

## An Understated Sacredness by Rina Swentzell

Last summer as I stood on Tsikumu, one of Santa Clara Pueblo's sacred mountains, I was most impressed by the wind, the beauty of the clouds, and the flow of the hills below. There is a shrine on Tsikumu with a few well-placed stones which define an area scattered with cornmeal and a deeply worn path in the bedrock. No special structure celebrates the sacredness of this place. Architecturally, it is understated, almost inconspicuous.

Tsikumu is typical of Pueblo shrines in that it is visually disappointing. It is, nevertheless, a special place because it is a place of access to the underworld from which the Pueblo People emerged. It is the doorway of communication between the many simultaneous levels of Pueblo existence. Tsikumu allows for a flow of energy between this plane of reality and other concurrent realities. Understanding the visual understatement of the Tsikumu shrine, and other Pueblo shrines, is important to understanding Pueblo sacred space.

Visually and physically understating shrines, or for that matter, Pueblo community and house forms, stems from the very nature of Pueblo cosmology. At the center of the Pueblo belief system is the conviction that people are not separate from nature and natural forces. This insoluble connection with nature has existed from the beginning of time. The goal of human existence is to maintain wholeness or oneness with the natural universe. Pueblo people emerged from the underworld — from the inside of the earth.

The Tewa were living in Sipohene beneath Sandy Place Lake far to the north. The world under the lake was like this one, but it was dark. Supernaturals, men and animals lived together and death was unknown. (Ortiz 1969; p. 13)

After emerging from the darkness of the earth, the people founded their worlds (Pueblos) by first finding the centers.

The water spider spread his legs to the north and to the south, to the west and to the east, and then he said to the priests and the chiefs, "Now indeed I have measured it. Here is the center of the earth and here you must build your city!" But they said, "We have been hunting for the center of the earth for a long time, and wish to be sure." So they asked Rainbow to measure it also. So the Rainbow stretched his bright arch to the north and to the south, to the west and to the east, measuring the distance. Then he too gave his decision: "Here at this place is the heart of the earth." (Carr 1979; p. 17)

The "heart of the earth" or "*bu-ping-geh*" (heart of the Pueblo) for the Tewa people is the open community space within the village where ritual dances and other community activities happen. The "*bu-ping-geh*" contains the literal center of the earth or the "*nan-sipu*," which translates as the belly-root of the earth. Each Pueblo's cosmos encircles the *nan-sipu* and the surrounding mountains, where the sky and earth touch, are the boundaries of the well-organized spaces for people, animals, and spirits to live.

As at Tsikumu, all the boundary points, secondary level shrines and *nan-sipu* (center) of this well-organized cosmos are marked by a very inconspicuous stone or grouping of stones. This physical understating of sacred places is typical of Pueblo thinking because it is believed that it is better to understate than to overstate—to be one with everything rather than to be separate or conspicuous. There is, then, little need to create or cause distinctions—among people, or objects or, even, places. Since every thing, every body and every place is sacred and has essential worth, there is no need to individuate. The Christian myth of “fallen man,” who is contaminated, has no counterpart in Pueblo mythology. Nowhere in Pueblo myths do humans experience a fall from “God’s” grace. The people and their world are sacred and indivisible.

The shrines, boundary markers and centers, then, serve as constant reminders of the religious, symbolic nature of life. Because this realm of existence and other realms exist simultaneously, there is a continuous flow between levels of existence. Because the *nan-sipu* (center) is the symbolic point from which the people emerged, the shrines (as Tsikumu) are points where the possibility for contact with different levels of existence happen. Thus the cosmos becomes a continuous flowing whole, with visible connections between the seen and the unseen, the tangible and the intangible.

Being religiously ego-centric, Pueblo people do live at the center of the universe. Their world is sacramental. It is a world thoroughly impregnated with the energy, purpose and sense of the creative natural forces. It is all one. Sacredness, then, is recognizable in everyday life. The purpose of life for Pueblo people is to be intimately united with nature, intimately connected with everything in the natural world. Everything is included in that connectedness. Houses, for instance are “fed” cornmeal after construction so that they may have a good life. The physical community (*O-wing-geh*), or place where people live, is periodically healed by the Bear or medicine society. Sacralization of the entire world is easy to achieve because humans are not separate from other life forms, not created to have dominion over other life forms, not on a higher rung of living, not closer to God. Directional forces of the world are cyclical and move in and out of the earth rather than upward towards the heavens. Clay (dirt) is talked to because it is of the earth and shares in the flow of life. That flow described as *Po-wah-ha* (water-wind-breath), is the essence of life. Existence is not determined by a physical body or other physical manifestation but by the breath, which is symbolized by the movement of the water and wind. It is the breath which flows without distinction through the entirety of animate and inanimate existences. The *Po-wa-ha*, then, is the creative force causing life, much as the Christian God is the originator and creator of Christian existence.

The *Po-wa-ha* is non-discriminatory; the profane and secular overlap with the sacred and solemn. On a recent trip to Chaco Canyon a non-Indian friend expressed anger at his girlfriend for unknowingly stepping on a part of the reconstructed walls of Pueblo Bonito. The act, to him, was sacrilegious. I was puzzled. I felt nothing sacrilegious had occurred, for as a child I climbed the Puye Cliff ruins in full view of my parents and great grandmother, who expressed no particular concern. I was not admonished, as a child, for enjoying sitting or standing on the *nan-sipu* in the *bu-ping-geh* of Santa Clara Pueblo. I now figure it was because I was not considered spiritually distinct from the stone or the walls of Puye cliff. I could not cause desacralization. No one can cause desacralization because the concept of original sin is lacking in Pueblo thought. We are

not a fallen people, and, therefore, are still blessed with being one with our natural context. We flow in the *Po-wa-ha* along with all other manifestations of life.

Further, the belief that the *Po-wa-ha* flows through inanimate, as well as animate, beings allows buildings, ruins, places, to have life spans and to come and go as do other forms of life. Buildings and defined spaces are allowed to have birth and death. There is general acceptance that houses, human bodies, plant forms are temporary abodes through which the *Po-wa-ha* flows. They share in the essence of life which gives them cycles of life—birth and death. Traditional Santa Clara Pueblo with its soluble mud structures is an organic unit expanding, contracting and changing with other life forms and forces.

For the Pueblos, then, the entire world is a special, sacred place. Tsikumu, with its few gathered and well-placed stones, is a soft-spoken reminder that all life is sacred.

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