit her. When we got there, I walked right up to her, looked at her and said, "You're a medicine woman. Why are you just letting yourself die?" She looked at me and told the other people to leave the room. She told me about eagle feathers—how to carry them, take care of them, their purpose—all in great detail. She kept asking me if I was remembering what she was telling me and kept questioning me to make sure that I was remembering. "Do you know which side to use? Do you know which area?" We repeated this many times until she was satisfied. She taught me the four ways of the eagle feather. At the time, I thought all the ways were the same. During her last days, I asked Singing Woman from the South how she was able to call the eagle down from the sky. She said that even if she gave me one of her songs she uses to call the eagle, I wouldn't be able to do it on my own. "You have to learn to control animals and to control a lot of things. Prayer alone won't work. But if you want to learn I can teach you. However, you have to sacrifice somebody in order to receive this knowledge. You must sacrifice someone you really, truly love, not someone who you hate. It must be a person who is close to your heart." But, I wasn't willing to

#### VISION MAKERS AND VISIONING

In the Diné tradition, vision makers are diagnosticians who gaze at crystals, specially prepared smoke, or the evening stars. Charcoal visioning refers to visions precipitated by staring at burning coals.

do that. That was bad. I chose to stick with the good ways.

Many years after Singing Woman from the South died, I thought about what she had said about the four ways of the eagle feather. That's when it all started to make sense to me. That was one of the ways how I became a medicine woman.

One of my gifts is asking too many questions, because this brings me knowledge. On the other hand, the holy people sometimes say, "If she really wants to know, let's give it to her directly from the holy side." I'm grateful to have all the ways of receiving sacred knowledge. I have no intention of giving up. It's going to be with me for the rest of my life, for as long as I live. This is what I tell my kids, but I also tell them that I'm a living person. I will do something wrong and I will not be perfect. Nevertheless, I will still be a medicine woman. That's the way I put it.

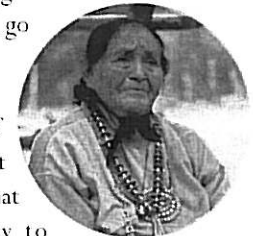
**MAXINE WILSON, MEDICINE WOMAN:** I still perform some of the medicine ways. I sing and give traditional prayers, as my father and grandfather taught me to do. They learned from the medicine men who came down from the Long Walk.



I work on people with mixed up minds—people who go to prison and people who have family problems. Most of all, I perform Purity Rites for young girls, the Warrior Prayer, and the Walk in Beauty Ceremonial. When we perform

those ceremonies, the patient washes with yucca in the morning, dries off with corn, and then we do the prayers. Every once in a while I do the trembling hands.

I want Walking Thunder to keep doing medicine work for people. She needs to keep helping. I hope that she keeps her head up and doesn't let anyone put her down. With the knowledge and courage she has within herself, nothing should go wrong for her.



**MAE K. JAMES, MEDICINE WOMAN:** I'm the sister of Maxine. I still perform the medicine way, but my children think I'm too old to continue that work. I know how to use the Waterway to

#### THE "LONG WALK"

The Anglo-American effort in 1864 to "subdue" the Diné. Kit Carson killed, captured, imprisoned, and then forced thousands of Diné to walk 300 miles from the reservation around Canyon de Chelly to Fort Sumner, on the Pecos River in southeastern New Mexico.

reawaken someone hurt from falling off a horse, hurt in a car accident or someone in a coma. Within my lifetime I have brought back 15 people from a coma.

When I was young, I wanted to learn all the medicine ways of the medicine men, but some men told me not to do it. I went ahead and did it anyway. I aimed for what I believed in and that's how I learned the medicine way. My father was a powerful man in the Windway. People sometimes thought that he was dirty, but that was because every time he ate meat he put grease on his shoes, body, and hair. The grease was his shield. He could bring the wind into a person.



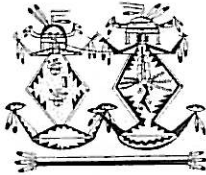
**WALKING THUNDER:** Maxine Wilson was married to my uncle, my mother's brother. I remember going to my uncle's house a lot and it was the only place where I was given meat to eat. I remember seeing Maxine and her husband holding hands and walking around. They were very much in love. I just looked at them and wondered what they were doing. Now I understand what they were doing.

The medicine woman who inspired me the most when I was young was Singing Woman from the South. She is no longer alive. The first time I ever saw her was at a peyote meeting. She had the loudest voice and she made me want to sing like her. The next time I saw her, she was a Ropewoman. I told myself that I wanted to be like her. She was the one who could sing the eagle down. She lived to be 108.

When I was young, I went to many traditional ceremonies. I went to both evil and good practitioners. Although they were real bad about witchery at that time, they used to visit one another. I found I learned something from everyone.

#### WINDWAY

A ceremonial used for diseases brought about by "wind infection" (such as heart and lung problems), "snake infection" (stomach trouble), and "cactus infection" (body itching and eye trouble).



Symbol for Singing Woman from the South

## Sticks, Pollen, and Horny Toads

When I was a child, kids my size used to ask me, "Since you're always in the Navajo traditional way, do you think you can do something to help us get over this sickness?" I would say yes and then go break off a stem from one of Mother Earth's plants and start singing. I would sing away and say a prayer, pick up some rocks or another stick and hold them while praying. I would pray in this way for my childhood friends. At the end I would make a big joke about it. I would shout, "Now you're better!" Then I would pull their ears or pull their nose. They'd start laughing. I would say, "If you're laughing, you're going to get well." That was one thing I used to say to the little kids who came to me when they were sick. Or I would just tickle them and say, "You'll be okay."

Even then, as a child, I knew that a stick was a root of life. It can come out good or it can come out bad. I remember one dream that I had as a young girl. In the dream I was in a fog picking up sticks. After the dream I started picking up sticks for my childhood ceremonies. The dreams gave me an education. They told me things, made me wonder, and helped me understand.

Once, when I was in boarding school, our dorm attendant asked me, "What are you going to do with all those sticks and rocks?" I replied, "We're going to build something out of them." She said, "You can't build anything with those sticks and rocks." I responded by going to my friends and having them help me make things. Some sticks became an automobile, while others became tools, trees, and houses. So the sticks in my dreams were about educating, helping, and moving others.

Every time I see a stick I think about it. I believe that if you carelessly break a stick, you may be breaking your own dream. That's what I always say. That's why I tell my kids to not break sticks. The stick in my dream was a life-teaching root. The rocks in my dreams were the same. The heart of rock teaching is found in the designs of the rocks. If you look carefully at a rock and focus on it, it may tell you the life story of the world. It is because rocks hold the stories of the world. That's how they hold earth's wisdom.

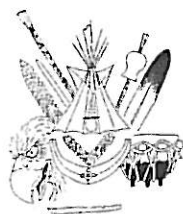
do. I kept praying and again she said, "I can't do it." Then I asked her what she couldn't do. "I can't let my nephew die," she said. "I can't let him die. Can you take this away from me?" I asked her what she wanted us to take away and she said, "I was learning how to be a witchcrafter, a skinwalker." I asked her why she would want to do that. She said, "Because I want good things. I only want it to get food and jewelry, sheep, and cows. That's how I wanted to become rich. That's why I wanted to learn it. The man told me to sacrifice a person. Since my nephew is the only person I love and get along with and talk and play with, he had to be sacrificed. That's why he's sick." Her mom got up and asked her daughter, "Why are you doing this? We have enough. We have sheep, horses, cows, and all that stuff." The girl continued and said that she and her teacher had removed a man's corpse from a grave and brought him back to life. They cut him up and used his body in a witch's ritual. "I had to eat his flesh in order to change myself into another animal. That's how I can sit in here but also be outside."

We straightened her out and we got her to pray. All we could do was pray for her. We also fanned her down and cleaned her up, and we made her take some herbs and hoped that she would vomit the bad things she had taken in. The ceremony lasted through two evenings. That girl is still living and walking. She looks normal, but deep down she is no longer focused. We saved her life, but she's still a little bit off in her mind.

## Native American Church

**M**edicine men and women deal with herbs, sandpainting, singing, or chanting. Some of them also deal with witchery and all kinds of hocus pocus on the other side. In addition to medicine people, there are Roadmen. They work with peyote, cedar, sage, smoke, prayers, and songs. Here we eat peyote and concentrate on the cedar in the fire. It requires sitting all night through a meeting where we sing, pray, teach, and talk.

The Native American church has been with me for a long time. The first time I ever tasted peyote was when I was about six. My mom said to come over and take some coffee grounds. I went over and it sure



**NATIVE AMERICAN CHURCH:** A pan-Indigenous organization that uses peyote as a sacrament in ceremonies that are called "peyote meetings." Membership is estimated to be as many as 300,000 among seventy different tribes.

**PEYOTE MEETING:** Usually performed to cure an illness, it also can be used for giving thanks, receiving blessings, or celebrating a birthday. There are typically four officials who run the meeting: the Roadwoman or Roadman (the main leader), the Chief Drummer (responsible for assembling the drum), the Cedarman (throws ground cedar onto the fire to create a sacred incense), and the Fire Chief (manages the fireplace).

Above: Native American Church by Leerolline Burke, 2000

didn't taste like coffee. She was using peyote and prayer for courage to face the difficult things in her life. That evening when she let me eat the peyote medicine, after 10 or 15 minutes, my body began to tingle. People say that's how the medicine starts to work. At the time, I was a hyperactive child and the medicine made me more hyper. I remember going outside and chasing a chicken. After a while, I went to sleep.

I continued to eat the peyote medicine as a child. When I was about nine, I attended a full peyote meeting. I wanted to see how it was, what they say, and what they do. I wanted to witness it myself. My sister and I hid behind some people and observed the meeting. The medicine man talked and afterwards he started the prayers while each person rolled up a smoke. With the smoke, they all started praying. When the medicine came around the third time, I grabbed a bunch of it and swallowed it without chewing. It was green and watery looking. Soon, I started feeling something and then we moved to the front to sit with the others. When the staff came near me, I grabbed it. Someone wanted me to sing. A man was playing the drum. That was the first time I started singing.

Even though I didn't know any songs, a song came to me automatically. I sang pretty well. The medicine man in charge of the meeting told me to come up front. He announced that I was going to be a medicine woman in the future and that I was going to have it all. He knew this because he saw it through my song. He then prayed, cedared me down very well, and gave me four medicines. He turned to my stepfather and said to me, "If he ever hurts you again, you come and tell me." Boy did I feel big and strong. That's when I started standing up for myself. My stepfather was mean. He used to hit me and chased me with a horse. He also beat my mom with a stick. That's the kind of house I lived in.

I remember one vision that changed things for me. As a child, I was often sick. My brother finally paid attention, "Sister, I want you to have this ceremony done on you. I'm tired of you being sick all the time. I want you to get better." I was so sick that I wore a towel on my head. I used to get real hot. A meeting was held for me in the traditional Native American way. The medicine man conducting the meeting said I was visioning things I wasn't supposed to see. I would see a woman in the

hospital and know where her pain was located. I would look at her and see an area of her body that was dark. Sometimes I'd see something black around her or I'd see a bug eating her.

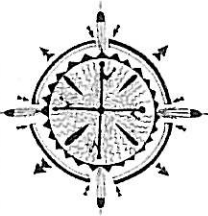
I could also smell the sickness and I could smell a person's blood. If a woman had sex the night before, I could smell it. My nose was that good and my ears and eyes were also very good. I learned that all the smells and things I saw made me get sick. That's why they had a peyote meeting. The medicine man gave me a spoonful of medicine every 30 minutes. I was flying high, as you would say in the white man's way. The medicine was really working on me and gave me visions. I told the medicine man that it was getting scary because I started seeing graveyards where people were buried. I saw the bodies lying there and the marks on the coffins. The medicine man said that my sickness had to do with the Ghostway. It involved people who had died. I never found out who made that happen to me and I didn't question it.

When the peyote medicine started doctoring me, I felt puffy. I felt like I was sitting high in the sky. It made me feel the people around me but I could only see their feet. The medicine fixed me up inside and my body hurt from it. I heard my heart beat and my liver move. I heard my insides moving and saw my own fat. I was able to see myself in a true way.

After taking more medicine, my vision focused like a TV set and I could see into my past. I viewed the time when my sister and I butchered and cooked an old, small gray desert lizard. I don't know why we did it, but we didn't eat it. We had mistreated Mother Earth and I learned that that was responsible for the soreness inside me.

Even after the meeting was over and the medicine man went away, the medicine continued to work on me for another week and a half. People came to my house asking for help because they believed I was under the influence of holy spiritual ways. I went and helped them. I prayed and used the sacred things I had been given. From that point on, many patients came to me.

The word got out and more and more people came. I would be awakened around 2 or 4 in the morning with somebody knocking at my door. That's how bad it became. Because of the frustrations, we moved away. We moved from Two Grey Hills in New Mexico to Denver.



**GHOSTWAY:** sickness caused by witches or ghosts

The Diné believe that sickness and misfortune are the consequence of being out of harmony with the natural world. Inappropriate interaction with natural phenomena, such as wind, thunder, and lightning may cause an imbalance as can the improper contact or mistreatment of animals. Ghosts and witches can also bring about disharmony and illness. Ceremonies and prayers are used to bring a person back to harmony with nature, thereby restoring health and beauty.

Somehow people found out and started coming again. The Diné out there started coming to me. Since I couldn't escape it, we decided to move back to Two Grey Hills again.

I found that if I tried to get away from helping others, I would get sick. That's why I stopped running. Years later, my husband and I decided to face this truth and we asked the Creator to not send too many patients to us because we are not so strong, but that we will help some of His people. That's how we did it. We sat down, had a smoke, and then we sang and prayed about it. We simply told the Creator how we wanted it.

Today when I eat the peyote medicine, I feel the spirits changing me. I see a lot of things. It gives me spiritual focus. I even see things I don't want to see. I can see what every person wants. When the medicine is working on me, I feel like I'm floating. The medicine also helps me see whether there is a skinwalker in the area.

Some medicine people became jealous of me because I had more patients than they did. Other medicine men tried to steal the methods I used to treat my patients. They tried to imitate what I did. What they forget is that when you are performing, it is the holy person in you who is working on a patient. I had to learn to live with these challenges.

Sometimes I'm tired and I don't feel I can help people. I have even tried to hide from my patients. Once, an old lady came for help and I told my family to tell her that I wasn't at home. I crawled under the bed and pretended I wasn't home. I was hiding there and pretty soon I saw the tip of her cane. She lifted up the sheet and saw me under the bed, and demanded that I get out of there and work on her. I didn't know what to say. I just got up and got my medicine pouch. I didn't say a word. She came after me for doing that. After I finished helping her, she started to laugh and make jokes. She finally said, "Don't you ever do that again."

One reason I used to hide was because some people didn't really believe in what I was doing. Their disbelief came back to me and made me sick. Sometimes they wanted to test me and I didn't want to deal with that. I never put a price on my services. I just take what they give me. My grandpa used to say, "Never overcharge people because what you do was given to you as a holy gift." If you're gifted, you're not supposed to ask for money. You have to let the patient decide.



**The Big Hogan Vision** Years later, I dreamt that I saw the biggest hogan in the world. I saw myself sitting in a corner of this hogan and I was really singing away. A voice in the vision said to me, "You need to be sitting over here." Immediately I flew to that corner and thought, "This is a dream. It's not real life." When I sat in that place, I became sick. The voice then said, "We need to put her back." They brought out a big mattress and sat me on it. I then threw up and thought that I had died. However, I found that I could now see through things. I could see through walls and through hogans. I was looking down from above and I saw many churches and religions inside. All the world's churches were in that hogan. Everyone was talking in their native tongue and made a lot of noises. All the sounds were coming to me.

I then heard something being dragged. I turned and saw a pair of feet walking by and behind them was a stick being dragging along the earth. It was outside the hogan and I immediately thought that they were the feet of Jesus carrying the cross. Then the person spoke up and said, "Believe in me. That's the only way to get your body back." I thought about my body and prayed for my spirit. I knew I had seen Jesus. I saw His body but didn't see His face.

The next day I took my kids to church. I went to the preacher and told him my dream. He didn't say anything about it. I left the church and went to a medicine man and he said, "You are a true healer. That's why you had that dream. He's helping you." The medicine man told me to use the name of Jesus whenever I pray. That's what I've been doing ever since.

The Navajo way usually refers to the Great Creator, but I know this is also Jesus. That dream focused my whole life in a different way. Sometimes I get a Bible and read it out of curiosity. I read it and then I go and perform my traditional ways. I stand between these worlds and feel the wonder of it all.

My dreams taught me that the fireplace is the same as the Bible. The fireplace is also where we communicate with our ancestors and find our teachings. The peyote is a translator. It is used the same way you use a telephone to make a call. It gives you messages and helps you understand things. The peyote can tell you what your patient is talking about and what he or she is saying through the fireplace.

## Prayer

**W**hen I first learned how to pray for someone, I went to our highest mountain with my whistle. The whistle was given to me by a medicine man. I looked around and saw everything down below and all the way around. I asked the Creator to teach me how to pray and to understand what I'm saying when I'm praying. I wanted to learn to deeply concentrate while praying. While I was talking in my prayers, a wind came up and blew on my face. I guess that's the experience you're supposed to have. After the wind went away, I continued praying for a long time asking for understanding. I kept repeating that request. Suddenly, I heard something and when I turned, a big elk was facing me. The elk came closer and I thought it was going to attack me, but he just came closer and closer. I kept praying with my eyes closed, and the wind came up on me again. I opened my eyes and the elk was gone. Immediately, I knew that my prayers went in all directions. The elk symbolized many lines of prayer that can be made. My husband, who watched from a distance, said that an eagle circled as I was praying. I didn't see the eagle because my eyes were closed in prayer. This is how I learned to pray and it gave me a sacred confirmation that I could fulfill the duties of a medicine woman.

A prayer goes from the east to south, west, and to the north. Then we do the center and upper ways. When you pray for a person, start on the right side first and then down to the left, followed by both feet and finally upwards. The songs work from the head on down. With a song, you're washing a patient and cleansing their body, but with a prayer, you're building them up.

When you are performing a ceremony, you can give herbs to your patient to help them feel the truth about themselves. While the patient is taking the herbs, you also have to take it because you will sing and chant the sickness out of the patient. You and the patient must take the medicine at the same time so that you can both feel certain things together. In the end, everything walks in beauty again. That's how it works.



## Mother Earth and the Four Directions

When a medicine person is teaching you, you have to really listen. They have several things that they go by. For instance, it is important to learn your colors. The white is from the east, the blue from the south, the yellow from the west, and the black from the north. The four sacred mountains must also be known: Siskaajini (Blanca Peak), Tsoodzil (Mount Taylor), Dook'oolid (San Francisco Peak), and Dibénitsaa (Hesperus). There are two other sacred mountains which are somewhat secret and seldom mentioned. *All Creation (Rainbow) Mountain* provides a sacred door for spiritual work, and *Medicine Mountain* is where one finds many healing herbs.

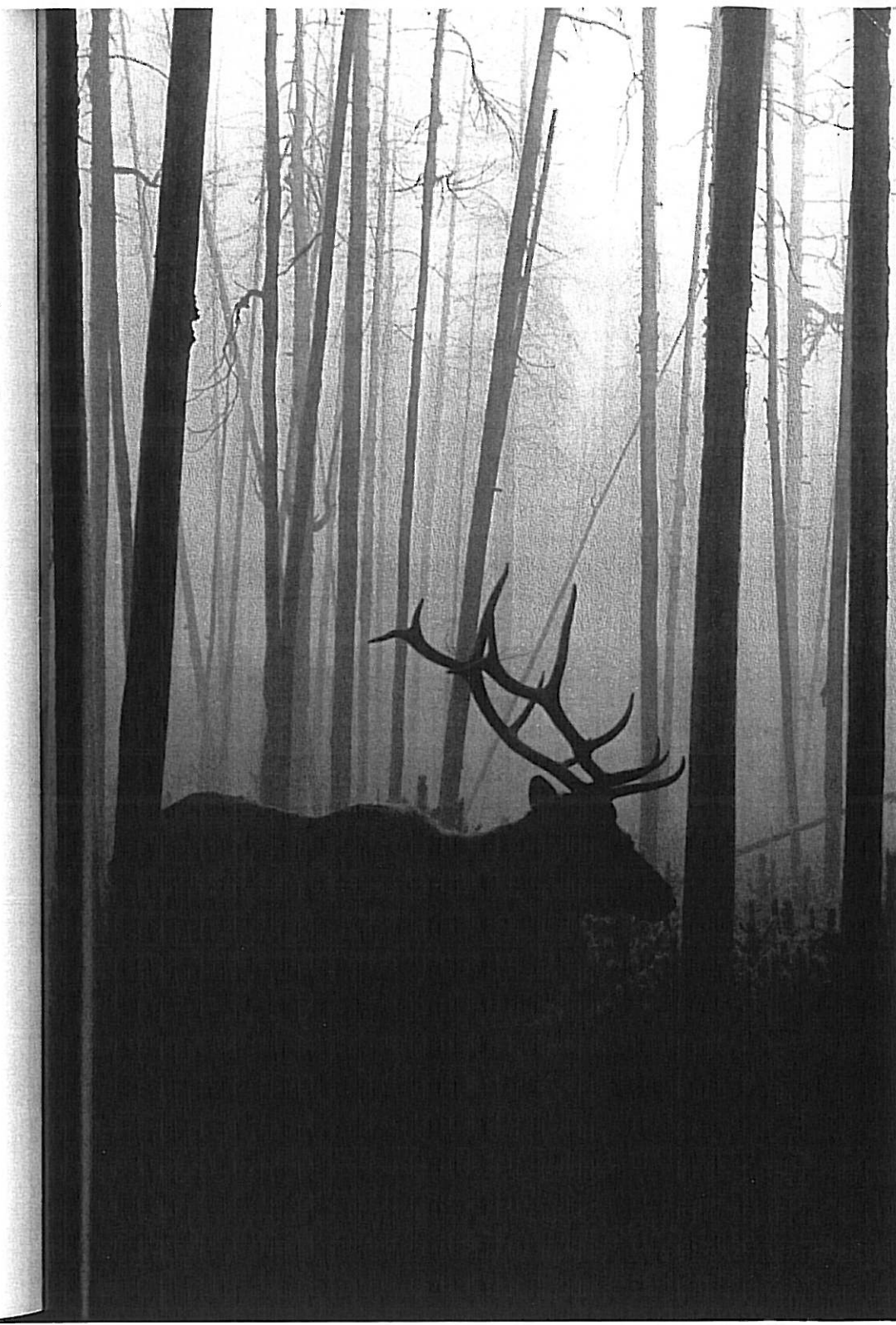
Even the Mother Earth has colors. A stone's color represents its personality and they, too, belong to the four directions: white-shell (east), turquoise (south), abalone (west), and black jet (north). If a person wants to be positive, you use a stone from the east which brings a power that can help. A woman's liberation is from the north side. A new marriage or new beginning comes from the south side. This knowledge helps direct how you perform on a patient.

When you see red rock, you understand that red symbolizes our inner feelings. That's where the Mother Earth feels close to the Creator. If you come to a yellow place, yellow earth means you should show respect in that area. If you come to a green place, a place with many plants, this is where the healer is. If you're in the desert, you will find directions to create yourself with beauty. If you see white sand, that's for being more positive about things. Blue is for when you're going to have a child or when you want to grow a plant or when you want to adopt something. People sometimes need to change their mind and their attitude. There is a door in the west for change. Finally, most people don't fool around with the north because that's where evil is taken away. However, I like working with the north. It's a powerful place for change and healing.

In our tradition, we learn to work with the four directions. We are taught to enter a hogan and move in a clockwise direction. You must walk in the correct way or you'll disrespect the traditions of

White represents new beginnings and spiritual purity; blue symbolizes the life force that makes things grow; yellow suggests wisdom, spiritual blessing, and healing; black suggests the underworld, as well as rain and fertility.

These mountains are identified as: Sierra Blanca Peak in Colorado or Pelado Peak in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near Alamosa, New Mexico, for the east; Mount Taylor in the San Mateo Range near Grant, New Mexico, for the south; Humphrey's Peak in the San Francisco Mountains near Flagstaff, Arizona, for the west; and it is uncertain, but probably Hesperus Peak in Colorado in the north.



someone's home. If you walk in the right way, you'll be greeted and treated with respect and kindness. If you don't know your four directions, you're out of whack. You're out of place. That's what my grandpa used to say. Because of my grandpa, I really know my four directions. He used to say, "Stand straight on Mother Earth and look at the four directions. What do you see?" I used to look in all four directions early in the morning because he got us out of bed and told us to go outside to say our prayers. Sometimes he told us to put water in our mouths but not to swallow it. With water in our mouths we had to run as far as we could. I think we ran for a mile and a half. Running a long time makes you want to swallow. I wanted to swallow the water. When we got back, he made us spit out the water in a glass to see how much we had left. He drew a line for the water he gave us. We hoped we would have more water from saliva. When I swallowed the water, he would say that I wasn't really focused yet and talk about the four directions. He said I should always know which way I'm standing and know my direction. He said I needed to know this to focus myself. That's how he put it.

## Other Medicine People

Once tried to learn to be a medicine woman for a woman's puberty rite, which is the four-day Kinaalda ceremony that includes a special night called *All Night Prayer*. A medicine woman agreed to teach me her songs. When she came to our house and sang, it sounded kind of funny to me. I laughed about it, but according to our tradition, you are not supposed to laugh at these songs. If you laugh at a song, it will never work for you. That's what happened to me. I didn't learn the two-day Purity Chant because I laughed. I know other prayers and songs but I don't know the Purityway. During the puberty rite, I understand what they're singing about and I can sing along with them, but I can't start the song myself.

I am a strong singer in the Native American church. There I just go for it and start singing. I've had difficulty picking up some traditional songs because I laughed about them. These songs are about the frog,

the snake, and the coyote. I've learned songs and prayers from many medicine people. Some of them would tell me something and say it only once. Others would say it twice. If a medicine person is talking to you and you move your head just once and look in a different direction, they might say, "You're not listening. Why should I teach you?" When I'm with another medicine person, I just sit, look, and listen to them. When they ask if I have any questions, I always say no. If you question them, they'll be after you. That's why I don't question them. I try to catch it real fast. I would then ask my husband because he and his father were medicine men. They'd further explain it to me.

My husband's father was called the Man with a Mark on His Forehead. He could heal a person with a fast heartbeat and someone with soreness all over their body. He knew the Windway, the Snakeway, the Frogway, and the Fishway.

From my childhood I remember an old blind man. Even though he was blind, he performed his medicine. He knew what kind of medicine bag it was by feeling it. He always knew where his medicine things were. When he performed on a person, he drew a wind design on the patient's body. Once I decided that he wasn't blind because he performed on people and made good drawings. So I decided to play a joke on him. We went to his place and I guess he had heard us coming. I wanted to run over to him and pull down his handkerchief. He had this nice necklace that every kid wanted. In our culture we say that when a medicine person drops their necklace, it belongs to the person who picks it up. We wanted that necklace to drop so we could pick it up. Since I knew it was connected to his handkerchief, I went for it. Before I could touch it, he got his cane and hooked my leg with it. He was fast. The cane grabbed me and pulled me towards him. He was looking at me and I shouted, "You can see, you can see!"

That joke turned back on us. You're not supposed to play around with a medicine person and try to get his stuff. He never dropped his necklace. Instead, he knew what we wanted so he untied his necklace and took a stone from it and gave it to me. That stone was very pretty. It was greenish in color. "This is what you want," he said. I nodded yes. He told me that I wasn't supposed to be doing this because if I kept on

The gift of a bead from a medicine person is special to the Diné because it is usually given to a patient as a sacred token following a ceremonial. Its possession brings protection and favor from the duties associated with the given ceremonial.

doing it, something was going to happen to me. But he gave me that stone as a gift. Ever since then, I never disrespected a medicine man.

There was another medicine man who worked with the Ghostway. He was one of the most powerful healers I ever met. He never talked, he only sang. He didn't communicate with others, but he was a powerful healer. When a person went to him he always helped them. He was a shepherd and lived completely in nature. During his lifetime he never went to a hospital. When he died they burned his body in his house, as he wished. "Don't put me in the ground. Don't replant me. Just burn the whole thing down with me." That's what happened when he died. He dealt with a lot of bad things. He helped people visited by ghost spirits and visions of their ancestors. He was a *ghostbuster*. He went to many haunted places and communicated with the spirits of the dead.

He had a wife who was a hand trembler, but she never helped him. Years ago, there was a big gathering with many people, and he was invited to the dinner. He arrived in a horse-drawn wagon. When he got off the wagon, I saw that his hand was all black. The kids said that that's why they call him the Ghost Man, because he's always black all over. I went up to him and saw that the top of his hand was all black like smoke but clean underneath. I closely watched him. He sat away from the other people. At one point a girl cried out. I think she fell into a seizure. He immediately got up and put his hand on her with his pouch and did something right there. Everybody got scared and backed up. They were very afraid of him, but he saved the girl. I asked one of the ladies what he was doing and she said he was taking the bad spirit out of the young lady. She said it happened because the ghost chaser was there. Whenever he attended a traditional gathering, something always happened and he had to fix it. That's why he seldom went to any community events. We looked and saw that he was all black. His skin wasn't brown, it was all black, and he was even dressed in black. He was strong because he dealt with spirits most of the time. I understand that nowadays when you're spiritually sick, you blacken yourself. In the Diné tradition, we turn our body black with burned herbs to chase away the spirit. This was done to me when my husband died. I went to a medicine man and he blackened my whole body.

That blackened medicine man only dealt with spirits. If a person wanted to talk with someone dead, he dealt with it. He had a special buckskin into which he put a bad spirit. Afterwards, he took it far away and released it. That's how he did it. I'll never forget the time when he revived the girl at the big gathering. Her tongue was all twisted and she couldn't breathe. He just put his hand around her throat as if he was choking her. He pulled something out of her, put it into his pouch, and went away. She got up and said she was dizzy and drank the water someone gave her. He was one of the truly great elders.

My husband was a quiet medicine man. He only talked if you asked him a question. He once told me to never criticize other medicine people because I don't know how they got their knowledge or what they had to go through. He greatly respected other medicine men. He never said, "That's no good, try this one." I tried not to question anyone when they were doing something because it was simply their way.

I remember a gathering that took place in Window Rock. We went there and many people were selling different kinds of herbs. My husband looked at all the plants for sale and described what each was good for. He noted the ones that were the wrong medicines. That's when he taught me to never trust anyone selling herbs in a public place. For example, there was a lady selling a medicine for the heart but it was actually a lady medicine for the mind. Also, a medicine was claimed to be for the kidneys but it was actually for the manly way. Another medicine that the seller said was for sinus headaches was actually a medicine for growing hair. David said whoever took that medicine was going to be furry.

## Challenges of Life

David taught me about herbs and I followed him around and was with him when he conducted his medicine ways. I would sit by him, pray with him, and sing with him. We were a team when we did our medicine. Sometimes I miss those times. I miss him very much when I'm doing traditional medicine. I keep my sorrow inside until I'm alone. Then I cry a lot.