

Dine' (Navajo Desert Southwest)

*Navajo*

A long long time ago, before grandmother and before her grandmother's grandmother, the first Dine' people lived in another world. The old people say it was far below the place where we live today. That world, they say, was deep under the ground. Back in those days, everything was magical. The people and the animals could talk to one another. But there was no writing. The only way anyone could recall their past times was by the elders telling stories to the younger ones. One of these stories that has been passed down for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years is the story of Turquoise Boy. He was not a typical child among the Dine'. He was the first nadleehi.

The mother of Turquoise Boy was named Changing Woman. She is the most important goddess to the Dine'. Those of us who practice our Dine' religion worship her more than any of the other gods and goddesses. She lived before the creation of the world. She has always lived, and even if the world did not exist she will always continue to be. Yet, she takes an interest in helping people on earth. We don't know why she does this, since there are many other worlds where she might live. That is why we honor her. We want her to stay and help us here on the earth.

Changing Woman was the first being to bring another person into life. She did this by what we consider the greatest of all miracles: birth. This is why the Dine' honor women so much. Only women are able to bring forth life from nothing. To us, birth is the single

most important thing. None of us would even be here if it were not for our birth. For that, we honor our mothers above all. This is why the Dine' believe that women are superior.

Changing Woman was the first mother. She has given birth to many children. She is very wise and powerful. She can swim to the bottom of the sea, or fly high up into the sky. At one point Changing Woman flew all the way up to the Sun. After she became friends with the Sun, she fell in love with him. His brightness dazzled her, and his warm rays soothed her body. She lived with him, and before long she became pregnant with their child. But Changing Woman was a very independent person, and not the kind to settle down into a marriage, even with the magnificent Sun. Therefore she decided to leave the sky. The Sun was sad to see her go, but he had to remain in the sky. It was his job to provide light and warmth for the universe every day.

After returning to the world, Changing Woman did not know if she would ever have a chance to be with the Sun again. She realized that this would probably be her only child from him. She could not decide whether she preferred to have a son or a daughter. So, Changing Woman decided to have the best of both. The result is that she created Turquoise Boy to be born as a combined person, a special sacred being, not either a boy or a girl, but both.

Changing Woman has the power to do many amazing things. Creating a nadleehi was no great difficulty for her. Turquoise Boy was the first person who was created like that. Changing Woman liked her child so much that, ever since then, she has

created such people. They are born with both the man's spirit and the woman's spirit. Such people are born into every generation. It is a fact of life. We believe that Changing Woman has blessed them. There is nothing wrong with them for being that way. In fact, many Indian people believe that they are superior to the average man or woman, who only has one spirit. They are put here on earth to teach us important lessons.

Such people can be of great value, in helping others with their unique way of thinking. For example, Turquoise Boy was always doing things to help the first people. When he was about twelve years old, many rains came and there was a great flood. That flood was much larger than any flood we have heard about in our lifetime. All the people and the animals ran to the top of the highest mountain. But still the waters kept rising. Back then the animals and the people were friendly. They did what they could to try to help each other.

Eagle said, "I'll fly everyone to safety!" But it was raining so hard that she could not get off the ground. When she tried to lift her wings, the weight of the raindrops pushed them back down. Not even Eagle's powerful wings could make her fly. Seeing this, Coyote became sad. "Oh no," Coyote cried, "we're all going to drown."

But then Turquoise Boy had an idea. He thought that they might be able to survive if they could find a tree that was tall enough to rise above the water. He began to search all around the mountaintop. This was hard to do, because of the terrible storm. He saw several

trees, but none of them were tall enough. He did not give up, but kept searching, though the rain was coming down even harder than before. Turquoise Boy never gave up. He was determined to try to save everyone.

At last he found a giant reed. This reed was so tall that it stretched high into the sky, higher than the rainclouds. Turquoise Boy could not even see the top of this tall plant. He made a prayer, in appreciation for the reed. He asked the reed spirit for permission to cut a hole in this reed. Turquoise Boy was always careful to give thanks to the spirits, because he himself was a spiritual person. He never wasted anything that was alive. He used only what was necessary.

The reed spirit granted him permission to cut a hole in the reed. But its outer surface was very hard. Turquoise Boy could tell that it would require a sharp blade to cut it. He had no knife that was sharp enough. He then called Woodpecker. He politely asked the hard-nosed bird, "Can you please chop a hole in the base of this reed for us?" No matter how desperate the situation, Turquoise Boy always spoke in a gentle and polite voice. Woodpecker was as wet and miserable as the others, but was so touched by Turquoise Boy's politeness that he did as he was asked.

After the hole was big enough for each animal to crawl through, Turquoise Boy then turned to Gopher, and again politely asked, "Can you burrow a tunnel upward, inside the soft interior of this reed?" Gopher did not need much encouragement, because he was quite afraid of

drowning. The rain had been coming down so hard that the water level was steadily rising. If they did not do something quickly, the mountaintop would soon be under water.

Gopher burrowed frantically until, one by one, all the animals and the people climbed up through the tall hollowed reed. Finally, they came out on top. When they emerged, they realized that they had gone far above the rainclouds. The reed had planted its crown into the dirt of another world above. That is the world of our Mother Earth that we walk on here every day. And so that is how the Dine' came into this world where we now exist. The animals and the humans were saved, all because of the original thoughts of Turquoise Boy.

This is why Dine' people feel gratitude for those who are created different. They are a gift to us all. They can help us with their special talents. They can open our eyes to different ways of seeing things. Such people are very creative. If Turquoise Boy had not come up with that creative idea, all the people and the animals would have drowned. This is why even the animals respect such people. A family that has such a child born into it should feel lucky, because such individuals often have magical powers. If they pray to the spirit of Changing Woman, they will feel a special closeness to her. Changing Woman is compassionate to everyone, but she feels a particular love toward nadleehi persons like her child Turquoise Boy. That is why such people are especially good at being nurses and doctors. They are able to help the sick, because they have

a special relationship with Changing Woman.

Nadleehi are sometimes born into the body of a man, and sometimes into the body of a woman. If they are a boy they are girlish, and if they are a girl they are like a boy. Their character as they grow up always shows them to have the spirit of a man and the spirit of a woman. They are two-spirited. Indian people believe that a person's spirit is more important in defining them than their physical body. We accept people for the way they are. That is a reflection of their personal spirit. The old people, years ago, always respected a Two-Spirit person. They are, somehow, sacred and holy. They are central to our whole way of life. Whenever there are no more Two-Spirit children born among our people, that is the day when there will be no more Dine'. The Dine', the animals, and the beauty of our homeland would all disappear.

A feminine male will typically fall in love with men, and a masculine female will fall in love with women. That is just part of their character. That is what their heart tells them to do. We always have to follow our heart.

No one has any control over the true speakings of their heart. They might hide it, but they still have those thoughts, no matter how secretive they try to be. It is better if they can be open about their feelings. Dine' believe that every person has the right to release their feelings and express love for another person of their choice.

Turquoise Boy was like that. He enjoyed working and

talking with the women, but his love feelings were reserved for men. He just fell in love with men all the time. In fact, at one point, he was married to all the Navajo men. Who can decide who wants to be attracted to whom, except the people involved? Either you're attracted to each other, or you're not. For a marriage to occur, what matters are feelings of love and attraction, not the type of persons involved. When two people love each other, that is one of the most blessed gifts in the world. It does not matter if they are male or female, tall or short, young or old, thin or plump, dark-skinned or light-skinned. What matters is that they love each other. In Dine' communities, marriage is accepted in different ways. If a nadleehi marries, they can get children by adoption if they wish. They are excellent adoptive parents. But in terms of marriage, people get more out of marriage than just children.

Intimate pleasure with your loved one is one of the great enjoyments of life, one of the greatest gifts from the spirit world. Becoming close to your loved one's relatives is almost like gaining a second family. We should express gratitude for love. Love brings men and women together as relatives, even if the marriage itself is two males together or two females together. It is good for men and women to be associated with each other. But the Dine' did not always live mixed together like they do now. At one point, a long long time ago, the men and the women lived separately.

A long time ago, soon after the arrival of the animals and the

people into this world, the men had a big argument with the women. The men wanted to start hunting the animals. They wanted to eat the animal meat, and to wear the animal hides as clothing. The women objected, saying the animals had always been their friends. They did not want to betray their friendship by killing the animals. In anger, the men left the women and crossed a big river. Turquoise Boy did not want to leave his women friends, but at last he decided to go with the men. He loved all the men very much, and could not bear to be apart from them. The men pled with Turquoise Boy to join them, because without any women they felt they would be lonely. They all wanted Turquoise Boy to marry them.

Turquoise Boy finally agreed to go with the men, and to marry them all. But he told them he would go only on condition that they would not expect him to do any hunting himself. He still felt that the animals were his friends. The men accepted the fact that Turquoise Boy would not do regular men's type of work, and would continue acting like a woman. That is why Dine' men accept the girlish ways of nadleehi. Turquoise Boy gathered wild plants, just like the women, and did the same kinds of work as the women. He did the farming, and cooked the plantfoods for the men. In addition, he discovered a new plant, which he named "corn." He taught himself how to grind the corn kernels into a fine meal, from which he made cornbread and corn soup. The men came to Turquoise Boy whenever they got hungry for plant foods. They also visited him when they were lonely. He loved them all, and considered them to be his



husbands.

Meanwhile, the women stayed on their side of the river. They continued doing the farming and gathering the wild plants, just as they had always done. They survived quite well. The women took care of themselves, and loved each other.

Each group, the men and the women, continued in this way in their separate villages. They lived apart for four years. However, the women missed Turquoise Boy greatly. For his part, Turquoise Boy was happy with the men, but he missed doing things with the women. Turquoise Boy, after all, had both girlish and boyish sides to his personality. He disliked having to choose one of those sides over the other. He wanted to live with both the men and the women. He wanted all the people to get back together again.

Finally, in desperation, Turquoise Boy made a trip across the river. The women were so happy to see him once again. He talked with them and convinced them to accept the men back. The women were willing to accept the men's return, but they were still not comfortable about killing animals.

Turquoise Boy thought about this, and decided to call all the animals into a council. When all the animals had arrived, he begged their forgiveness for the men's hunts. He explained that the only reason the men hunted them was because they were hungry. They did not want to betray the animals' friendship. In fact, he said, the men liked the animals. The animals were impressed with Turquoise Boy's politeness. They discussed the issue among themselves.

Finally, the animals decided to forgive the men. They told Turquoise Boy they did not mind sacrificing an occasional animal, if the people were really hungry. But they did not want the men to continue to slaughter them in such large numbers. At this point, two special animals who were not afraid of men volunteered to supply the needs of the people for both meat and clothing. Their hides grew long hairs that Turquoise Boy learned how to weave into beautiful wool cloth. These two animals were sheep and goats.

The sheep and goats agreed to be sacrificed, if the men would promise to raise them, protect them from harm, and treat them respectfully up until their meat and hides were needed. Turquoise Boy went back to talk to the men, and they agreed to raise sheep and goats instead of hunting. Turquoise Boy again crossed over the river, and told the women about the men's agreement. Impressed with this, the women then agreed to brush out the extra loose hairs on the animals' bodies. This way, the sheep and goats could remain cool in the hot desert climate.

And so, after all these agreements had been made, that is how the Dine' became shepherders. Sheep and goats have been, even up to this time, the most important sources of meat and wool for all our people. Following our ancestors' practices, we treat them respectfully. Even when we slay them we say a prayer of thankfulness to the animal's spirit for allowing us to use their meat, wool and hides.

In all those agreements, it was Turquoise Boy who did the

negotiations. Because of his spiritual power to communicate with animals, he served as a go-between for the animals and the humans. Because he could see things from both the men's and the women's points of view, Turquoise Boy was the most effective go-between even among the humans. He helped both the men and the women to see that it was not good to continue to live separately. He showed them how they both could benefit from coming back together. And they did benefit, both the men and the women.

Following Turquoise Boy's instructions, the men deemphasized their hunting and started acting more respectfully toward the animals. The main occupation of Navajo men from that time has been herding the sheep and goats. The women, meanwhile, learned from Turquoise Boy how to grow corn, and they did the farming. And that is how the Dine' way of life came about, with sheepherding and farming being the basis of our survival. It was a prosperous lifestyle, one that could not have begun without the help of the Two-Spirit person. Since that time, Dine' have always lived together with lots of relatives.