

MYTH, FEAR, AND LOATHING IN THE AMERICAN WEST

sermon by Stephen Trimble, First Unitarian Church, Salt Lake City

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Over the years, I've spent a great deal of time in Southwest Indian Country, writing and photographing and listening. Indian artists still work with the old designs, whether they make their mark on a hand-coiled pot or a cradleboard or on the flanks of a horse decked out for a parade, whether they paint traditional designs on buffalo hide or on the satellite dish standing outside their hogan.

Native dancers still wear buckskins, moving through space with a sensuous tinkle made by rows of metal cones shaped from the lids of chewing tobacco cans. Those jingle dancers see no reason to take off their Mickey Mouse wristwatch when they enter the pow-wow arena. Indian people live in the 21st Century—giving up some of the past to absorb the present, but maintaining connections to the earth, to culture, to ancestors.

This isn't "the desert"—with all the connotations of barrenness that word "desert" carries with it.

"This," they say, "is home."

An interviewer from the East, at ease in green and watery places and leery of the arid West, once asked me how to fall in love with the desert. How could transplants like her find a way to be touched by such daunting space?

I began my answer with a phrase that just popped into my head: "The opposite of relationship is arrogance."

Come into new country ready to listen. Don't figure that you know everything there is to know.

Arrogance means refusing to take in new information, ignoring context, planning without regard for the failures and successes of the past. Arrogance means assuming you already know—when you don't.

As I've listened to Indian people talk about the Southwest, I've learned just how connected everything is, from land to people to spirituality to art to my own crafts, photography and writing. All these connections came together 25 years ago, during the four days that I photographed an Apache girl's coming-of-age ceremony at Whiteriver, Arizona.

I watched as Jeannette Larzelere became a woman. Like so many other Apache girls on the verge of womanhood, she passed through the coming-of-age ceremony called the sunrise dance. The entire village of Whiteriver on the Fort Apache Reservation, surrounded her with respect and love, dancing her into adulthood.

I wish you all could have been there with me, for the more people who watch and participate, the more powerful the ceremony.

I have never seen anything more moving.

My companion, the late San Carlos Apache medicine man Philip Cassadore, told me that Apaches believe the young woman goes from childhood to adulthood in these four days, "the most important part of her life."

After taking many pictures that weekend, I turned to ask Philip whether it was *really* acceptable to publish and display these intimate images, to share them.

With a wry spark in his eye, Philip reassured me: I had a wordless model release from the entire community: "You took the pictures there at the ceremonial ground in front of two hundred

Apaches, and no one stopped you. If somebody is going to stop you, they'll stop you right there. Nobody stopped you; that means okay.”

If any of you know Apache people, you know they are absolutely fierce about being bluntly honest. I could trust Philip’s reassurance. If someone in that dance circle wanted me to quit photographing, that concerned Apache would have no problem telling me.

What an honor to experience that ceremony. What a generous gift from the Whiteriver community to include me—and my camera.

These stories that I tell you today belong to the Indian people who told their stories to me and allowed me to take these pictures. I have the privilege of being the messenger.

In the old days, every young Apache woman passed through this Sunrise Dance—in Apache, a *nai’es*, a “getting her ready” ceremony. Today, not every Apache girl wants one; not every family can afford to bear the costs; not every family believes that the ceremony is appropriate. But those young women who go through the ceremony travel on the medicine man's chants, passing onward from childhood once and for all.

The medicine men sing behind her; they stand to sing the creation story of the Apache people. They sing for four days. At night, in a tipi, they solemnly instruct the girl in the right ways to live as an Apache woman.

As so many other Apache girls reaching adolescence have done for centuries, Jeanette Larzelere dances first with a friend, for moral support. Then, an older woman sponsor of impeccable credentials joins her.

On the third day, everyone in the community has the opportunity to bless the young woman with sacred pollen, corn and cattail pollen, the pollen of life. And as she is blessed and blessed and more blessed, and blessed again, she acquires the power of Changing Woman, the great Apache heroine, and can return that blessing, granting every wish from long life for a toddler to a mother's concern that Changing Woman watch over her son studying to be a barber in Dallas.

Jeanette wears on her forehead an abalone shell, symbolizing the shell within which Changing Woman sealed herself to survive a great flood and become the first Apache—a holy person indeed.

On the last day of the ceremony, a young man dips an eagle feather and a spray of sage in a basket filled with clay and water. He covers the kneeling initiate with this earth paint, to give her the power of the earth, to keep her strong until her old age. With this clay, she acquires still more power from Changing Woman.

There are comparable spiritual experiences for young people in many cultures: a glowing Christian child receiving the sacrament of confirmation; a young man or woman standing in a synagogue to read from the Torah for the first time as a Bar or Bat Mitvah; a young Buddhist leaving his family to don saffron robes and begin his interlude as a monk.

For these four days and through the rest of her life Jeanette Larzelere embodies the strength of the Earth, the connections that define a people's homeland.

We don't need to be an Apache person to acquire that strength. Look around...

Everything really is connected—and the more we share in that power, the more innovative and understanding and wise we can be in our lives, our work, our world. The more connected we will be with our families, with each other, with ourselves.

Not everybody understands this on their first encounter with these connections across cultures, with The Other.

Twelve years after that remarkable opportunity to photograph Jeanette Larzelere's coming-of-age, I celebrated another coming-of-age. My wife, Joanne, and I took my parents out to dinner here in Salt Lake City, to celebrate my father's 80th birthday. We went to a trendy café. I excused myself to go to the men's room. The décor in the bathroom was just as elegant as the dining room, the lighting subdued and exquisite.

I stood in front of the toilet contemplating the photo on the wall; I was stunned. What would Jeanette Larzelere think about her image hanging here, a focal point (dare I say it) for a parade of well-off White Men relieving themselves between courses?

My picture of Jeannette Larzelere at the culminating point of her ceremony—*this* picture—had been purchased by the restaurant owner a few months before at a fund-raiser. He bid it up, evidently moved by the subject. He received my written description of the ritual to take home with the print. I was pleased and felt he must understand the power of the photograph.

Now I have found the photo hanging over the toilet in the men's room at his fashionable café.

This picture captures what well may be the most important, most sacred event in this girl's life. An entire Apache village gave unspoken permission for me to photograph this intimate moment. In recompense, I have the responsibility to speak for Jeanette. Hanging her photo above a toilet demonstrates profound disrespect, demeaning her, demeaning the Apache religion, Indian people, and all women.

We non-Indian people still haven't learned. On the one hand, we continue to romanticize Indians. We flock to *Dances With Wolves* in one generation and to *Avatar* in the next. We root New Age ritual in the more accessible edges of tribal religions.

On the other hand, racism continues. Indians remain “the other.” We deny the survival and vitality of contemporary Indian people. We freeze them in 1880, a “vanishing people” with a “lost” culture. We forget that Indian people are just that—people. And that missing act of empathy—attributable to lack of experience, lack of attention, lack of taking the trouble to find common ground—denies us a rich understanding, a resonance, a connection.

Several weeks after her ceremony, I saw Jeannette Larzelere walking in jeans and a T-shirt at the Apache Tribal Fair. She still looked transfigured. I hope she retains a little of that strength today, more than twenty-five years later. She will need it.

As it turns out, we all need it.

Today, I live in two worlds—in a university neighborhood in Salt Lake City and just outside a tiny town in southern Utah. I can assume the role of “The Other” in either place. I am an urban environmentalist. I ride my bicycle to this church every Wednesday morning for my yoga class—wearing Birkenstocks, for god’s sake!

I am also a taxpaying homeowner in Torrey, Utah—in the rural West, the land of sagebrush rebels and angry ranchers. I am struck by how much conflict and suspicion and fear exists between these two groups that I belong to—even as we *all* watch the natural treasures of the public lands that we love, and that belong to all of us, slip away.

The petrocracy in which we lived during the Bush-Cheney years pushed hard to escalate development in wild Utah. We have slowed our assault in the last 20 months. But corporate interests continue to successfully exploit Westerners who fear change. The Tea Party isn't funded by individual populists at two dollars a crack; it's funded by the Koch brothers.

An August article by Jane Mayer in the *New Yorker* tells us that the Kochs operate oil refineries and own industries that make their holdings the second-largest private company in America, after Cargill. David and Charles Koch are among the richest people in America. The top ten includes four Waltons, of Walmart (two men and two women), Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Larry Ellison of Oracle, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and the two Kochs, who are tied at number five with a fortune between them of more than forty billion dollars. Jane Mayer writes, “By giving money to “educate,” fund, and organize Tea Party protesters, the Koch brothers have helped turn their private agenda into a mass movement.”

David and Charles Koch don't want dialogue. They have no interest in reaching out to The Other. They want power. They want to change America. They are fearful, and they fan fears. They learned at their daddy's knee. “In a 1963 speech that prefigures the Tea Party's talk of a secret socialist plot,” their father, Fred Koch predicted that Communists would “infiltrate the highest offices of government in the U.S. until the President is a Communist, unknown to the rest of us.” Fred Koch believed that “The colored man looms large in the Communist plan to take over America.”

You may be wondering how we so quickly traveled from an Apache village in the middle of nowhere to the Forbes 400. It's an easy answer. In the second decade of the 21st Century, nowhere, no place, is the middle of nowhere. We are all connected.

Those of us who still think of ourselves as living in the middle of nowhere like to revel in the freedom of being a Westerner in all this glorious open space. We continue the tradition of disliking outsiders who tell us what to do—whether those outsiders are scientists who work for federal land management agencies or people from far away who come to Utah for the first time as adults and fall in love with our wilderness and become conservation activists who work to protect Utah's public lands from overuse and development.

For every piece of land each of us sees a different reality—wilderness, parkland, homeland; grazing allotment, timber harvest, stone quarry, uranium mine. Beauty and challenge. We see real estate deals and quick profits. We also see public preserves and national parks, responsibilities to our great-grandchildren, lifetimes of local commitment, and Paiute Indian ghosts.

What we see is a mosaic of land tenure and fierce belief guaranteed to make Utah wildlands a high-stakes battleground.

We have elected an African-American to the presidency, and the Koch brothers' father, Fred, would be horrified. A lot of other people are uncomfortable with our black president, and they mask their discomfort with a flurry of angry language. There is a racist strain in the Tea Party and its supporters. That venom spills over into generalized hollering, with slogans like, "Take Back Utah!" From what? From whom? Insecurity and fear grow from our economic woes and

manifest in a distressing array of hateful attacks on The Other. As my Torrey writer friend Chip Ward puts it, Utah has turned into Glenbeckistan.

In his syndicated commentary last week, the Pulitzer Prize-winner Leonard Pitts summed up what we have been hearing from our fellow citizens who are offering “what now passes for political discourse in America:”

“The situation has been vexing for years, but the last two summers, with their birthers and Ground Zero mosques and death panels and town hall shouting matches and guns at rallies and rocks through windows and threats of Quran bonfires and charges of socialism, Nazism, terrorism and general sense of end-times bacchanal, have been especially disheartening.”

Have we really evolved no further than this from Fred Koch’s fear of conspiracy in 1963?

For an eloquent response, look back to the brave and brilliant speech on race—one of his best—that Barack Obama wrote during the presidential campaign. What he said about race applies equally to the chasm in culture that has paralyzed and poisoned our discourse about the open spaces of the West.

President Obama points out that inflammatory hate speech is not only wrong but divisive “at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems that confront us all. If we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to solve challenges like health care or education.” Or, I submit, the future of our public lands.

The attackers, led vociferously in the Utah State Legislature by Rep. Mike Noel of Kanab, think that they hate environmentalists. They believe that wilderness designation will

destroy rural Utah's resource-based economy. They can't listen, they can't ponder; they can only rant.

The chasm between these attackers and those who support the conservationists' vision of treating Utah's public lands with tenderness and restraint yawns nearly as wide as the distance between white and black America.

To bridge that chasm, Noel and his supporters at Take Back Utah will need to come to grips with the changing West. Extractive industry no longer forms the crucial core of the rural economy. Recreation and tourism—and retirees drawn to Utah's wild landscapes who choose to move to places like Kanab and Torrey—form the new economic bedrock.

So is it really a good idea to do what Mike Lee told the Utah Republican convention that chose him over Bob Bennett as this year's Republican candidate for the United States Senate from Utah: to “get the government off of 70 percent of our land?”

That would be the two-thirds of Utah that remains public land, owned by all Americans—including Zion and Bryce and Arches and Canyonlands and Capitol Reef national parks.

And the San Rafael Swell and Grand Staircase-Escalante and Cedar Mesa. The High Uintas. The Wasatch. That would even be Lake Powell.

I don't think Mike Lee has been talking much with the Utah Travel Council. I also don't think he has the budget to take over these lands.

Lee told the conventioners last spring that “The people have realized that the power is in the hands of the people. Tea partyers, 912, and our caucuses.” “912” would be Glen Beck's 912 Project: 9 principles and 12 values that define “us” as opposed to “them.”

These folks want to do away with the Departments of Education and Energy. What are our two biggest crises? Declining success in education and climate change. I think we need all the help we can get.

We all live in the same West, and we need to figure out how to talk to each other across the fence—even when our angry neighbors keep building the fence higher and higher.

In turn, conservationists need to acknowledge the roots of Noel's anger. Rural Utahans react instinctively, with suspicion, to all new federal designations. They rightfully resent condescension. And yet both long-term residents and newcomers love this astonishing land. There is common ground here, if we can only find our way to that emotional overlap.

Barack Obama has been highlighting our choice for years, now. In that same 2008 speech on race, he said, “We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. If we do, nothing will change. Or, we can come together and say, ‘Not this time.’ Let us find that common stake we all have in one another.”

I bumped against the image of the demon enviro one morning when I talked for a spell with Larry Fletcher at his home in the Kodachrome badlands on the outskirts of the little Mormon village of Cannonville, Utah. The wind swept down on us from the west, whistling through the pines and firs shading the breaks at Bryce Canyon and swirling through slickrock narrows where I'd been hiking with my family in Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monument.

Folks in town had referred me to the Fletchers. Having rattled the bike rack to pieces on the back roads of the Colorado Plateau I needed a place to store our family's mountain bicycles until I could return for them with a repaired rack—and I'd been told that the Fletchers had an

empty shed that might be available. Larry was generous and accommodating and neighborly. His face was as wind-chafed as the barn wood of his outbuildings. And then he cocked his head and asked me a question. He wanted to know if I happened to be a member of the Sierra Club.

It seemed Larry had never met such a character. He had grown up in Cannonville. He imagined every Sierra Club member, every environmentalist, to be his enemy—a faceless Other from New York, who would never come to his town or to his home territory, much less to his driveway. He was convinced that these people hated him and wanted to destroy his way of life.

Larry looked at me with wonder when I admitted my identity. I didn't fit his caricature. Sure, we had plenty of differences. But we could talk without fisticuffs; we were even enjoying each other's company. I knew a few of the places that he knew, a few of the same people. By the time I left, he was bemused by the whole situation—bemused that I had turned up, and that I didn't seem to be crazy.

Since then, my family has purchased land in Wayne County. We have built a house there. It's a thrilling and restorative experience to have that home perched on the fulcrum between the village of Torrey and the wilderness of the Waterpocket Fold. I first lived in Wayne County thirty-five years ago when I worked as a Capitol Reef ranger; I've visited nearly every year since. I've met three generations of local residents.

I don't feel like a newcomer, because I've loved this country for so long. But newcomer I am.

I keep looking for common ground in both my homes—and one place that I've found it has been the “Faith and the Land” initiative brilliantly facilitated by Terri Martin and Deeda Seed at the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. That conversation about the spiritual importance

of wilderness in 11 faith communities led to an interfaith statement on wilderness delivered to the Utah congressional delegation on the eve of Earth Day in 2009. The interfaith statement became part of the hearing record last fall when the House Resource Committee turned its attention to America's Redrock Wilderness Act for the first time ever in the United States Congress.

But, remember—I live in two worlds.

“Wealthy, overeducated spoiled brats.” A longtime resident in Wayne County summed up local attitudes toward us move-ins, and a new acronym lurks in that one-liner. Old-timers are jealous of WOES—those Wealthy Over-Educated Spoiled brats—and they are fearful, too, of the power granted by financial resources and education and angry at the shift in attitudes toward public and private land that the WOES bring with them.

Stereotypes hurt. I can picture a cartoon of an overwrought face-off between the two factions—a couple of naïve but well-meaning, be-fleeced, and Teva-sandaled WOES standing next to their mountain-bike-racked SUV in front of their lovely stucco home newly built in a former alfalfa field, righteously brandishing copies of Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance and Sierra Club newsletters as well as a current New Yorker—tongue to fence line with an angry, cowboy-hatted, hard-working local mounted on an ATV embellished with antienvironmentalist bumper stickers, a rifle strapped into his gear, his machine flanked by ranks of hungry heifers searching for one last clump of grass on a drought-starved range.

When you begin to turn over the rocks of casual assumptions, however, the conservative, resource-based local Mormon men and women may not match your expectations. The “wealthy, overeducated spoiled brats” may not either. Easy classifications like these form perfectly split

kindling for western anger. I'm convinced, however, that there is hope for the future and that dialogue can incrementally wash away the stubborn certainties and ignorance of unchallenged generalizations.

The New West is urban. Today more than eighty percent of Westerners live in cities. More than half of American Indians live in cities.

Identity doesn't come automatically in this modern West. We might be cowboys, but we have to decide if we are mythic cowboys or Sundance Catalog cowboys trumpeting our trendiness with our freshly purchased apparel—or if we just happen to be folks who work on a ranch and know a lot about livestock. We might define ourselves, in part, as western skiers or river runners or hikers, but we may well have grown up in Newton, Massachusetts or Toledo, Ohio before we came west.

I imagine a Next West, a People's West, where, with a new awareness of the true nature of our home, we finally acknowledge that we will always live enmeshed in Place—and that to find our way we must collaborate in creating a community rooted in healthy relationship, with each other, with the land.

Even as we predict a future for the West, it keeps changing; it keeps challenging us. Just as when summertime flash floods sweep a canyon clean, and a hard winter wedges free a new succession of rockfalls to block our way.

The latest challenge looms large. The Colorado River Basin lies squarely within the crosshairs of global climate change. Rising average temperatures are certain to bring warmer summers, more rain than snow, decreased spring runoff, and more frequent wildfires. Fewer and

fewer canyon treefrogs will call from potholes and desert streams. Climate change will push every living community uphill until alpine tundra and alpine animals like pikas can retreat no higher and will be pinched right off the mountaintops. What will we do for water in this increasingly dry century?

In the canyons of this dynamic home place, in the tricky cultural currents we must navigate, my aging generation is running out of time to make a difference. I turn sixty this month. Sixty isn't old, but clearly we can't dawdle.

Our edges are rounder, our destination closer. Gravity and time turn out to be equally inexorable. This same arc through time deepens our relationships with the places we love. The redrock wilderness has granted us spiritual refuge, repeatedly. The universe has provided us with a lifetime of chances to speak up for these remaining fragments of wild ecosystems.

Let's take full advantage of these last few winding and glorious bends, missing no opportunity for joyful adventure, tending to our grassroots work of building bridges between us and them, rising to each occasion calling for advocacy in the face of fear and loathing—as we all tumble downcanyon toward our final resting place in the sea.

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Stephen Trimble has received a broad range of awards for his photography, his non-fiction, and his fiction, including: The Sierra Club's Ansel Adams Award for photography and conservation; The National Cowboy Museum's Western Heritage "Wrangler" Award; a Wallace Stegner Centennial Fellowship at the University of Utah Tanner Humanities Center; and a Doctor of Humane Letters from his alma mater, Colorado College, honoring his efforts to increase our understanding of Western landscapes and peoples. As writer, editor, and photographer Trimble has published twenty-two books, including: *Bargaining for Eden: The Fight for the Last Open Spaces in America* • *Lasting Light: 125 Years of Grand Canyon Photography* • *The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places* (with Gary Paul Nabhan) • *The Sagebrush Ocean: A Natural History of the Great Basin* • *The People: Indians of the American Southwest* • and • *Talking With the Clay: the Art of Pueblo Pottery in the 21st Century*. Trimble teaches writing in the University of Utah Honors College and makes his home in Salt Lake City and in the redrock country of Torrey, Utah. Trimble's website is www.stephtrimble.net.