



TOUCH *of* FIRST LIGHT

By Justice Greg Hobbs

On the second part of our flight to the Navajo Teachers summer workshop at the Grand Canyon from Denver, we are heading north out of Phoenix on the grasshopper jump to Flagstaff, Ariz. It's the last week of June 2010. Erickson Air-Cranes buzz around the San Francisco Peaks, releasing load after load of quenching water from their pregnant orange praying mantis bellies.

A camper-started blaze, 180 Hotshots are fighting to build 10 miles of fire line up to a snow bank on Doyle Peak. The Forest Service has closed the Kachina Peaks Wilderness. All-terrain vehicle and motorcycle riders violating the ban, 10 cited so far, could get up to six months in jail and \$5,000 fines.

At the Flagstaff airport, we settle for a big black Lincoln Town Car – all they have left. The rental company has provided the compact fuel efficient foreign imports to the emergency responders who, immune from anti-immigration suits in Arizona state courts, go their way to work on the mountain courtesy of the Supremacy Clause of the U. S. Constitution.

On this day in summer solstice week, dark-faced smoke jumpers are welcome. “Go Firefighters!” “Thank God for you!” read hand-scrawled signs on RVs we pass.

Skirting wind-blown smoke, my wife Bobbie, the poet Kathy Winograd, and I drive west toward Williams; turn north up Highways 64 and 180 toward the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, stopping in Tusayan for ice cream. (I recall John Wesley Powell, led by a Navajo boy, visited the Hopi mesas in 1870, calling them “The Ancient Province of Tusayan.” Note to self: look up “Seeing Things Whole,” a collection of Powell writings edited by William deBuys of Santa Fe.) I keep fiddling with the cool button on the Town Car's hot dashboard.

We arrive at the rim. I'd say the Grand Canyon has a rather stuffy parking problem. I'm not driving one of those phone booth-sized Smart Cars they park sideways onto Paris sidewalks.

Our lodge, the Maswick, is located across the tracks from the grandly more elegant El Tovar, which perches like

a giant California condor on the rim of the big cut. Kathy and I are pushing the start time for our writing session with the Navajo teachers at the Thunderbird Hotel. Dropping her off, I adjust my chauffer's cap, drive halfway back to the Maswick, and finally find a mooring dock. It could host a fleet of Smart Cars or one Town Car.

Many friends from years before give us welcome. We gain new ones. Rangers Andy Pearce and Jacob Fillion introduce the park to us. Irene Nakai Hamilton reads us a reminiscence about being in the family car with her father at the entrance gate, refusing to pay the fee because his people were here long before. Embarrassed, young Nakai slid as low as she could in the back seat. Now a teacher of the Nation's children, this Diné woman considers her father's stand worthy of a warrior. The ranger waved them through.

Tall, lanky, and eloquent, Dr. Kathryn Winograd, winner of the Colorado Book Award for poetry in 2002, leads us through a warm-up exercise. These teachers of the Navajo children are Navajo, Latino, African-American, Asian-American, and Anglo, some inter-married.

“What do you think you already know about the Grand Canyon? Break into your smaller groups, talk, and write about it.”

Into this fifth year of the “Middle Ground” project, I like to hear the buzzing hatch of Diné voices around the table telling of pinyon picking and the gathering of medicinal herbs—purging poisons, healing ancient wounds.

“Clack two sticks like this two steps down the trail!” exclaims James Peshlakai. “That way the ancestors will know you're here.” (Marie Salt leans over to me and whispers, “His last name means ‘silver.’”)

A homing device, Navajo people introduce themselves by the names of their clans and the features of their origin and birth lands. Of the clan of the Hopi-Navajo, of the sacred salt at the confluence of the Little Colorado and the Colorado mainstream, Peshlakai harkens to the Beauty Way and the Enemy Way.

“The National Park Service picks the Navajos off for entering the canyon without a permit; that's 99 percent of all the violations,” he said. “No Indians shall pick pinyons! You have to post \$200 to \$300 bail and you usually forfeit it

instead of coming back.”

Peshlakai says bears shake the pinyon trees to mark their territory. Hispanos harvest this way, not Navajos. He says recent DNA sampling reveals Anazasi genes in the Diné. Who we are seems as spectacular as the many colors stacked layer on layer below our feet to the turquoise ribbon of the Colorado far below.

“When you get down to the river for a blessing, hold the corn pollen in your hand upstream and then release it downstream. We live in a place that is harsh and we need to live together,” he said.

Marie Salt follows: “The east is where the light comes from. Come to your calling. Wash your hands. Transition into healing. Forgiveness puts you back into the Blessing Way. All male and female is in the art. The origins and the meeting of the two rivers. The spring water for washing your hands. Take a glance. What do you see? Where the light first hits is sacred, even the wind people do not dwell there. Be resplendent! Make an offering! Ask permission to enter. Mother Earth says with her corn, here I am, make your home on my body.”

We walk outside to the rim along the well-worn visitor’s path to eat lunch. An endangered California condor with a nine-foot wingspan wheels over head, then lands on a rock ledge to the west.

In the afternoon, we walk to a forked-stick hogan Diné people may have used for temporary shelter. They gathered pinyon and herded sheep here at the Canyon’s rim before the 1868 treaty talks when Barboncito persuaded Gen. William Sherman to let his people go back to their homeland. Passing through every generation, the bitter memory of their forced exile in 1864 out of Canyon de Chelly and their other sacred places to Fort Sumner on the cut-worm Pecos River lives on.

On the third and final day of the workshop, we have a packed program to finish. Bobbie and I perch on a ledge above the condor’s ledge and look to the east. The sun cracks its way through a notch above the confluence. A month later, on a raft trip through the gut of the Grand’s schist and black gneiss gorge with grandson K.J., I recall how First Light appears far above:

Squat on a shaving rock at Zoroaster.
In the gut of the schist gorge,
you cannot see where the sipapu sun
rises to the east this morning

Out of the Little Colorado,
carrying chocolate to the mainstream,
stirs Navajo sandstone and sacred
Hopi salt into the Colorado.

In the minute or so it takes
to extract my razor and cream
from a Ziploc the TSA hasn’t screened,
a turbine-propelled tide from Page eats
at the blue stripes of my \$7
Cortez Walmart sneakers.



Marie Salt at the Navajo Teachers summer workshop.

Down in Phoenix and L.A.?
Get yourselves ready for a nice
air-conditioned day!

I loose my amputated beard
to the current, consign my DNA
to sediment

On some downstream beach
a heron may stand
and fish upon.

Though I cannot see,
I know a few Harvey House
South Rim pilgrims have walked
this very morning
to a ledge high above
the condor’s nest,

They see what I see,
wherever the light
touches first
is holy.

Walking back from sunrise, Bobbie and I have breakfast and pack our bags. Katie Gilbert, the Navajo science teacher, calls my cell. We rush back to the main lodge and gather around Dr. Michael Welsh. He’s the University of Northern Colorado history professor who has led the Middle Ground project for five years. His heart attack began in the night. Now he’s experiencing a second one. National Park Service firefighters give him air. Rangers strap him into an ambulance headed for Tusayan and the helicopter hop to Flagstaff.

In the Town Car, Bobbie, documentary filmmaker Stefan Brodsky, and I chase his Flight for Life through a pass over the northwestern shoulder of the San Francisco Peaks. Back at the rim, our friends and colleagues, the Diné among us, in the land of their lineage, arrange their sacred prayer stones. In the tongue of their ancestors they pray a blessing for Michael. That he may be strong and healthy.

He lives. **D**