



Counseling and Human Resources Consulting, PC

MICHAEL H. BROWN, ED. S.
LICENSED PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR
LICENSED MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST
DIPLOMATE IN CLINICAL HYPNOTHERAPY
E-Mail: Internet: MBROWNLPC@aol.com
Website: [HTTP://www.MichaelBrown.org](http://www.MichaelBrown.org)

4889 A FINLAY STREET
RICHMOND, VA 23231
(804) 222-0483
FAX: (804) 222-8823

ADVENTURES IN NAVAJO LAND **Rituals and Reflections** **Cortez, Colorado** **July 29-August 3, 2010**

A trip with my son, Damien, to Cortez, Colorado in 2010 to visit a cousin of mine led to unexpected and fascinating contact with the Navajo culture. A 96-year-old medicine man named John Holliday and his daughter spoke of the traditional ways of their people. A Road Chief for the American Native Church guided us in a night-long drumming and chanting ritual called a peyote circle. These experiences stimulated many reflections about my past clinical use of psychedelic drugs and memories about ritual experiences I have shared with my children and others in the past on the quest for Self-knowledge.

ADVENTURES IN NAVAJO LAND

Rituals and Reflections

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INTRODUCTION

A ritual invitation

As a reward for completing the first of a challenging, two-year master's degree program in anatomy and neurobiology at the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, I took my 31-year-old son Damien on a five-day trip to Cortez, Colorado. My cousin Gary Adams and his Taiwanese wife, Ming, own a 2200-acre ranch called "Canyon of the Ancients," 260 miles south of Denver in the middle of the state's spectacular mesa country. The Adams have built an adobe home in keeping with the history of the land. They raise free-range chickens and rabbits, 50 head of cattle, two horses, and two black Lab dogs that prowl at will the sparse and rugged countryside. The Adams grow tomatoes, melons, beans, corn, squash, okra, and hay and sell them to the Navajo Indians whose reservation begins 15 miles up the canyon road. They also rent cabins via the Internet to people from around the world who come to explore the countryside with their guidance and view the Indian ruins and petroglyphs of the past.¹



The author and his son

When I confirmed our plans to visit with Gary, he put the word out to friends and acquaintances that we would be coming. One of his acquaintances was a man named Pat Smith * who lived 90 miles from Cortez. Gary told me that Pat was a retired investigator of troubled Federal Government programs who for the past five years had been pretty involved with a Native American medicine man named Lenny.* When Pat heard about my professional background from Gary, he wanted to meet me.

Damien and I arrived in Cortez on Thursday afternoon, July 29. The following morning as we sat for breakfast with the Adams, the phone rang. Pat was calling to talk to me. Cued up by my cousin, in short order he was asking about my experiences at the Monroe Institute of Applied Sciences (MIAS) in Nelson County, Virginia, back in 1980-81. At that time Bob Monroe ² was using isolation booths, sound-wave engineering, and guided imagery to provoke an experience he called hemispheric synchronization, or hemi-synch, and to facilitate altered states of consciousness for participants to his Gateway programs. I had written imagery scripts for Monroe and had been in charge of community building for people who were drawn to his work and came to live on or near his Blue Ridge mountain property. I designed brochures for institute programs and conducted some of my own retreats from there.



Adams' adobe home

Remote viewing

Both Gary and Pat were particularly interested in Monroe's work with "explorers," a small group of women and men he attempted to train in an experience called "remote viewing." It was thought that in a trance-like state certain gifted people could see and know things that were happening in places at a distance and sometimes in time frames other than the present. As a result of yoga and meditative practices I had had such experiences in the past. I moved from Montreal to Charlottesville, Virginia, to look into Monroe's work and see if it could help me better understand these inexplicable experiences and what they might mean about the psyche, the soul and perhaps the human survival of death. Gary and Pat told me they had met other people who had been involved in remote viewing, some with Monroe and some in other parts of the world, and they wanted to pick my brain about what I knew. It was strange and unexpected, 30 years later, to be in the heartland of Colorado, 1700 miles from home, and run into

people interested in my past.

Pat told me on the phone that the Indian called Lenny was part Hopi, Navajo, and White and was a member of the American Native Church. This is the only group in the United States allowed by the Federal Government to legally use a mescaline-imbued cactus called peyote in sacred ceremonies. Lenny acted as the leader or “Road Chief,” of these rituals in the area. He was also known as a “seer.” According to Pat, Lenny was the ‘real deal’. He could know things about people through a clairvoyant, spiritual ability akin to remote viewing. Pat had asked Lenny to ‘check me out’, he said, and Lenny had come to know some things about me in this way.

From his conversations with my cousin, Pat also learned about my involvement in LSD psychotherapy at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center (MPRC) in Baltimore in 1972-75, nine years before my time with Monroe. They both wanted to know more about this, too. The breakfast phone call was an invitation for Damien and me to participate in a ceremony with Lenny called a Peyote Circle. It was to be held, in part, to honor my visit I was told.



Mesa Verde

One of the reasons I decided to visit Gary was to tour with Damien the geologic and ancient sites of the Anasazi Indians, predecessors of the Hopi, Zuni, Ute, and other native people. Of special interest were the 800-year-old cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde to which my father had taken my sisters Margi, Celie, and me on a trip to Nevada in 1960 when I was 12. I was excited to return to the area and hoped to learn more about the ruins and the local native cultures. Never in my wildest dreams, however, had I expected to be offered an invitation to participate in this ritual. Lots of questions flooded my mind. Should I participate in a Peyote Circle with Damien? Would he want to do it? Would there be any down sides, dangers, or benefits for Damien or us?

Maryland Psychiatric Research Center

I was very familiar with techniques for altering consciousness I told Pat. I touched on some of these facts on the phone and gave him further details at his home a couple of days later. At the MPRC, extensive research had been done to assess the clinical value of altered states. The Lilly sensory isolation tank ³, the witch’s cradle, yoga and meditative states, guided imagery with music, ⁴ and mandala artwork ⁵ were some of the methods used to help people prepare for, explore, and integrate unusual states of consciousness. Most notable was the research on the therapeutic use of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) with alcoholics, heroin addicts, terminal cancer patients, and other specific groups. Stan Grof was the clinical director of the program but left shortly after I became involved to be Scholar in Residence at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. ⁶

The clinical use of LSD followed two protocols. Psychedelic psychotherapy, or low dose LSD 125 µg (micrograms), created a gentle blurring of the boundaries of consciousness and an opportunity for the patient to open the senses, awareness, and the unconscious mind. Psychedelic psychotherapy, high dose LSD 300-400 + µg, utterly overwhelmed the ego and dissolved the boundaries of consciousness. Most interesting was the finding that the single most significant factor that correlated with the therapeutic “success” of LSD psychotherapy was the authenticity of the therapist and the depth of connection that developed between the therapist and client. Recent research on successful psychotherapeutic outcomes across disciplines, approaches, and techniques confirms that finding to this day.

I was candidate #98 among 100 people who were accepted into a professional training program concerning the clinical use of LSD at MPRC. In 1972-74, as head counselor at a Federally funded drug abuse clinic called Epoch House, I was doing psychotherapy with adolescents who were abusing

psychedelic drugs. I had a “need to know” what these experiences were all about to better work with these kids. This earned me a seat on the boat. The program included countless hours of conversations with the LSD therapists for a year, reading much of the extensive literature published from research there,⁷ watching portions of videotaped eight to 16-hour-long LSD sessions, and learning how to use music to support and facilitate these trips. Then I took a battery of psychological tests, went over their evaluations, and underwent two psychiatric interviews. The training culminated in three high-dose LSD 400 µg experiences over a two-year period of time. Before each session I wrote a comprehensive statement about where I was in my life at the time, what my major challenges were, and what I hoped to explore or achieve from the experience. After each session I wrote a comprehensive summary of it and drew a mandala or two in illustration.

Albert Schweitzer Cultural Center in Mexico City

As a consequence of my involvement in this program, I was invited to attend with my LSD therapist, Richard Yensen,⁸ the First Pan American Conference on the use of psychodysleptic compounds at the Albert Schweitzer Cultural Center (ASCC) in Mexico City in July, 1974. Convened by Mexico’s former Minister of Health, Dr. Salvador Roquet (1920-1995), healers, psychiatrists, and professionals from North and South America came to share with one another their knowledge and use of these drugs. Oswaldo Ramos, Colonel in the Mexican Army and Special Representative of the President to the Indian Nations of Mexico, shared wonderful slides and a great many stories of his experiences with the Huichol Indians and their ritual use of peyote, a practice dating back more than 3,000 years.⁹ He took us on a three-day peyote hunt in the Mexican desert north of San Louis Potosi and showed us how to cut, harvest, and keep peyote. We took a huge amount of it back for use at the institute.

Roquet used MDA, psilocybin, datura, LSD, and peyote in monthly, 24 hour-long sessions with patients at his institute.¹⁰ They got a shot of Ketamine HCL if they resisted his insanely intense psychedelic group psychotherapy process. I observed a session led by a group of Argentinian psychiatrists and took part in another during which I had my first experience with peyote that I had just harvested from the desert! My experiences in Mexico deepened my understanding of the depth of the human unconscious, the resiliency of the human psyche, and added immeasurably to my appreciation of the healing value of these drugs when carefully employed.

Esalen Institute

While on the phone with Pat, I also told him that I was quite familiar with the ritual to which we were being invited. My second experience with this cactus, and my first Peyote Circle, happened in the Ventanna wilderness high above Big Sur, California. From September 22-November 1, 1975, I attended a six-week training program on altered states of consciousness at Esalen Institute coordinated by Stan and Joan Grof called “The Human Experience: Culture and Consciousness.” Leaders in the field who contributed included Gregory Bateson, Joseph Campbell, Michael Harner, Jean Houston, Charles Tart and Gordon Wasson. The one who got most of my attention, however, was Robert Greenway, an associate professor of psychology at Sonoma State University (SSU).¹¹ Greenway told the group about a ritual called a Wilderness Vision Quest used by Native Americans to seek life purpose. I came to the training program, in part, to clarify mine. My marriage was on the rocks and I needed inspiration to face its ending and go on.



Robert Greenway 2009

Fascinated by what Greenway had to say, I left the group the following morning and spent three days alone in the mountains above Esalen on my first vision quest. I came back with new resolve and a new identity. A week or so later, Greenway led participants in a two-day Native American ritual for developing group or tribal consciousness called the Bone Game. A week after that, leaving the room-bound program again, I went with him on a three-day forced hike through the mountain wilderness in search of a site to bring in, camp, and do a Peyote Circle with our fellow participants. When all were safely camped, we built a

Sweat Lodge to purify ourselves in preparation for the Peyote Circle.



Don Caterino's
Huichol ceremonial costume

Grof invited a Huichol Indian shaman named Don Caterino to be the Road Chief for the night-long ritual. Don Caterino brought with him his wife, three small children, their own cornflower, and other food to eat; we were told that they were unwilling to eat White man's food. I grew up trapping fur-bearing animals and selling their pelts for cash. I caught a rabbit in the grasslands around the camp with a string choke-trap and gave it to the Huichols to eat. Don Caterino gave me his costume as he left our company. He said that this gift was in for the gift of the rabbit, for having enjoyed the songs I sang during the Peyote Circle, he said, and for having saved his children from a rattlesnake I spotted leading them out of the wilderness. The whole six-week program was so transforming that I called myself Rising Eagle for the next four years.^{12, 13} I took part in two other month-long programs with Grof at Esalen: In 1977, "Ancient maps of consciousness and modern approaches to self-exploration"; in 1979, "Energy: Physical, emotional and spiritual."

The Bone Game, Wilderness Vision Quest

In 1977, I moved from Montreal to San Francisco to have Greenway be the chairman of my master's degree program in psychology at SSU. He knew the Peyote Circle ritual well and was the Road Chief for two other circles in which I sat. I also did the Bone Game with him again and a two-week WVQ. I incorporated these programs into my own growing array of retreat offerings. Since then I have conducted the Bone Game¹⁴ six times. I extracted from it the use of the Talking Stick and its procedure for arriving at decision-by-consensus, incorporated them into a five-person ritual I called the "Kiva Group Process," used it extensively in my counseling and consulting work, and shared it at conferences to which I made presentations.

For instance, in March, 1979, a week after my son Damien was born, I received a call from the 3HO Foundation in Vancouver, B.C., an organization that promotes Kundalini Yoga. They were seeking help to stabilize the chaos of their eight-day World Symposium on Humanity in Toronto, Canada, that was falling apart due to low registrations and the consequent lack of money and presenters. I used the Kiva Group Process with 800 hostile and unhappy people and helped them cope with change in 130 daily one-hour small group circles. For years afterward I heard from people who thanked me for the process and how it had touched them. They told me how they had incorporated it in school systems, with nursing colleagues, and in many other ways. In July, 1983, I used the Kiva Group Process at the First Symposium on Organization Transformation in Durham, NH, and adapted it for use in consulting I did until 1990.^{15, 16}

The further we get from culture, the deeper we can look into the mysteries of consciousness. Since 1975, I have led 200 wilderness vision quest retreats^{17, 18, 19} of from one to seven days in length for individuals and groups throughout the United States and Canada.²⁰ Through a combination of while consulting for agencies in the Federal Government in Washington, D.C., I met John Hendee, editor of the book, "Wilderness Management," for the Department of Agriculture Forest Service. As a result of our collaboration in October, 1983, I presented a paper about the vision quest at the 3rd World Wilderness Congress in Forres, Scotland.²¹ I took wilderness managers from the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and other wilderness related organizations on many quests in the '80's and summarized all I learned in two papers presented at the 4th World Wilderness Congress in Ft. Collins, Colorado in 1987.^{22, 23}

PssEIwas: Preparation (set, setting), Exploration, Integration (writing, art, sharing)

From my native experience and western psychological training, I came to understand that when three important steps are followed, a positive outcome is virtually assured from forays into altered states

of consciousness, drug assisted or otherwise. These three steps are preparation, exploration, and integration. The more *prepared* I am for an unusual, significant event, the more likely it is that I will be open and receptive to it. Set and setting are important here. “Set” refers to my mental and emotional attitude toward the experience. “Setting” refers to the nature and quality of the environment in which the experience takes place. *Exploration* requires me to go into spaces—in my head, with a group, in wilderness—where I have never been before and be ready to take risks and experience the unfamiliar and the unknown. *Integration* makes my experience meaningful when I document its lessons in writing and capture them in art so they can be remembered and reinforced. Sharing my experience with others deepens my relationships and increases the likelihood that I will take ownership of and act on the lessons learned in positive ways.

Visionary experiences

Visionary experiences, like fantasies or dreams, can be forgotten and are of little transforming value if not remembered, shared, and acted on. PssEIwas. At the MPRC, guided imagery with music was used to support LSD sessions and helped get people into such states of altered consciousness. Eye shades and ear phones were used to keep the experience internal. Debriefing with a therapist, documenting the journey in writing, and the use of mandala art assisted in integration. Monroe used binaural beats to help people relax. He inputted into each ear sounds of slightly different frequencies, the result of which sounded like ocean waves. Over top of these soothing sounds he layered narrated guided imagery scripts that led people on imagery trips. But this was a passive process and integration was never the focus of his concern. As a result, participants tended to leave his Gateway program deeply relaxed, if dazed, remembering little of the trips they took in his isolation booths. The Huichol Indians do all kinds of preparation before collecting or using peyote and document their visions in colorful yarn paintings.²⁴ Much of the training in psychosynthesis involved learning how to help people conjure specific images or symbols to represent the issues or concerns they brought to counseling, helping them to carefully interpret them, and then grounding their insights and inspiration in practical homework assignments.^{25, 26}

How then can these drugs help us explore or develop better patterns of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and behaving and improve our pathways of consciousness? No specific outcome can ever be predicted because of the interlocking factors that combine to determine it: the kind, quality, and dose of the compound(s) ingested; the person’s metabolism; the nature of their unconscious structures; the authenticity of the relationship with therapist, guide, or companions; and the quality of their PssEIwas.

A canoe trip



Huichol yarn painting depicting
the journey on peyote.
M Brown private collection

All this being said, the analogy of a canoeing trip can paint a general description.

Example 1. I am in a canoe on a sunny afternoon. The flow of the river is slow and I am free to paddle and explore the river as I wish. I notice debris in the tributaries and trash along the river banks, do nothing about them but instead just enjoy the day. In our normal state of consciousness we act out of established pattern sets. Some are fine, others may be troublesome, but we typically do nothing to change or improve our functioning.

Example 2. There is a sudden squall upstream and it is heading my way. I prepare for the storm and it overtakes me. The wind picks up, rain falls, lightening flashes. The river becomes swollen and begins to move fast. I can get out or stay for the ride. I am swept into the main channel. I notice

stuff that breaks loose and floats along with me but, moving at the speed of the water, I am unharmed. The experience is terrifying or exhilarating depending on my attitude, experience and luck. Psychedelic LSD psychotherapy and low doses of substances like psilocybin and mescaline can unclog and cleanse our channels of perception and get our energies moving again in positive ways.

Example 3. A hurricane comes, floods the river, and inundates the landscape. I am carried out onto a vast sea, into a world I have never been before, open and unobstructed. It is an overwhelming experience of infinity and eternity. I feel an enlightening sense of freedom and joy. Classical psychedelic LSD psychotherapy and other high dose compounds—MDA, ketomine hydrochloride, datura, ayahuasca—can reboot and restore the psyche to its fundamental biological capacities. Reactivity and repetitive personality patterns give way to response-ability, creativity, and communion with self, other, and the natural world.

The Power Circle, LSD sessions

So from my training and experience with mind altering drugs in Baltimore, Mexico, and California, I discovered that the effect of peyote was akin to low dose LSD. From Don Caterino and Greenway I learned how to conduct the Peyote Circle, to select people to fill its ritual roles, and to time the special events that take place during this sun-down to sun-up drumming and chanting ritual. Strictly using these protocols but using clinically pure LSD 125 instead of peyote, I acted as Road Chief 20 times for groups across North America from 1975 to 1984 as part of a three-day retreat. I called the experience the Power Circle and always wore the costume/vestments of Don Caterino to honor the timeless healing traditions of indigenous people. Between 1974 and 1986, following the protocols for psychedelic psychotherapy established at the MPRC, I guided 50 psychiatrists, psychologists, doctors, and others who demonstrated a “need to know” in high dose LSD experiences, most of them in Quebec. Since 1984, without the use of LSD, I have done the Power Circle as a weekend retreat called “Drum, rattle and chant: A journey to the Spirit World.” It is a moving event even without the use of “sacred medicine.”



Rising Eagle

A participant at the end of a vision quest 30 years ago saw the flip chart I used to explain the process his group would be going through. “PssEIwas. What a great memory aid,” he said. “How *pissy* I was before this quest!” Cute. And clever. It became a catch phrase, for decades a short-form greeting or exhortation shared between people who worked with me before important life events. “I’ve got a job interview next week.” “PssEIwas!” “My husband is divorcing me.” “PssEIwas!” “I’m getting married in two months.” “PssEIwas!” Clearly these steps are absent in our lives, in general, and certainly in the untutored, illicit use of mind altering drugs, in specific. As a result, many of our biggest adventures become marginally beneficial at best and difficult if not harmful at worst. These substances are quite readily available “on the street” and grow ever greater in number, complexity, and use. It is tragic that for 37 years they have been locked out of legal, legitimate clinical use by the war on drugs. I have always said that each of my three high-dose LSD experiences at the MPRC was equal to a Ph.D. in self-knowledge and personal growth. Grof (1976) compared their “potential significance for psychiatry and psychology to that of the microscope for medicine or the telescope for astronomy” (p. 32-3). This is a telling summary with which I most heartily agree.

Back in Cortez, conversations at the breakfast table with Gary and Ming and the phone call with Pat brought all of this back to mind, a domain of special expertise I sadly had to abandon and about which I seldom thought. In 1991, with an 11-year-old son and a nine-year-old daughter, I tucked my eagle wings inside my sports jacket, became a Licensed Professional Counselor in Virginia, and focused my attention on maximizing the ritual of the 50-minute-insurance-supported-counseling-hour for clients. Pat’s invitation for my son and me participate in another Peyote Circle left me feeling honored, intrigued, and excited. After long discussions with Damien and our hosts, we decided to jump into our canoe and journey down that river.

PREPARATION

John Holiday, Medicine Man

Gary had asked some of the Navajos who bought vegetables from him if there were any medicine men living near his ranch who might be willing to stop by for lunch and engage in a dialogue with us while Damien and I were in town. Turned out there was. A 96-year-old medicine man named John Holiday²⁷ lived an hour or so away. With his 83-year-old wife, 51-year-old son, 54-year-old daughter, Jen, and her husband, he agreed to stop by on Saturday to visit with those whom my cousin invited to attend. Gary arranged to give him hay and firewood for his trouble.



John Holiday and daughter, Jen

Due to flooding from a recent storm in Monument Valley where they lived, however, Holiday and his entourage arrived two-and-a-half hours late. Jen pushed her heavy-set father in his wheelchair from their van into Gary's living room. 15 people sat in excited expectation. Holiday was dressed in cowboy hat, fancy boots and turquoise jewelry. In attendance were my cousin and his wife, Gary's farm hand and his family, his sister and her doctor husband, several ranchers from up and down the canyon road, a retired organizational consultant, a former dentist now Life Coach, Damien, and me. I play five musical instruments and had brought my Native American flute along with me on this trip. Gary asked me to play it to quiet the group and gather the energy which I did.

With his daughter translating, Holiday asked us to introduce ourselves to know who had come to meet him. Around we went, one by one, describing our backgrounds. Holiday was impressed by the quality of the audience gathered to meet him. When it came my turn, I briefly mentioned my work as a psychotherapist, my background in altered states of consciousness, and the vision quests I run. Holiday laughed when he heard this. Through his daughter he said it was too bad I did not speak Navajo. We could talk all night long about the similarities in the work we did. I was pleased to hear him say so and looked forward to his description of his work as a medicine man.

Five questions

Holiday asked if we had any questions for him. Five surfaced from the group. 1) How did someone become a medicine man in the Navajo community? 2) What did he do as a medicine man? 3) Were women allowed to be medicine people? 4) Was the use of peyote part of the Navajo tradition? 5) Would he share a chant with us?

1) Holiday said that when someone wanted to be a medicine man, he went to someone with whom he wanted to study. Together they would go into a corn field when it was pollinating. The medicine man would sprinkle corn pollen on the head of the initiate, say some prayers, and that was it. Following this came a lifetime of training.

2) Holiday said he was known for many things in the Navajo community. He had been a miner of "yellow cake", uranium ore, in his youth. He was a rancher in later life. His wife bore him 17 children four of whom were dead. He said he conducted many kinds of ceremonies and rituals to bless people, farms and animals, to cleanse anyone who had touched or been around the dead so their spirits would not haunt them. He said he was best known for doing a ritual called the "Blessing" to help people walk in balance and be happy. Holiday had recently co-written a book about his life and his

daughter held up a copy.²⁸ Sitting in his wheelchair, eating lunch and engaging in the dialogue, he was attentive, open, humorous, and very engaging.

Fathers and daughters

3) Yes, Holiday said, there were medicine women in the Navajo community today but it was a recent phenomenon. Old traditions were dying out and women were helping to preserve them. Jen spoke at length, then, about her own humble past and Navajo upbringing. She only began to learn English at the age of eight when she was sent away from her family to attend the White man's school. Jen went on to earn her bachelor's and master's degrees in education and was a fourth-grade teacher.

Holiday had disapproved at first of his daughter's interest in his ways, she said, until he was quite old. Then realizing that none of his 11 sons or any of the other young men in the tribe were going to pick up the traditions or follow in his footsteps, he began to support her in learning them. I wondered to myself if he had actually initiated his daughter with the corn pollen but did not ask. She was learning his ways, she said, so they would not be lost. Jen also knew the ways of her mother and grandmother, members of the Goat Clan, she said. She sang their songs and conducted their rituals, too. Jen's husband spoke right up then and told us she went to Peyote Circles and sang her father's songs. Given all she had accomplished as a Navajo woman, her husband asserted, she was as powerful among their people as was her father.



Gabrielle Brown

The discussion caused me to reflect on my own 29-year-old daughter, Gabrielle. She has a tremendously sensitive, perceptive, and resilient spirit. Along with many of her friends growing up, she participated in many retreats with me—the WVQ; mask, myth and storytelling; the Bone Game,²⁹ and others.³⁰ She graduated *cum laude* in fashion design from the School of Arts at VCU and is becoming as gifted an artist as is my wife, Solange, homemaker and Signature member of the Virginia Watercolor Society.³¹



“Maturity”
Gabrielle Brown

Holiday's daughter, Jen, had woven a wonderful tapestry in life out of threads taken from her mother and father and so had Gabrielle, I reflected. She is not following my footsteps into the field of counseling and psychology but continues to allow me to help her explore significant events in her life through deep relaxation, mental imagery, and mandala art. She contributed “Maturity” to a public art exhibition my clients and I mounted for the city of Richmond in 2001 called “Mandala Minnow and Transformations of Consciousness.”³² She dreams of one day operating a retreat center where she provides hospitality and I conduct workshops and retreats. Jen and Gabrielle relate to us fathers in similarly interesting ways. She currently makes a living imaginatively creating embroidery imagery and designs.³³

4) No, Holiday said, the use of Peyote was not part of the traditional Navajo path and he said he disapproved of it. It was being used more and more frequently by members of his community, however, as a practice that goes back at least 100 years. Beyond this he had nothing more to say about it.



Jay C. Brown, 95

Fathers and sons

I liked Holiday and could not help but think about my own father who died the year before our trip, ten weeks shy of his 100th birthday. Holiday and Dad had both walked long upon the earth set in their ways and standing for the values of their times. I reflected on the differences between Jay Brown's “traditional path” and my own. My father raised six children as a New York Life Insurance agent. He helped people consider death, too, through the lens of policies that provided family

protection after loss.

Like Holiday, Dad had a wonderful sense of humor. He taught my sisters and me all the songs of his generation and their harmonies around the kitchen table and on long road trips across the country. From these roots my twin sister and I became professional folk musicians.³⁴ Dad liked to brag, though, that his politics were “to the right of Attila the Hun,” and anyone who tangled with him on these topics found out pretty quickly how honest that description was.

Hunting was the primary ritual dad and I shared every fall and winter of my life from the time I turned 14 until he lost his sight 36 years later. In the sun or rain, fog or snow, from dawn to dusk, we would sit in a brush-covered goose blind near the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland hoping to get a shot at passing or decoying waterfowl. We wandered across the farmlands of Virginia, Maryland, and Nebraska, his home state, on the lookout for rabbits, quail, and ringneck pheasants to bag and bring home to our families. From Dad I learned self-reliance, how to pay attention, how to plan, and how to regenerate my spirit in the natural world [appendix: “In concert with the natural law”]. I honored his passing in haiku. His final words to us were:

“It’s all about love.
Family is all we have.
Thank you god.” Silence.

Father, teacher, friend.
I am who I am because
he was who he was.

My mother’s “clan” was Catholic and she was a devout member of that religion. I went to parochial elementary school where she was secretary and sang in the church choir until the 9th grade. My first experience of rituals and the sacred occurred as an altar boy when at the moment of transubstantiation I rang the bells for Fr. Walsh as he lifted up the Eucharist for all to witness. I left home to become a priest in my senior year of high school. But after four years in seminary, I left what seemed for me to be a too intellectually-oriented spirituality for the infinitely more experiential field of Transpersonal Psychology.^{35, 36} The dynamics between my parents and me were often strained after I left home, but their challenges gave me pause and helped give direction to my life as I followed my visions in search of my own life path.

Family Values

Jen was the caretaker of her father and the keeper of her parents’ traditions. This, too, reminded me of my family. Mother brought her aged and demented parents into our home when I was in the eighth grade and we cared for them until their deaths four years later. My wife and I took in Dad at age 89 for seven months when, blind from macular degeneration, his second wife died and he could no longer live in the home he had occupied for 60 years. He moved into a retirement community then. We stopped in to see him as often as we could and brought him to our home every Sunday for the last 10 years of his life.

In fact, Sunday was always family day for my kids when they were growing up. We would begin the day with breakfast then sit around for an hour or so passing a Talking Stick and listening with respect as each of us described the week’s activities and our interests and concerns. We would then write and draw mandalas in our journals and spend the rest of the day outdoors exploring the parks and forests of Virginia. No friends, no technology, no excuses. It wasn’t always easy. I broke the hoop of this tradition the day my son turned 18.

My kids grew up multi-culturally. Solange, their mother, is French Canadian and they had countless opportunities to interact with her French-speaking family and friends from Quebec. We lived in Northern Virginia, the quintessential cultural and racial melting pot. They had many derivative native



experiences growing up. Both were in the YMCA Indian Guide and Indian Princess program in elementary school. I was the Story Teller for the Accotink Federation and the Sachem or Chief of the Shakori Tribe in the Springfield Longhouse. Damien called himself Hawkeye and I was Rising Eagle. Gabrielle was “Running River” in the Kiowa Tribe. I took them on their first vision quests when they were 13 and on many other retreats after that.

Holiday and his daughter’s description of the Navajo culture provided many mirrors for me, provoked many reflections, and highlighted a number of important similarities. We human beings are far more alike than we are different. Every generation builds on the one that comes before. We must help our youth develop their unique talents and abilities. We must find ways to heal the inevitable wounds that come from living. We must use rituals to hold ourselves together as individuals, families, and communities. We must take care of our old folks.

Damien sat next to me during the visit with Holiday. I was proud as he described his interest in becoming a doctor and his basic science research on spinal cord regeneration, the focus of his master’s degree. His introduction was met by Holiday’s keen interest and the group’s respect. Growing up, Damien and his friends also took part in many of my workshops and retreats. Like my daughter he, too, still allows me to help him journey inward and clarify what’s going on when the need arises.

Damien graduated *magna cum laude* in computer graphics and animation from the School of Arts at VCU. A professional videographer since high school, he helped me create 25 psycho-educational documentaries about my work that have aired on public television in Richmond, including one that featured my 95-year-old father called “Reflections: Wisdom of the Ages.”³⁷ While Damien is also not following in my footsteps—he’s into hard science vs. the soft skills of psychology—he certainly understands and respects my work. He was glad to accompany me on this trip and was quite willing to take part in the upcoming Peyote Circle when the opportunity arose.



Damien, videographer

5) When I asked Holiday if he might share a chant with us, his son-in-law piped right up and said that he could not sing “without a shield of protection around him.” “What does *that* mean?” I asked. He said we needed to make a monetary contribution for Holiday to sing. In other words, pass the hat! We were surprised by this demand. Gary had already negotiated a payment for his visit but we could hardly refuse. Holiday needed “protection,” so we would give him some. We pitched in and built a \$200 shield around him so he could sing for us.

The Beautiful Blessing and a chant

“What do you want me to sing about?” he asked. “Since Navajos and whites were together to increase our knowledge of one another,” I said, “how about a song for uniting the people?” Holiday paused, closed his eyes, drew himself together, and began to sing. His wife and daughter, son, and son-in-law all joined in. He made many gestures along the way, the meaning of which seemed variously obvious or obscure. When the singing was over, he said he would do the Beautiful Blessing ceremony for us. He sent his son to the van for his pouch of corn pollen. Holding it in his hands, he showed us how to take a pinch of this yellow powder, sprinkle it over our heads to clarify our thinking, touch it with our tongues to heal and make our organs healthy, face east, and release the rest of our pinch from floor to ceiling so we would walk a true and good path in our lives. Slowly and reverently we each took our turn doing so. It was a reverent and moving experience.

Later Gary, Ming and I spoke about this “protection” thing. The demand for money was surprising and it was couched in a language and maybe a tradition we did not understand. How was money some kind of protection for Holiday and from what? It would have been rude to ask at the time,

but the question lingered. A simple monetary request would have been ok with everyone we were sure. The Navajo people are understandably an extremely poor and cautious people and we were lucky to have them join us. A White rancher who lived in the canyon near Gary and raised Churro sheep, the kind the Navajo prize, told me she also promised to give Holiday one of her sheep in gratitude for his visit. He was clearly happy with his gifts and we were grateful for all he shared with us.

A 35-year-old Mexican man named Emile * sat among us. He had come to Gary's ranch from Pat's place 90 miles away to meet and listen to Holiday. Emile had been a top athlete in Mexico for a number of years and was now in a master's degree program in the states in search of a new life purpose. The Indian Lenny was his current teacher, but he joined us to experience Holiday and see what he had to say.

At the end of our two-hour visit with Holiday, all of a sudden Emile was ready to drive back to Pat's for the Peyote Circle. Damien and I jumped up and caught a ride with him. We drove in silence for awhile to enjoy the afterglow of Holiday's visit and the impact of the Beautiful Blessing. Then we stopped in Cortez for supplies. Without some sort of back support, sitting on the ground all night long in a tipi would be an ordeal in itself. We found a place to buy flat, fold-out stadium seats and we also bought some fruit and juice to enjoy the morning after the ritual. In my backpack was my Native American flute. I thought I might contribute some music during the ritual if Lenny, as Road Chief, allowed it. Damien and I would have to borrow some clothes from Pat though, since having left with Emile in a bit of a hurry we forgot to grab some clothing for a night outdoors.

Fasting

We arrived at Pat's around 7 PM, an hour-and-a-half before the Peyote Circle was to begin. A wonderful meal was waiting for those who gathered at his beautiful country home. A couple of the women participants and Mary *, Pat's wife, had prepared beef stew, potato soup, vegetables, and a dessert for us to eat. Because I had done this ritual many times before, I knew it was a good idea to fast beforehand (PssEIwas). I was not tempted to eat and Damien followed my lead. Earlier, back at Gary and Ming's, a great lunch had been served to the Navajo visitors and guests as well. We hadn't eaten then either.

What's the deal with fasting? Once you get the hang of it, it is not that difficult to do. But a lot of water is important. This ancient, spiritual, cleansing practice breaks the normal, comfort-providing cycle of eating. It empties the belly and helps focus attention on things that are going on in the present, in the "here and now." I had learned to fast as a Catholic seminarian. It was part of the Huichol way. I fasted two days before my first Peyote Circle in the spring of 1975. In December that same year, after my marriage fell apart, I fasted for much of a cleansing, 40-day solo quest in the wilderness of Quebec in a cabin owned by Martha Crampton (1933-2009), the director of the Canadian Institute of Psychosynthesis in Montreal.³⁸ I trained with her in this transpersonal approach to psychotherapy for three years before moving to San Francisco for an additional year of training at the California Institute of Psychosynthesis in San Francisco.³⁹ Simultaneously, I earned my Masters degree in psychology under Greenway.

Fasting was a practice Greenway also encouraged before Peyote Circles. At the end of my master's degree program in May, 1978, 11 women and men and I accompanied him on a two-week WVQ into the Yolla Bolly-Middle Eel Wilderness in north-central California. We took no food or equipment with us, expecting to encounter early spring conditions and live on emerging mountain flora. What we got was late winter conditions and snow but that's another story all together. We lasted 10 days. At the end of the quest we did a Peyote Circle to celebrate our survival. Following that, for years I regularly fasted on Tuesdays. A half-dozen times in the '80's I ate nothing during week-long backpacking quests I led in the mountains of Virginia. I have always greatly enjoyed the process.



**Spirit allies:
Shedding black snake
and brown bear**
Damien Brown

A year before our trip to Colorado, before Damien began his master's program at VCU, I took him on a three-day quest into the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia. At Southwood, the 250-acre mountain property of my friend, Donn Smith, I introduced my son to fasting. We subsisted on water and one 'stolen' watermelon from Donn's garden. Damien found two "Spirit Allies" on the land that inspired and encouraged him to continue on his educational journey. So, as we prepared for this Peyote Circle, we chose not to eat.

Peyote is a difficult substance to eat and swallow anyway, and it has a simply awful taste. Furthermore, the cactus is full of alkaloids that make it hard to digest. Projectile vomiting is often the consequence for the unlucky or the unprepared. If the body is not busy digesting food, however, the mescaline is more quickly metabolized, hastening the onset of altered states. Against my careful advice, poor Emile ate both times, at the homes of Gary and Pat. He threw his guts up outside the tipi later that night. A little more about that later.

EXPLORATION

People gather

Lenny and Pat were cautious about discussing the Peyote Circle with others I was told, and careful about whom they invited to attend. Just as Holiday and certain members of the Navajo community disapproved of using peyote for spiritual purposes, so did many Whites. As we were waiting to leave Pat's home for the ritual, several rifle shots were heard off in the distance. It spooked everyone for a minute but they did not continue and we all relaxed. Other people showed up at the house and at 8:00 PM, by car and truck caravan, Pat, Linda *, Becky *, John *, Damien, and I drove a quarter of a mile toward the forest behind Pat's home and around the base of a large hill to a sheltered cove in amongst the trees. Drumming could be heard as we arrived and dark descended.



The Road Chief and his crew of Native American helpers--six men and two middle-aged women--waited for us inside a large tipi 30' in diameter. I never knew what group of Indians the rest of them belonged. I felt excited, open, and ready for the night's experience and I was thrilled to have Damien with me. It was an incredible opportunity to share with him an experience that had meant so much to me in the past.

Damien felt nervous, not so much about the Peyote Circle itself and its unknown effects, but about being among actual Native Americans for the first time. He feared he might be intruding in this experience or out of place somehow, maybe even unwelcome. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

The Road Chief greeted us casually as we stepped into the tipi. He was a dark-skinned, soft-spoken man of medium build, missing his front teeth. A large fire burned in the middle of the circle. I checked with him and got the ok to bring my Native American flute in with me. He said he would let me know when I could share some music with it during the night.

The Peyote Circle takes place from sundown to sunup. The purpose was explained to me 37 years ago by the Huichol Don Caterino. Individuals and communities fall into periods of darkness from time to time. This ritual was intended to help honor, explore, and transform that darkness. With great intensity participants open their hearts and souls with peyote, drum and chant, pray, sing out, and release the dark forces within them and seek visions of life renewed symbolized by the rising of the sun.

The Road Chief told us we could sit wherever we wanted to. By tradition he sat in the west, watching for the light to return at dawn through the opening of the tipi in the east. He sat on a

comfortable stack of couch cushions,. Navajo Harry * sat to his right. Then Pat, Linda, Becky, John, and three other Navajo men. On the other side of the tipi opening sat the two Navajo women on folding chairs. Emile opened his flat stadium chair and sat on the ground next to them. Beside him Damien and I opened our chairs and sat down. To my left sat Navajo Dan* and then it was back to the Road Chief. The circle was complete. Fifteen souls were about to “journey to the spirit world.”

Navajo Dan had driven 150 miles to contribute to the event. He brought with him a ceramic water drum on the top of which he tightly tied an animal skin. When beaten with a wooden stick, this drum produced a powerfully loud percussion. He would play the drum for the Road Chief whenever he sang and for all the other Native Americans whenever they did. One of the Indian women was Dan’s mother. I did not discover the identity of the other Navajo woman until the end of the night. By usual tradition in the American Native Church, women never sing in the Peyote Circle.

The Peyote Circle begins

Like the conductor of an orchestra, the Road Chief directs all activities during this ritual. This is important for the sake of consistency. Like the Catholic Mass and other religious services, the process is routine and predictable for those who know it well. It follows a careful order. The Road Chief decides who fills the other ritual roles and when they get enacted; when it is time for chanting or silence; when someone can share a special song or prayer; when as a group participants pray, stand, leave the tipi, etc. But he is also in an altered state, so it takes experience, confidence, and skill to well direct a very fluid experience.

Our Road Chief formally welcomed us and told us how to conduct ourselves. We could sit, lie down, or stand any way we chose during the night. He told us we could leave the tipi any time we needed to, but advised us never to come between a singer and the fire. This informality was new to me. The way I learned to do it from Don Caterino and Greenway was much more strict about participant behavior. One had to sit upright all night long so as not to disrespect the medicine, not to fall asleep or miss others’ songs, not to disturb the experience others were having. One always had to ask permission to do anything unusual or unique, for example, to leave the tipi when necessity called or simply for a breath of fresh air. I liked the Road Chief’s gentle approach from the start, however. I imagined it would make the night less demanding and a bit more comfortable if perhaps a bit less structured. I had no idea what the two White women and the other white man knew about the ritual, but I knew Emile and Damien were unfamiliar with it.

The Road Chief invited anyone to speak who felt they had something to say. Two people shared their thoughts about the night, then I did. I thanked Pat and the Road Chief for inviting us to participate. I expressed my joy at being able to share it with my son. I thanked everyone for choosing to be a part of the journey, and I said I looked forward to sharing it with them.



Peyote cactus

The Road Chief explained that it had become difficult to acquire peyote because of the drug wars in Mexico and the problem with illegals trying to get into the border states. Finding this small, round cactus in the high desert of north central Mexico had become dangerous, and those who acquired it took great risks. The peyote had been made into a dark brown tea and was held in a half-filled gallon glass jar. He invited us to drink as little or as much as we wanted to whenever the jar passed around, but assured us that none of us had to drink anything if we did not want to. The Road Chief took a drink and the jar passed in a clockwise manner from person to person around the circle. Then he placed it in a special spot close to the fire. We were told we could drink from it again any time we wanted to. No one spontaneously did so the entire night.

Ritual roles, drumming and chanting

The other ritual roles included Fire Man, Blessings Man, Water Man, and Food Bearer. These

roles understandably were filled with the other Native Americans who were present. Fire Tender was a difficult and important role to fill. To pay attention to the blazing element of fire while under the mind-altering effects of mescaline is a challenging task. To stand up on quivering legs, leave the tipi, pick up, haul in, and carefully place logs in the middle of the group so that the fire is neither too small nor too hot for participants requires special attention, commitment, and skill. I was Fire Man in my third Peyote Circle 32 years ago. I felt appreciation and respect for ours all night long.



The Road Chief began each round of singing. He held a rattle in his right hand and a two-and-a-half-foot-long staff with a bundle of feathers and sage in his left. When he sang, Drummer Dan to his right beat the drum with a strong, thin stick. When the Road Chief finished singing he passed the rattle and other objects to his left and took the drum from his right, ready to play for the next singer. The rattle, stick, and drum passed in a clockwise manner like this all night long. When the rattle and stick came to someone, s/he could sing a song or not and pass them on. The drummer followed the rhythm of the rattle as closely as possible to act as accompaniment to the singer as s/he searched for a song.

Stress causes a tremendous amount of illness and suffering in our culture.⁴⁰ It results from troublesome patterns of thinking and behaving, negative emotions, unintended consequence, and circumstance. Repression brings illness and expression brings health. The trash and debris that builds up in our pathways of consciousness imperils our authenticity and impedes the flow of love and spirit in living. The use of peyote can loosen the boundaries of consciousness and flush these pathways out so that that which is repressed or hidden in the unconscious can enter awareness, be expressed, and released through song.

This is not easy. As with psycholytic, low-dose LSD psychotherapy, one must learn how to relax and allow awareness to drift into a state that might be called a waking dream. Religious ceremonies and spiritual services throughout time have used music as a trance-porting device to help people disconnect from worries and concerns, release their tension, and experience a sense of the sacred. This ancient singing process is something quite different. In the Peyote Circle there are chants sung with others as in any church service that provide a powerful sense of unity. But it is difficult to sing a unique song, to put spontaneous words and tunes together to express thoughts, feelings, images, visions. It requires a willingness to cross a threshold, to surrender the defensive structures of the ego, to let go of concerns about others' judgements or what they might be thinking for this to happen. It is an active technique, truly a whole brain experience involving body, feelings, mind, and spirit. The songs can be simple and superficial, of course, but they can also be surprising, complex, emotionally releasing, and genuinely healing.

Before Damien and I arrived at Pat's ranch for the Peyote Circle, he told Lenny that I might be a singer because of my extensive experience with the ritual in the past. I was really looking forward to finding some songs and sharing them with Damien and the group during the night.

Round One. Gratitude, taking life seriously, Damien an Elder in training, Even the Eagle Falls

After the Road Chief sang his song, he passed the objects to Navajo Harry who would be our Blessings Man. His role was to share thoughts of gratitude and thanksgiving twice during the night so that no matter what other spaces people wandered into, these levels of energy would be present and felt. In broken English, Blessings Man thanked us all for coming; for sharing our lives, energies, and spirits with the Navajos; for caring enough to take part in this adventure to help unite the White and Indian cultures. His words were sweet and kind, heartfelt, and welcoming. They helped me relax and brought tears to my eyes. They also helped Damien relax and settle in. Then he opened up and sang a Navajo chant. The Road Chief drummed for him and after a bit the other Indians joined in. Our mental "set" was good and the "setting" was outstanding. The canoe was sound, river was good, and we were on our way.

The rattle passed to Pat. Having known the Road Chief for five years or so, he was probably familiar with Navajo chants because the song he sang sounded just like the ones the Native Americans were singing. It's just that none of them joined him in it. Maybe he made it up, maybe the Indians do not sing with Whites, I could not know. His voice was strong though, and the song was enjoyable. Linda, Becky, and John passed the rattle, staff, and drum and they went quickly to the next Indian. Drummer Dan left his seat beside me and sat, one by one, next to his Indian brothers to drum loudly on the water drum for them as they sang. One had a beautiful tenor voice. One was a powerful baritone. One sang with a soft reed-like voice. Each chant was really long and was supported by the nearly deafening sound of the water drum. The Navajo women passed the sacred objects along as did Emile and Damien and so in time they came to me.

I closed my eyes and shook the rattle to disconnect from what was going on in the tipi and let the rhythm of the rattle carry me away. Damien beat the water drum in rhythm as I sought my vision and my song. I sang of my gratitude to Pat, to the Road Chief, and to the Navajos for letting me experience again this wonderful ritual. I sang that it was my first circle, my 20th circle, a mystery, an exciting adventure, an opportunity to journey in spirit again. I sang of my joy at having Damien next to me. I sang that I would soon enough be gone, that he was in training here, that one day he, too, would be an Elder and this was a chance for him to experience and learn something of the Old Ways. I sang that it would be up to him to bring into his world and into future generations the sparks and embers from this fire, these people, from generations gone by. My heart was full and my voice was strong. When I was done, Drummer Dan sang and the round was over.

After a brief pause, the Road Chief spoke to us as spiritual mentor and guide. He had a little trouble with English but his words were slow and thoughtful. He asked us to take our lives seriously, to treasure every moment, to always give our best effort to everything we did, to care for one another, and to work actively to join people together wherever we found ourselves. Then he introduced tobacco into the ritual. He explained that by smoking tobacco our spirits would merge with the plant life, co-mingle with the smoke from the fire as it exited the hole at the top of the tipi, and be one with the heavens above. He never gave another reason or explanation for the use of tobacco. He passed around a pouch of tobacco and rolling papers. We were to roll our own.

The Fire Man lit a ceremonial stick from the blazing fire with which to light our cigarettes and we passed it around. We were told that after we smoked our cigarettes we were to get up and put their stubs in the pile of orange, glowing coals he had scraped from the fire with a long, bent metal bar and carefully piled in front of the Road Chief. I had not noticed there was a pile of coals before this moment. It seemed the coals had an important but unknown significance. During the night the Road Chief said a few things in the Navajo language and the Indians did a few things that had special meanings to them but which were incomprehensible to me. The Road Chief sat staring at the coals in front of him with rapt attention. Several people got up and stuck their cigarette stubs into the coals then stood looking at them. This seemed odd to me. Curious, I asked the Road Chief what was going on? He invited me to stand up and take a look myself.

To be enchanted in the present, one needs to let go of the past. It was an hour-and-a-half into the night. The mescaline had heightened my awareness and my senses and I was certainly enchanted, fully present. Fanned by the cool night air sweeping in through the opening of the tipi, the embers and their ashes pulsed and glowed with a radiance and life of their own. Carefully I stood up to get a better look and was stunned to see a large, brilliant eagle glowing in the coals. "Right on the quarter!" the Road Chief exclaimed. I had no idea what he meant. In a moment I realized he meant "Right on the money!" The design was perfect. It was truly transfixing.

There was then a lull and a few moments of silence, but the silence had depth and texture to it. I remembered as a child staring at the wall paper in my bedroom at night when the lights were out. The designs, barely seen, took on a three dimensionality I did not understand but which carried me off to sleep. The people on the other side of the fire seemed close and yet, at the same time, a million miles away. The fire had a life of its own. Inspired by the blazing coals and exquisite eagle I had seen, I asked

the Road Chief if I could quote a poem I had written after my first Peyote Circle in 1975. He granted me permission. To the sound of the crackling fire, for my fellow peyotists sitting up or stretched out on the ground with their faces illuminated by the light, I shared my naming poem.

Even the Eagle falls.
The great winged explorer of nature's heights,
opportunist of every rising current,
falls, at last, back to the earth to rot.
Even the Eagle falls back to the earth to rot.

In his moment, what does he know?
He sees the sunrise hours before the dwellers of the valley
and feels its penetrating light long after shadows cross the land.
He knows the slopes and where the mountains truly touch the sky
when others only know the most apparent summits.
He breathes the purest air and, in his travels,
learns where the fragrant flowers bloom.
He knows where the kelp ends and where the water deepens.
He can see the mountains and the ocean,
the desert and the fertile valleys all in one great sweeping vision.
He rides the winds, alone, the master of his life.

Even the Eagle falls.
The great winged explorer of nature's heights,
opportunist of every rising current
falls, at last, back into the arms of Mother Earth
to give lift to the ants and beetles
but in his moment who can estimate the value
of the things he knows?

Oh Great Bird, I am your Brother!
I am Rising Eagle.



Eagle Mask
Michael Brown

Round Two. Group consciousness, ecstatic energy, the Dolphin's Lament

The Road Chief sang a long chant and his fellow Native Americans joined in. The Blessings Man sang. Pat sang another strong, solo, Navajo-like song and passed the sacred objects on. Linda passed them and Becky sang a song about her daughter. John passed the objects and it was back to the Navajos. Emile stood up and left the tipi. A few minutes later he could be heard retching out in the dark alone.



"Remembrance"
© 2012 Solange Brown

In all my life I have never heard or felt chanting as powerful as I did that night. I led many a songfest and hootanany as a folk musician. With fellow seminarians I often sang Gregorian chants. Looking into Eastern spiritual practices, I chanted for hours in satsang with Baba Muktananda exploring kundalini yoga. But when the Native American men took their turns to guide us in our trances, their chants seemed to echo up from the very earth itself. With the incessant beating of the water drum, each man would begin a song and the others would soon join in and create a strong group consciousness that simply overwhelmed me. As I listened to their music I had a fantasy that if I ever met them on the field of battle this spirit would be unconquerable. Indeed, although poor materialistically, the rich Navajo culture has survived more than 1000 years in the face of extreme environmental challenges and in spite of countless tragedies and attempts at conquest by the Spanish and White cultures.

Of course I know no Navajo, but soon I began to sing along with them, loud and strong, picking up the cadence and the melodies of their songs. I felt utterly unselfconscious. I was one with the music. It rose up from the depths in me as if I had sung it all my life. I clapped my hands in rhythm or in syncopation depending on the moment. My body vibrated, danced, and moved to the music as I sat on the flat stadium seat I brought. It tingled like it does after swimming a mile, after a long session of holotropic breathwork,⁴¹ after an experience of kundalini. I was full of energy and I gave it spontaneous, joyful direction. The river was high and I was shooting down the rapids! Damien sat upright next to me with closed eyes, quietly engaged in his own inner visions.

The Navajo women passed the sacred objects to Emile. He passed them on to my son. Damien passed them on to me and took up the water drum. I asked the Road Chief if I could play my flute instead of singing and he said it would be ok. The moon had just arisen in the east and filled the tipi opening huge and white. The Navajo men were sitting upright to the left of it. The Navajo women sat on their chairs to the right. I began to play the flute. I marveled at my ability to remember music I had created and with trembling fingers played it perfectly. The song was called "The Dolphin's Lament."⁴² It is a slow melody intended to express the fantasy of a dolphin lost at sea, separated from her pod after a great storm, longing to find her kin and connect again. With variations on the tune I played for about five minutes. It filled the space with soft, sweet music.



High Spirits flute

Round Three. Suffering, water, healing, a love song

At the beginning of round three the Road Chief passed the tobacco around again. We each rolled a cigarette, lit it with a ceremonial stick provided by the Fire Man, smoked it, and placed our butts in the heap of glowing coals. I stood up once again to put mine out and was amazed to see fashioned in the coals a brilliant, glowing heart. The talent to create these images seemed incredible given the fact that the Fire Man was also under the influence of peyote. These designs seemed to show a deep respect for the Road Chief, a reverence that surely seemed warranted given the quality of his presence and all he lent to the experience. Lenny was a real Medicine Man.

With a kind, empathic voice, the Road Chief then spoke to us about suffering. He said we needed to learn how to share our suffering and pain with one another, not skulk away or hide it. People are too isolated and alone in the modern world, he said. I thought of Emile's leaving the tipi and being sick outside awhile before. In a Peyote Circle, one of the duties of the Fire Man is to scrape up and remove vomit from the circle whenever one got sick. Sickness is expected and supported in native cultures. Suffering is part of the human condition, the Road Chief said. Sharing it makes us stronger as individuals and as communities. Learn from the Navajos and this ceremony how to support and love one another, he implored.

His words sent me cascading into the realm of sadness as I looked back down the long tunnel of time. My first wife, Corinne, and I took a 10-speed bicycle trip for our honeymoon. We enjoyed two wonderful weeks pedaling our way from Baltimore to Casper, Wyoming. On the 15th day of our trip she was run down by a tractor trailer truck. She survived, but it took a year for her to recover and she left the marriage to leave the trauma behind. Devastated, I survived by going to Esalen, doing my first vision quest, finding Rising Eagle, and committing my life to being a guide for others in the process of transformation. I remembered all the cities I lived in and moved from in 23 years of pursuing training in the healing arts: Alexandria, Amherst, Montreal, San Francisco, Charlottesville, Springfield, Williamsburg, Richmond. Each time I left behind friends, colleagues, and a business I created. Each time I had to start over again from scratch with nothing but confidence, my passion for learning, and a desire to help to others in the deepest possible way. I remembered being present for my father at his

brave and lucid dying.

It was about midnight then and Blessings Man stood up. He spent a few minutes giving thanks for all those who had come before us, for the earth and all creation, for his own humble life.



Rain squall

Comforting, calming, thoughtful words. It was time for another ritual role to be filled; the bringing in of water. In my past experiences water was always shared quite strictly and ritually but the Road Chief had been casual when we arrived about having our own water bottles to drink from during the night. He asked Water Man to get it. Sitting close to the opening, an Indian exited the tipi and came back with a large bucket of water and a cup from which to drink. We were instructed to drink not only to quench our thirst but also to honor this element so essential to the Navajo people in this dry and arid land. Navajos raise corn and sheep and live on an annual rainfall of about 13 inches a year. By contrast, 44 inches of precipitation falls each year in Virginia. I drank from the bucket of cool water not only out of need but also with appreciation and respect and with an exquisite

sense of its wet sensuality.

The night sky had been filled with stars when we arrived at the tipi. Now a bank of clouds passed overhead. Earlier in the week, as Gary and Ming led us as we explored the mesas and canyons around their ranch, I had seen rain showers fall from random pockets of clouds onto widely scattered areas of the vast and open countryside. As if on cue it began to rain. For about ten minutes the water sprinkling down from the hole above merged with the smoke rising up from the fire and created a translucent beam of light in the middle of the tipi. It was a wonderful coincidence and visually spectacular. It seemed like magic to me in my altered mind, as if Tonenili, the Navajo God of Water, had come to bless our gathering.

I suffered an injury to muscles in my right side working out at the gym two years before this trip. In spite of many tests, doctors found no cure. It had been a chronic problem. Sometime during the night the pain went away either because of my shifting positions on the flat stadium seat, the movements I enjoyed in concert with the chanting, or because of the liberating state of consciousness I was in. I needed to stand up and go outside to stretch and relieve myself. After the Road Chief sang, I got up and walked out into the cool forest air. My legs felt like jelly, quite unsteady. Pat came out behind me to freshen up. He complimented me on my song, thanked me for playing the flute, and said my contributions were helping to move the energy along. I had only met him just before the ceremony. I was glad to get his feedback but this brief encounter was slightly awkward stoned and in the dark. After a few minutes we ducked low, staggered back into the tipi, and took our places across the fire from one another.

The Road Chief asked for the jar of peyote tea and reminded us we were free to drink from it or not as we chose. He took a swig and passed it on. When it came to us, Damien and I drank again. The jar had been sitting close to the fire for several hours and the liquid was now quite warm. It tasted awful to begin with and the heat didn't help at all. I took six or eight large swallows as I had the first round and passed the jar along. Shortly thereafter I did feel a little queasy. In past peyote circles I had thrown up but not this time. In any case I would have gladly risked nausea to enhance the depth of my experience with the mescaline. I did not get sick.

The Road Chief passed the tobacco pouch around again and encouraged us to smoke. Pat wondered out loud if maybe the tobacco itself had in it some mind-altering substance. It was an interesting question because the taste of the Peyote tea was different from how I had remembered it from the past, but the question was not addressed. I had not smoked in about 10 years so when it came my turn to smoke again I passed the pouch to Drummer Dan. When everyone was finished smoking they stood up and put their cigarette butts into the glowing coals.

Another half-hour or so of Navajo chanting and the sacred objects passed to Emile. Encouraged by the Road Chief to openly share our suffering with one another, he stood up, took the staff, and began a powerful psycho-dramatic dance. He shook the rattle fast and hard, clearly expressing anger. He did not sing, but shouted more than spoke, in passionate Spanish about a woman or his wife. I could not tell to whom he referred unfamiliar with Spanish. It was a riveting release and went on for several minutes. It must have been helpful because when Emile sat back down again he seemed spent and quite relaxed.

I so wanted to hear Damien sing but again, this is not an easy process for the uninitiated. Each time the rattle and stick came to him he passed them on to me. Each time I hesitated to take them from him beseeching him with my eyes to give it a try. In the third round I sang "I have a love song!" I sang of my love for Damien, for my wife, Solange, and daughter, Gabrielle. I expressed why I loved them. Solange and Gabrielle were far away from this mountain I sang, from this tipi, this ritual, this night, but they were there in my mind and heart. I longed for them to be there physically, to take part in this wonderful experience with us. It is easy to take people for granted when you see them all the time, I sang. But when they are gone their absence is poignant, the missing palpable. Would I ever see them again? If I did, would I be a different man because of this experience? It seemed I surely would be.

I looked up at the smoke hole and noticed that there were nine tall poles holding up the tipi. I looked around and noticed 15 people huddled safely under this web of support. I remembered hearing at a lecture we attended with Gary and Ming about the Navajo myth of Spider Woman. She was first to weave her web of the universe, and she taught the Navajo to create beauty in their lives. She also taught them to spread the "Beauty Way" teaching of balance within the mind, body, and soul to all whom they met. I recalled the Beautiful Blessing that Holiday had shared and how that group had come together through it. I imagined the poles combining with the tipi to make a giant spider web that connected us all together, uniting earth and sky, Damien and me, Navajo, White, and Spanish people. I sang of all this with love and appreciation, then passed the rattle on to Drummer Dan.

Round Four. Hopes and dreams, another flute song

The Road Chief left the tipi and was gone for several minutes. Then I heard four small, soft, high pitched, notes outside which, I assumed from past experience, were made with an eagle bone whistle. He was enacting an important part of the ritual, the blessing of the four directions, but its purpose was not explained to the group. Like the Catholic Mass, there are standard protocols followed when conducting the Peyote Circle that are understood by those who regularly participate in it. When he returned, the Road Chief once again spoke to us as spiritual guide. He asked us to think about our futures, to envision ourselves happy and successful and doing the things we really love to do. He asked us to imagine having anything and everything we wanted or needed. He exhorted us to express our hopes and dreams out loud. All at once the tipi exploded with a startling cacophony of English, Hopi, Navajo, and Spanish.

What did I wish for? For more time with my family. In 38 years of self-employment, this has always been my deep desire. Beyond that I could think of nothing else I wanted so I expressed gratitude all for that I already had: for the blessing of eight hours' sleep each night, for my body kept strong by regular exercise, for my family and friends, for the 25' x 85' garden behind my house where I raise our food, for the deer I kill each fall for meat to feed us, for the privilege of a thriving counseling practice. All of this was spoken loudly, my little voice lost in the chorus of humanity. So many prayers, all different, all heart-felt, all important. It went on for quite a while then gradually died down and the tipi became silent once again.



Indian corn

Blessings Man sang, then Pat. Linda, Becky, and John passed and then the three Native American

men sang. Their singing seemed to go on forever. The water drum pounded away. By now fatigued, I found the music assaultive and somewhat overbearing. I had only heard one song sung in English that night and I began to feel empty and alone. Staff and rattle stopped at the Indian women and there was a lull and, to my great relief, a period of silence. I asked the Road Chief if I could play the flute again, probably to comfort myself but also to add some soft and sweet music to the moment. It was, of course, up to him to allow me to play or not. I was a guest in his house, in his tipi, in their circle. I felt slightly scolded as he told me kindly to wait my turn. In a few moments the Indian women passed the rattle and staff to Emile. He passed them to Damien and he passed them on to me.

I was both full and empty. With a strange sense of depersonalization, feeling both in and out of my body, I played my flute for a second time. No particular melody came to mind. My fingers glided past the holes as if by themselves. The drifting music was enchanting and uplifting. I was happy to play, hear, and share it. When I was done I passed the rattle and staff to Drummer Dan, who sang with his fellow Native Americans before passing them back to the Road Chief.

Round Five. The circle ends, food.

The hurricane came, inundated the landscape, and washed away everything familiar. Mescaline inundated my synapses and flooded my brain. I was transfixed by everything that was going on. The Indians sang powerfully and the water drum drummed. In multiple dimensions. The flames of the fire danced and undulated. Sensuously. The Road Chief passed around the pouch of tobacco, but again I did not smoke. The participants put their cigarettes out into coals heaped into the shape of a huge, glowing star. The Road Chief asked for the water to be brought in again. The bucket passed around and came to me. I was captivated by what I saw. What *is* water, really? What is wetness, thirst? I dipped the cup into the bucket and the water rippled in its dark, gray bottom. I lifted the cup to my dry lips, watched the liquid cascade off the side of the cup, and plummet like a waterfall back into the deep well. I listened to its sloshing sound with rapt attention, drank, and passed the bucket on.

At a certain moment Damien passed the staff and rattle on to me. He had signaled in the previous round that he would try next time but did not. I understood and accepted this but honestly I was disappointed. I wanted him to sing. I *needed* him to sing. Then I began to worry. I was afraid I had taken too much place in the circle during the night. Had all my sharing overpowered him somehow and made it tough for him to find his voice, his song? I wanted to create a space, a sort of vacuum so that he could take the risk, find the courage and ability, and sing on the next round. Without singing or offering music again I passed the rattle and stick along. To my great surprise, when they got to the Road Chief, he said the circle was over.

It was about 4:30 A.M., an hour before dawn, an hour-and-a-half before sunrise. In every other circle I had sat in or had led, the ritual did not end until the sun could actually be seen rising in the east. Why this break in tradition? I never knew. It would have been rude to ask. The Road Chief asked that food be brought in and a Native American woman went outside and returned with bowls of corn mash, canned fruit, and a boneless Spam-like meat. Pat later told me she was the Road Chief's wife. She seemed very far away at the front of the tipi and her voice was soft and hard to hear. She said mother earth sustains us and we must all protect her. She thanked us for respecting and taking part in the ritual. She thanked the person who brought the flute music to the circle. The bowls of food passed around. With trembling hands, clearly in an altered state and not at all hungry in spite of having fasted 24 hours, I ate a little from each bowl then passed them on.

INTEGRATION

Bigfoot

When everyone had eaten, we all stumbled out of the tipi into the night. The stars hung so brightly in the dark night it seemed as though I could pluck them from the sky and hold them in my hand. I greeted Damien but we had little to say. No thoughts came to mind and we were still very much

in a heightened state of awareness. It felt like I was walking in a dream.

I had had no contact with the Native Americans before the circle and wanted to interact with them a bit, particularly with Lenny, but did not know how. They were sitting on the wood pile talking amongst themselves in a language I did not understand. Pat stood next to Lenny so I walked up and asked him what they were talking about. To my surprise, he said they were talking about Bigfoot. Apparently there had been sightings in the area lately. In fact, back at Gary's ranch 90 miles away, a group of Navajos had stopped to buy some hay when I was there and I had helped them load their truck. For half an hour or so afterward they, too, spoke of the recent Bigfoot sightings. Pat told me there was a long tradition of sightings and interactions with Bigfoot among the Navajos. He told me he himself had tracked one in the deep snow one winter but then, for no reason whatsoever, the tracks just simply stopped. He said many speculated that Bigfoot was an alien or trans-dimensional being of some sort and had long favored the Navajos. The ancient petroglyphs seen on Ming Adam's video depict many other-worldly trans-human figures seen on the rock walls in the canyons around their ranch.⁴³



Petroglyph in McElmo Canyon
© 2009 G. Adams

Pat told me there would be a meal for us up at his house at dawn so with nothing else to do Damien and I lay down on the floor of the tipi and rested by the fire until it was time to leave. At dawn I rode in one of the cars back up to the house. Damien stayed with the Indians to help them take down the tipi then returned with them to the house and shared in the feast. Thought I was still not hungry, I ate a bit but engaged in little conversation since the only person I knew was Damien and I was still disinclined to talk.

Pat and Mary showed us where we could rest until Gary and Ming came to pick us up later that afternoon. We laid down and rested sleeplessly for several hours in a mind-conscious-but-empty-of-content mode. In the afternoon Damien and I got up and rejoined the group. The Indians had left. Pat, Mary, and their kids, Linda, Becky, and John were sitting around interacting casually, talking among themselves. I suggested we sit together at their dining room table and talk about our experiences, which we did. Responding to their questions, tears came to my eyes as I got in touch with my regret around having had to give up using these empowering tools in my healing practice so long ago. I shared my background with the group and felt their resonance and respect.

On display in Pat and Mary's home were gorgeous geodes and communities of colorful crystals of many different kinds. We examined them with great delight. They shared artifacts from other cultures--some common, some sacred, all carefully preserved--that they had found or had been given in their travels. They told us their histories, their secrets, and significance. In time, Gary and Ming came to get Damien and me. We said our fond goodbyes and drove back to Cortez.

Corndala

On the way to the airport as Damien and I prepared to leave Cortez, I asked Gary to stop at a local feed store where I bought a pack of rare/traditional Anasazi Flour corn seeds. On the plane trip back to Richmond, I wrote extensively in my journal about all that had taken place. In the spring I planted the corn in my garden and nurtured it through the summer growing season. In the fall when the corn was dry, I shucked and fashioned it into a colorful "corndala." The Huichols call such an object a *Nierika*, a focus of energy and power, a portal through time. My corndala hangs on the wall above the desk in my counseling office, an item rich in significance to me that all my clients see but about which few inquire.



"Corndala"

Symbols are open to interpretation and can mean different things at different levels. On one level, each ear of corn represents one year I have lived in Richmond, its seeds the people I have touched. One seed/one ear/400 new seeds/souls each (y)ear! At a deeper level it reminds me of my time with Damien at Gary and Ming's ranch, Canyon of the Ancients, and all that I learned about the Anastazi Indians who lived and loved and disappeared from Mesa Verde eight centuries ago. When I glance up at the corn dala from my chair I remember the poles of the tipi and we peyotists huddled in its center. I recall the pounding of the water drum and the timeless Native American chants. I remember how ecstatic my body felt dancing, clapping, and singing along with them. I hear the gentle voice of the Road Chief exhorting me to live fully, to share my suffering with others, to express my hopes and dreams out loud. And I give thanks for those in the past who in their need and wisdom created the healing ritual of the Peyote Circle.

My Beautiful Blessing

To build my practice, since 1991 I have gradually been credentialed by 26 insurance companies to do counseling with their members. My secretary, Sharon, has been with me since the start and wrestles with these companies 25 hours a week to get the billing done. I resource myself in many different ways personally to be able to give 100% of my attention 100% of the time to every client whom I meet. I am in my office from 9:00 A.M. to 10:00 P.M. Monday through Friday and average 40 hours of direct counseling a week. The phone rings and I schedule a new appointment with delight. I am genuinely interested, connect authentically, and employ techniques and methods appropriate to the issues at hand. When a client fully engages in the process there is a significant flash of insight or imagination, intuition or inspiration that radiates into the community, and a child or adult, couple or family, moves through trauma and crisis from darkness into light. This is my Beautiful Blessing.

I have a wide menu of options from which to choose. There is the weekly 50-minute counseling hour, a Thursday evening women's group, an occasional retreat. Sometimes though, when I am lucky, a client comes with the need, the time, has developed the trust, and can afford to take a longer journey into spirit and we work together for two or three hours at a time, maybe for a day or a weekend, go on a vision quest.

Important, life changing experiences do not happen easily, quickly, or by themselves. PssEIwas! The trip I took with Damien to Colorado only lasted five days. It happened nearly two years ago. It awakened a lifetime of reflections and has taken nine weekends to document in writing. It takes a little while to tell a good story.

For my son and daughter and all who follow, *my* final words come from the chorus of a song I wrote:

*All the flowers of all the tomorrows are found in the seeds of today.*⁴⁴

Travel deep and far, my friend.

Michael Brown

Easter, 2012



Two worlds I see.
 Earth and Spirit join in me
 that I with love may bless all men.
 Michael Brown

Author

Michael H. Brown is President of Counseling and Human Resources Consulting, P.C., in Richmond, Virginia. He received his Ed. S. in Professional Counseling from the College of William and Mary in Virginia in 1990, became a Licensed Professional Counselor in 1991, became a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in 1998, and was granted the status of Diplomate in Clinical Hypnotherapy in 2008. He is past President of the Virginia Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling.

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Appendix

IN CONCERT WITH THE NATURAL LAW

To honor my father, Jay Brown (1909-2009)

1/5/93

Two men went out on a winter hunt, a father and his son.
It was a yearly ritual of renewal that needed to be done
for differences and distance, age, memories and words
often disconnected them and made their heart link blur.

The younger man drove 100 miles early that Sunday morn,
from Richmond to Alexandria where his own life had begun,
then silently with his father to Cambridge, Maryland and the blind
to set out 40 decoys and with hope some luck to find.

It's a funny thing, this thing called luck for which so many search
through costume, makeup, influence, in gambling halls and church.
Through his life the elder taught his son to place his bet
where this story points: "The harder you work, the luckier you get."

"We'll place the geese in two groups on the water. The ducks go in the front,"
the father said with authority. His son would only grunt
for about many things they argued if he shared his point of view.
Letting his father call the shots was the wisest thing to do.

For in skeet shooting competition the old man was a champ--
Captain of the excellent Virginia's Veteran's camp.
He was a proven expert on the range and in the field
and in time his son had learned to follow all his leads.

Still, strange things happen out in nature, things you can't control
like tides and wind and how you drift when you're in a boat.
The son knew they'd have to cooperate to realize this plan
and before too long, like the elements, they were working hand in hand.

With ease and strength and expertise the son worked the oars
while skillfully his father kept an eye toward the shore.
He untied each decoy's string and labored hard to find
its anchored right position 30 yards from the blind.

In an hour or so the decoys floated just as they should be,
an open invitation for all passing wildfowl to see.
To prove the point, just overhead passed a wedge of snow white swan.
Satisfied, to their motel they went to await the dawn.

At 5 a.m. the son, 44, found it easy to arise.
 His father, though, at 83 was slower, no surprise.
 At 6 they ate. At 6:45 as they crept up to the blind,
 300 long necked, Canada geese on the river they did find.

In unison they both crouched down. They both held their breath.
 To get into the blind without a noise would be the test.
 Achieving this, with pounding hearts, through cedar brush they spied
 300 unsuspecting geese, right out of range, swim by!

And there they sat for about an hour, a hundred yards away,
 the geese honked and splashed around well into the day.
 The men stood motionless through it all for either one could spoil
 the delicate opportunity for which they each had toiled.

Then at that magic moment no one ever can foretell,
 the geese began to flap their wings and rise into the air.
 With practiced skill both hunters began to blow upon their calls
 and mimic the racket which loudly echoed off the forest walls.

Wave after wave, by dozens, these great birds took their leave
 until the very last of them barely could be seen.
 Then abruptly two wheeled 'round, toward the decoys they did go,
 as quickly did despair and disappointment turned to hope.

On they came. And closer still. Unerringly they flew
 toward a fate predestined but yet which only God knew.
 Now the hunters blew their calls much more carefully
 to attract the geese toward their ruse but not so they'd be seen.

Then time stood still. The dream came true. They set their wings in flight,
 faced into the wind and dropped into the gunners' sights.
 Three shots were fired. Two geese fell. One was dead outright.
 The other, wounded, turned and swam like hell still full of fight.

The son leapt quickly from the blind and to the boat did go,
 untied the rope, pushed off the mud, across the water rowed.
 The goose swam furiously through the waves but his wounds slowed him down
 then from the boat a shot rang out: the contest's final sound.

Two geese killed on the hunt's first morn. It seemed miraculous!
 Why, in the past, for days they sat and never got a shot.
 Here was a treasure they could share with family and friends,
 a prize from nature fairly won through a skill-and-effort blend.

The men were simply overjoyed, spirits could not be higher
 as several times, in great detail, they recounted what transpired.
 Excitement and enthusiasm filled the hunters hearts
 about a success in which each had played a necessary part.

Their luck continued the next day as, time after time, they got
 through patience, partnership, and labor shot after ringing shot.
 When at the end they headed home they were understandably proud
 of the five long-necked Canada geese with which their cooler was endowed.

Now many people disapprove of hunting we all know,
and bitterly complain about the killing as a goal.
It's safe to say they've probably never shivered in the dawn,
or paid so dearly just to hear the whistle of a swan,
or stood stock still, intense, alert, every minute of a day
in rain or snow or howling wind just to find a way
to get beyond their patterns, to realize a dream,
to feel a deep communion with the woods and field and stream,
to set obstacles aside like age, politics or fear
and with another come to know the duck or goose or deer.

Two men through adventure found a way to make it right,
to take a fraying length of rope and braid it good and tight.
In the face of life and death as one they stood in awe
and renewed their deep connection in concert with the natural law.



**Mallard ducks shot
on the little Choptank River,
Cambridge, Maryland, 1987**