THE SPIRIT OF THE SOUTHWEST

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Reflection, I was once warned, is a malaise of retirement. And, now a decade into those reputedly golden years, reflection does indeed seem to afflict me, its symptoms intensifying with the ceaseless acceleration of one year into the next. I have learned to live with my illness and to accept in a positive sense its little episodes that, not surprisingly, always seem to cluster around the Holidays.

Regardless of the years we carry, the Holidays should be a time for reflection – a time of memories, good and bad, which seem to bubble up in the attenuated darkness of the winter night. In the spirit of the season and its shortened days we wish each other "Happy Holidays", conveniently forgetting that for some of our forbearers, it was easier to grunt "holidays" than "holy days". Nonetheless, these remain Holy Days not in a sacramental sense, but rather as an interval in which to pause, reflect and renew ourselves. But, how frequently do we exclaim, or hear others say, "I just can't get the Holiday spirit this year"?. Most likely, the reason we can't get the Holiday spirit this (or any other) year is because it is cranked out in increasing decibels from November to the final bowl game on New Year's day.

So, last year as the Black Friday advertisements started appearing appropriately on the Day of the Dead, my wife and I decided that we would not spend yet another spiritless Holiday siege in the San Francisco Bay Area. Where, however, could we find a place that we could feel the spirit of the season? A bit jokingly my wife suggested that, even though reminiscent of the 1970s, perhaps if we were serious about a spirit quest, we should spend the Holidays in the Southwest.

It was not a suggestion to be taken lightly – there is a bit of the spirit world woven deeply into the fabric of the Southwest. I touched that world nearly thirty years ago when I decided to take a fishing trip up into the headwaters of the Little Colorado River in Arizona's White Mountains. It is high country at an elevation around 9,000 feet, however, the forested mountain slopes roll gently, and pocketed between them are little lakes and streams that still hold rare Apache trout.

One of the lakes I wanted to fish was on the Apache nation's land, and I needed to get a tribal fishing permit before hiking into the lake. I found a remote little tackle shop where I could purchase the permit. The shop was run by an Apache elder who looked like he had probably lived in the mountains all his long life.

As he handed me the permit, he said, "You know the rules don't you".

I quickly replied, "Oh, yes, no open fires, camp in designated areas, use barbless hooks, and release all trout."

The old Apache looked at me remotely for a minute and without any expression said, “There are other rules”.

I just stood there looking, I am sure, quite dumb. I had read the regulations for the area, and thought I knew them reasonably well.

Then he smiled a bit, “There are other rules that are not written. But, you will learn them if you listen to the land and treat it well. Have a good trip.”

In a hurry to catch an Apache trout I didn’t think too much about what the old man had said – until I hooked my first fish. There had been a nice insect hatch at the lake and the trout were taking bugs off the surface. I cast a little fly out in front of one of the feeding fish. Without coming out of the water, he sucked in the fly with a quiet gulp, much the way a wise old brown trout would. After a ten minute struggle, I finally got him into the shallows, and indeed in the slanted sunlight of the late afternoon, the three pound fish looked like a good-sized Loch Leven brown with large black spots along his golden-yellow flanks. Then, I observed the fish a bit more closely. There were no red spots, his back had a dark blue cast to it, and the gill plates shined like silver. Not a Loch Leven brown, I carefully released my first Apache trout.

It was then that I sensed more acutely what I had felt at some subconscious level from the point that I first set the hook in the fish – *somebody was watching me*.

I turned around quickly, expecting to see a tribal game warden glaring at me because maybe I had overplayed the fish. But nobody was there. A woodpecker knocked on a dead pine near my camp, and I glanced over at it, again expecting to see somebody. The camp was empty. Nobody hidden in the willows in the cove by the lake shore. Nobody on the trail that dropped down through the sagebrush from the ridge. As I had been all that warm afternoon, I was alone in the White Mountains, and nobody was there.

Except for that intangible presence – an intuitive recognition that primitively expressed itself as a sense of being watched. Looking for some shred of meaning, I sat down where I had just released the fish. Reason said I had caught and released the fish legally. I wasn’t feeling guilty because I had broken the rules, so why did I feel, if not guilty, a sense that somebody was watching. It was then that I remembered the old Apache’s admonition that “there are other rules that aren’t written. But, you will learn them if you listen to the land and treat it well.”

And so, nearly three decades ago, up there in the White Mountains, I experienced for the first time the spirit of the Southwest, it was talking to me, and I was just learning to listen.

With these thoughts bouncing around in my mind, my wife and I decided to spend our 2013 Holiday season in the Southwest. We flew to Albuquerque, rented a car, and for

the better part of two weeks journeyed through the history and culture of northern New Mexico – from Albuquerque to Gallup to Taos to Santa Fe.

As we drove toward Gallup along what had once been historic Route 66, we first heard - softly but distinctly - the spirit of the land talking to us, reciting the rocky family tree of its geology. As Californians, at least those of us living along the Pacific Coast, we tend to think of geology in terms of the tectonic shambles of the San Andreas fault. Subduction has produced row upon row of low coastal hills whose singular geologic feature is a well stirred pot of metamorphic detritus geologists like to call the Franciscan Mélange. The only time you really know it is there, and appreciate the forces that produced it, is when some roadway cuts through it.

In contrast the geology of the Southwest is an in-your-face geology. It speaks loudly and clearly of its tectonic past. It forces you to listen to the explosion that created the fifteen mile wide Valle Caldera, a volcanic eruption hundreds of times more powerful than the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens. You cannot, as you pass over the John Dunne bridge west of Taos, ignore the visceral scar of the Rio Grande gorge falling to the river 660 feet below. It speaks of a rift zone slicing up the underbelly of North America, dividing geologic provinces, as it follows the boundary of the ancient continental craton. Nor, are these features all the remote echo of some distant geologic past. El Malpais, "the bad country", east of Grants carries a mantle of black crusty lava that flowed across the face of the land a short three to four thousand years ago – a sterile black river of rock valued only by the lizards, scorpions and snakes that now make it their arid home.

But, other species, including we humans, have also made the rocks of New Mexico their home. At some point after the cessation of the final El Malpais lava flow, the Southwest was permanently occupied by the first Americans. They brought with them a new agrarian civilization which modern anthropologists have somewhat insensitively called the "Anasazi" culture. Much to the chagrin of the social scientific community, the term "Anasazi" is a Navaho expression which translates into English as "ancient enemy". Understandably, many modern Pueblo Indians are affronted by the audacity of an academic establishment which in the name of modern science assigned this epithet to their immediate ancestors.

The story of these early Pueblo people - whose culture flourished through most of the first millennium and ended with the particularly brutal drought of the 14th century – is well recited by the rocks. Although in the arrogance of the Conquest the Spanish referred to themselves as *gente de la razon,* their autonomous spirit of enlightenment somehow ended when they came to the petroglyphs inscribed on the basaltic mesas west of the Rio Grande near present-day Albuquerque. Here are images of parrots and macaws that, via ancient trade routes with the Aztecs, found their way to live as caged pets with the Pueblo people, many of whose progeny's first taste of European culture was to be Castilian steel.

The petroglyphs etched into the basalt of the Rio Grande's mesas also tell a far more recent tale of geologic and cultural collision. Here on the wind-blown bluffs past and present collide in the panorama of a great rift depression bounded on the east by the Sandia Mountains, granitic remnants of the Grenville orogeny when they were uplifted against the craton's core a billion years ago. And, sitting squarely between the Sandias and the volcanic mesa land to the west, is Albuquerque with its half-million human inhabitants. It has grown as if it were a malignancy, metastasizing across the face of the desert in long tendrils of homogeneous subdivisions, little beige homes all cloned from an aggresive parent tumor.

The city limits of Albuquerque now abut the boundaries of the Petroglyphs National Monument. Certainly, if the land developers had had their way, some politician would probably have been paid off, and ancient Pueblan artwork most likely would have fallen to the bulldozer's blade. But, the macaws and the parrots have been saved, along with the sun daggers, whose target-like images carry the pock marks of .44 caliber gunshot wounds, inflicted most likely by vandals who sanction their actions with a membership in the NRA. This is the same crowd that justifies its actions with simple phrases such as "Second Amendment", or from a more historical perspective, "Manifest Destiny". In the avaricious spirit of the western movement, what hasn't been taken from the land and its people, has been destroyed.

If we listen, these are some of the many stories to be told by the spirit of the Southwest – of its rocks, its land, its people. And upon reflection, that bit of advice I learned up there in the White Mountains remains no less applicable today than it was thirty years ago. Yet as we careen into 2014, somehow our civilization is not listening. And, in not listening we have lost the unwritten rules that should be guiding us. Great numbers of our people are underpaid for their labor, or unemployed. As a sadly deficient palliative, our leaders continue to mouth the tired mantra of economic development – the battle cry of Western expansion that sucked the wealth of the land from the ground, the forests that grew upon it, and the rivers that watered it.

It is time for us to start listening. *"There are other rules that are not written. But, you will learn them if you listen to the land and treat it well*" – something on which to reflect with the commencement of the new year.