

## Chapter One

# Holism in Navajo Language and Culture

Ontology, the study or philosophy of the nature of existence, is not often discussed outside of the theological domain. This is probably because most people in modern Western societies share the same basic views about the nature of existence. These presuppositions only come into question when one immerses himself or herself in a philosophical system that is vastly different from the one learned as a youngster. Through nearly 30 years of exposure to and involvement with Navajo language and philosophy, I have struggled to understand very basic, deep level presuppositions Navajos make in their perceptions of themselves and the world about them. In this book, I am going to share with the reader some of the glimpses of understanding that I think I have garnered along the way in this intellectual and philosophical encounter.

In Western world view and in classical science, the ontological focus has been on the fundamental and smallest building blocks of the universe that can be isolated. Accordingly, Westerners have focused their attention on primary elements. Originally, these were thought to be four: earth, wind, water, and fire. Later, in chemistry, this list evolved into an expanding periodic chart of more than a hundred elements. Atomic physics has taken us further into the dissection of the atom, revealing not only the basic parts of the atom such as neutrons, electrons, and protons, but also such things as anti-neutrons and anti-protons. Further, subatomic physics has taken us into the world of particles and waves and now to the Physics of chaos.

In biology, our search for the fundamental reality of living organisms has taken us from the study of the organ to the tissue, to the cell, to the nucleus of the cell, to the gene, to DNA and RNA, and to the components and structures of each of these. This dissection of the world into ever smaller and smaller pieces is intended to take us closer to the nature of existence, revealing to us the keys to un-

derstanding our universe and life within it. The findings of these searches and these studies certainly have enlightened our understanding of the nature of existence within the Western ontological paradigm.

My interest here is not so much in the findings or conclusions of different ontological systems, but on the foci and orientations that seem to derive from the presuppositions of these systems. Why has the focus of Western research been on the smallest of the small, the most elemental of the elementary, the division of the atom, resulting in a seemingly never-ending search for the most elemental, the least divisible building blocks of the universe? In attempting to understand Western ontology, this particular focus seems to me to be the single most significant and revealing dimension of this ontology.

The ontological focus alluded to above, the search for the smallest of the small, is not the only type of research done in the West, but most other research conducted in the West is also of a dissective nature. The very disciplines in which people study and write dissect the universe into fragmentary knowledge, and the research that they conduct attempts to isolate facts and factors that cause or influence things to behave the way they do. Whether on the macro level or on the micro level, Western searches for causation and constitution seem to be mostly of a dissective nature. The most lauded studies and writings are masterpieces of dissection, regardless of the nature of the material being dissected.

The focus of Navajo ontology is not on the particle, the element, or the individual, but on the whole and the links, the connections and the relationships that unite the parts of a whole. From the Navajo perspective, the fundamental reality is the whole, not the part. In the Western ontological perspective, wholes are generally considered to be contingent and usually temporary arrangements of the parts. In Navajo ontological perspective, the wholes are the primary reality and the parts are contingent and temporal.

## Individual and Society

In the West, theories that explain the origin and nature of society assume the individual as the fundamental reality. Societies arose during a hypothetical time of

a war of individuals, all against all. The warring individuals at some point came together and decided to form a society to govern themselves. This is known in the literature of social and political philosophy as the social contract. Thus, the individual came first, and individuals relinquished some of their rights and freedoms in order to create a society to govern and preserve the peace. Society is a contingent arrangement of individuals that partially alters the natural state of individuality. All rights not voluntarily given to society in the form of a social contract remain vested in the individual.

Navajo social and political philosophy projects that Navajo existence began in a corporate structure. When Changing Woman created the Navajo, she created the four original clans. There was never a time when individuals existed apart from society. This corporate structure of society, based on clans united by the bonds of kinship and linked together by the ties generated by exogamous marriages, exhibits the fundamental reality in Navajo social thought. There was never a time in Navajo imagination when individuals existed separate and apart from society. The society, the corporate being, is what is given as a fact of nature. In this perspective, individuals are temporary and contingent; society is the fundamental and continuous reality.

To the Navajo, therefore, social action can only legitimately and effectively be undertaken on the basis of unanimity. In the past, all social and political deliberations required a total consensus before any decisions were made or any actions were taken. No individual, no partial group, either a minority or a majority, was invested with the right or power to impose its will on the whole. Leaders led only by the power of persuasion and by the consensus this persuasion generated. Even though a system of majority rule has been imposed on them for well over half a century, nearly all decisions today, whether at the chapter, district, or national level, are made unanimously. The few times when consensus has not been achieved have been very destructive. Whenever a majority has tried to impose its will on a minority without achieving consent, a disabling chasm has arisen. Fortunately, these chasms have eventually been bridged and holistic unanimity restored.

The Navajo emphasis on the corporate nature of human existence is further illustrated in their language and social behavior. Whereas Euro-Americans emphasize individuality through the extensive use of personal names in both address and

reference, Navajos traditionally do not use personal names in address or in reference when the person referred to is present. When speaking English and when using English names (given to Navajos because government agents could not pronounce their Navajo names) in non-traditional contexts, Navajos do sometimes today vary from this custom, but in Navajo contexts where Navajo is spoken this custom is rarely violated even today.

In Navajo society it is offensive to approach someone and say, "My name is Harry. What is your name?" Personal names isolate individual identity, leaving that identity void of any relationship with or obligation to anyone else. For the Navajo, such a postulation would be considered antithetical to the very nature of human existence. To think of oneself as an individual, separate and apart from everyone and everything else, is to be sick, abnormal, and ultimately untenable and inviable. To put someone else in this precarious and disabled state by addressing them with a personal name, or referring to them with a personal name when they are present, is extremely offensive.

Navajos address each other with kinship terms, even when there is no known kinship tie. The extensive nature of Navajo kin reckoning (Witherspoon 1975) links one directly to probably two thirds of the nation. But in the rare instance when no kin tie is apparent from an exhaustive search of genealogy and clan ties, Navajos will impute a kin tie that seems appropriate to the parties being addressed. The kin tie implies a common identity and a corporate, interdependent existence, expressed in and exemplified by mutual obligations of assistance and sharing.

Kinship, however, is not limited to other human beings. Kinship terms are applied to various animal species, to various aspects of the nonhuman environment, and to the earth and the sky. Kluckhohn, an anthropologist who spent over 30 years in learning about Navajo culture, once noted that the worst thing a Navajo could say about another person is, "He acts as though he had no kinsmen." Actually this comes from the Navajo lament, **Doo k'é nizin da**. This literally translates as "He or she does not think according to kinship." The implication is that such a person thinks of himself or herself as an individual, unrelated to anyone else. This is also to say that one is behaving in a sick, abnormal manner that is ultimately not viable. To correct one in such a state, a ceremony would need to be performed to reintegrate one harmoniously into the corporate society and environment.

Kinship terms in the Navajo language are constantly possessed. It is not possible in Navajo language to say “mother”. The stem for “mother” is **-má**. I placed a hyphen before this stem because this stem does not occur in speech without a possessive pronominal prefix. Thus, one says **shimá**, “my mother” and **nimá** “your mother”, but never just **má**, “mother.” If the identity of the person's mother is not known, the speaker will say **amá** “someone's mother.” This term will also be used if one wants to talk about mothers in a hypothetical manner. Moreover, this is true for every single kinship term, of which there are many (Witherspoon 1975, 1977).

The presupposition here seems to be that kinship by its very nature is relational, and kinspeople as well as kin categories cannot be detached from those people and categories to which they are related. A mother does not exist unless she has children. The children are part and parcel of her being a mother. The mother/child bond that the kin term labels is indivisible. Kinship for the Navajo presupposes a corporate whole.

There is another domain where the Navajo language has constantly possessed nouns, and it is also significant for an understanding of Navajo ontology as it relates to the society/individual perspective. Body parts are also constantly possessed. A leg, even if not attached to a body, is always 'someone's leg'. It can never be just a leg. The presupposition here appears to be that body parts do not generate themselves and are inconceivable and inviable apart from the body from which they came. The whole body is the fundamental reality; the parts are contingent on the whole. The body may function without some of its parts, but the parts can never function outside the body. Of course, Navajo body concepts originated before artificial limbs and organ transplants, but these practices have not really changed Navajo presuppositions about the body. A recipient of a kidney transplant refers to his new kidney as “my someone else's kidney.” This pattern also holds for human milk or the milk taken from other animals. One never says “pour me some milk.” Instead one says “for me pour someone's milk” or “for me pour the cow's milk.” The only time one can say **shibe'** “my milk” is when one is referring to one's own milk from one's own breast.

Navajo ontology seems to exhibit a difference in emphasis and focus from the ontology we generally find in the West and in classical science. I characterize the Navajo emphasis and focus as being *holistic* in contrast to the emphasis and focus in the West as being more *atomistic*. One tends to lead toward dissection as a means of understanding the nature of existence, while the other leads toward synthesis and integration as means of expressing the nature of existence. Parts and wholes exist in both ontological views, but they take on different natures and significances when viewed from an atomistic perspective as opposed to a holistic perspective. Nowhere is this more evident than in the two approaches to the individual/society domain.

## Single/Plural Domain in Navajo Language

The Navajo verb prefixes a subject pronoun and many other parts of speech to a stem that conveys the verbal idea. Singular or plural subjects of the verb are also indicated by verbal prefixes. For instance, **naashnish** translates “I work continuously around and about.” The underlined **sh** indicates the first person singular subject pronoun. To make this verb form first person plural, one would say **neijnish**. The **ii** indicates the first person plural subject pronoun “we.” However, this plural is a kind of corporate plural as distinct from what Young and Morgan have called the distributive plural (1987:62). The distributive plural is marked in the Navajo verb by the distributive plural marker **da**. When this marker is added to the verb “we work,” the result is **ndeijnish**. Rules of sound assimilation cause the vowel **a** in this case apparently to disappear.

The important point here is the semantic difference in the corporate plural and in the distributive plural. The corporate plural indicates “we work together in unison or in concert” whereas the distributive plural indicates “we work separately or independently.” This separateness or distributiveness could be either in space, time, or purpose. The corporate plural indicates holistic action performed or existing in unison, in concert, or in common. The distributive plural indicates atomistic being or action done separately. Importantly, the corporate plural is unmarked, whereas the distributive plural is marked. Though this may not necessarily hold for all such cases, here, given the preponderance of other collaborating cultural information, we can argue that the unmarked term is assumed and primary, while the

marked term is unassumed and secondary. We might extend this point to say that for the Navajo the corporate plural is the primary and fundamental reality, while the distributive plural is the secondary, temporary, or contingent reality.

The distributive plural marker **da** is used with all verbs and in all persons. Another example of the use of **da** as a distributive plural is found in the verb 'to be'. **Niidli** is the first person corporate plural, whereas **daniidli** is the first person distributive plural. A Navajo might say **Diné niidliinii** when referring to the Navajo people as a corporate nation in the phrase 'we, the Navajo people'. If the speaker wanted to speak in the first person of the Navajo people as a plurality of separate and distinct individuals and/or groups, he or she would say **Diné daniidliinii**, using the **da** distributive plural.

The corporate and distributive plurals exist in all parts of the grammar, not just in the verbs. Navajo nouns for the most part stand for both the singular and the corporate plural. The presupposition here seems to be that the corporate plural is in some way singular in nature. We could appropriately call the Navajo corporate plural a singular plural. For example, **dibé** is the noun referring to sheep. Like the English sheep, **dibé** can indicate either singular or plural. However, this parallel is not perfectly or completely similar. The Navajo plural **dibé** means sheep as a singular species, or as a single individual or a single herd. In contrast, **dibéda** (here the distributive plural marker **da** occurs as a suffix on nouns) means a plural number of ungrouped sheep (plural separate individuals), sheep of a variety of kinds or in a variety of herds (multiple separate groups). The same holds true for nearly all other nouns in the language.

Only a few nouns have separate forms for the singular and the corporate plural. An example of this rarity would be the terms for boy/boys:

**ashkii** boy (singular)  
**ashiiké** boys (corporate plural)  
**ashiikéda** boys (corporate distributive plural)

Here the corporate distributive plural refers to a plural number of groups of boys. Each of the groups in this case would be considered to be corporate or singular in nature but plural in the numbers of different or separate groups involved, such as

might be the case if one were referring to all the boys of the Boy Scouts, the Cub Scouts, and the Boys Clubs of America.

Because the ontological focus in English is on the individual, the particular, and the separate as the fundamental reality, the Navajo attention to various kinds of grouping and various kinds of plurals seems to English speakers to be rather final, unnecessary, or even burdensome. This is because the English perspective is fundamentally atomistic, whereas the Navajo ontological perspective is fundamentally holistic, emphasizing the whole over the part as the fundamental reality. Holism and atomism exist in both ontological frames or foci, but the primary focus on one or the other is different. This difference is very important in our attempt to understand Navajo art, language, and culture.

## **Hózhó and the Cosmic Concert**

**Hózhó** refers to the holistic environment and to the universal dimension of beauty, harmony, and well-being. **Nizhoní** refers to the particular item or individual that is nice, attractive or beautiful. The difference in these two terms is in the prefixes **ho-** and **ni-**. Elsewhere (1974:53) I have described the meanings of the **ho-** pronominal prefix as fivefold. These meanings are contrasted to the meanings of the prefix **ni-**. **Ho-** refers to (1) the general as opposed to the specific, (2) the whole as opposed to the part, (3) the abstract as opposed to the concrete, (4) the indefinite as opposed to the definite, and (5) the infinite as opposed to the finite. I could add here that the prefix **ho-** refers to an area, a domain, or a universe, as opposed to the prefix **ni-**, which refers to a specific item, entity, or being within an area, domain, or universe.

Each culture projects a particular construction of meaning and purpose on the universe, and each particular metaphorical construction colors and molds all experience within it. The Navajo metaphor envisions a universe where the primary orientation is directed toward the maintenance or the restoration of **hózhó**. **Hózhó** means “beauty” or “beautiful conditions.” But this is a term that means much more than beauty. For the Navajo, **hózhó** expresses the intellectual notion of order, the emotional state of happiness, the physical state of health, the moral condition of good, and the aesthetic dimension of harmony.



The Navajo do not look for beauty; they normally find themselves engulfed in it. When it is disrupted, they restore it; when it is lost or diminished, they renew it; when it is present, they celebrate it. The Navajo say in their own vernacular: **shil hózhó**, “with me there is beauty”; **shii' hózhó**, “in me there is beauty”; **shaa hózhó**, “from me beauty radiates.” The Navajo express and celebrate this “beauty” in speech and prayer, in song and dance, in myth and ritual, and in their daily lives and activities, as well as in their graphic arts. Art, therefore, is not divorced from subsistence, science, philosophy, or theology but is an integral part of both common activities and cosmic schemes. This integration is best expressed in a common Navajo prayer/poem:

With beauty (**hózhó**) before me, I walk.  
With beauty behind me, I walk.  
With beauty above me, I walk.  
With beauty below me, I walk.

From the East beauty has been renewed.  
From the South beauty has been renewed.  
From the West beauty has been renewed.  
From the North beauty has been renewed.  
From the zenith in the sky beauty has been renewed.  
From the nadir of the Earth beauty has been renewed.  
From all around me beauty has been renewed.

**Hózhó** is the grand metaphor by which the Navajo understand the world and their place within it. It describes what I sometimes refer to as a grand cosmic concert. Although the Navajo do not in their society present concerts for spectators, they do perform rituals that long term ethnologist of the Navajo, Gladys Reichard, correctly characterized as symphonies of the arts. These rituals contain oral literature, drama, dance, poetry, music, and sandpainting. They are performed to celebrate, to maintain, or to restore **hózhó**.

When a Navajo gets out of harmony with those other beings with whom he or she shares this world, the ceremonies are there to reformulate aboriginal harmony and beauty. These are participant symphonies, and the patient not only par-

ticipates in the symphony but also becomes the symphony through absorption. The patient becomes the central figure in the story, sings in chorus with the Singer (ritual leader), repeats the poetic prayers, and is placed directly in the sandpainting when it is finished. The sandpainting is not just to be seen but also to be absorbed. When absorbed, its beauty and harmony heal mind and body. The patient does not just visualize nature or the environment; the patient also becomes absorbed in its harmony and beauty.

The world of the Navajo was thought and sung into existence by the Holy People. The curing rites of the Navajo are referred to in the Navajo language as “sings” or “chants” (**hataál**) and those who lead them are known as 'Singers' (**Hataalii**). The singer assists the patient to cure himself or herself by allowing the patient to experience the cure through song and to visualize the cure through sandpainting. These are not short songs or performances; they last up to nine days, and, on the last night of the ceremony or the concert, the Singer sings all night. But the Singer does not sing alone. The patient and his or her relatives also join in the singing as a chorus. In the more complex ceremonies, the cure -- the restoration of **hózhó** -- is also danced as well as sung and painted.

The central and most important Navajo ceremonial, often called the backbone of Navajo religion, is the Blessingway. The name of this ceremonial is **Hózhóhójí**.

The name of the rite, *hózhóhójí* which we render Blessingway, is derived from a stem which has no single equivalent in English. Like the Greek *arete*, which is usually translated as excellence, but actually covers all forms of human excellence and implies an ideal of wholeness and harmony, the Navajo term includes everything a Navajo thinks is good . . . It expresses for the Navajo such concepts as the words beauty, perfection, harmony, goodness, normality, success, well-being, blessedness, order, ideal, do for us. (Wyman 1970:7).

The **jí** suffixed to **hózhó** in the name of this ritual means “in the manner of,” “on the side of,” or “along its path.” Thus, the ritual is done in the pathway of **hózhó** and is performed to generate, maintain, or restore **hózhó**. When reduced to one English word, **hózhó** is usually referred to as either beauty, harmony, or blessedness.

In his work on Navajo philosophy, Clyde Kluckhohn comments on the meaning of this all-important term:

There are, however, some abstract words, extremely difficult to render adequately in English, which are of the greatest importance for the understanding of Navajo philosophy. Perhaps the most significant of these is conveyed by the Navajo root **hózhó**. This is probably the central idea in Navajo religious thinking. It occurs in the names of two important ceremonials (Blessing way and Beauty way) and is frequently repeated in almost all prayers and songs. In various contexts it is best translated as "beautiful", "harmonious", "good", "blessed", "pleasant", and "satisfying". As a matter of fact, the difficulty with translation primarily reflects the poverty of English in terms that simultaneously have moral and aesthetic meaning. (1968:686).

**Hózhó** is unquestionably the most important word in the Navajo language and expresses the most important concept found in Navajo art and culture. This concept is holistic in nature, as is indicated in particular by the prefix **ho-**. **Hózhó** further illustrates the fundamental holistic emphasis in Navajo ontology. The Navajo comprehension of the world is aesthetic and holistic, for harmony is by its very nature interdependent and complementary. Just as the leg is dysfunctional apart from the body, all living beings become dysfunctional -- ill -- outside of or in disharmony with the cosmic concert. For the Navajo, health is restored when the patient is re-incorporated into the harmonious cosmic whole.

## **Symmetry and Holism**

One of the important questions raised here is "what is the relationship of the whole to the part?" In English, this question might more normally be asked in this manner: "what is the relationship of the part to the whole?" This inverted statement of the question reflects the English orientation toward a primary focus on the part and a secondary focus on the whole. For the Navajo, the appropriate issue is the relationship of the whole to the part.

Symmetry provides a succinct expression of the nature of the whole-to-part relationship. In symmetry, the whole consists of two or more complementary parts. Any dissection of the whole destroys the symmetry and elegance of both the whole and the parts. All parts have their identity, their function, their efficacy, and their beauty in relationship to the whole. Any marring or disabling of any part of a symmetrical whole destroys the integrity of the whole. Therefore, symmetry is inherently interdependent and holistic. The predominance of symmetry in Navajo art and culture is the topic of the next two chapters. Symmetry is mentioned here solely because of the light it sheds on the whole-to-part and part-to-part relationships.

## **The Passion for Synthesis**

The Navajo passion for synthesis is well-known and has often been pointed out and discussed by various scholars. Elsewhere (1977:200-202), I discussed synthesis as the dominant pattern in the Navajo intellectual and aesthetic style. In their thinking, in their works of art and in their daily lives, the Navajo seem to be constantly and creatively integrating and synthesizing. The outward trappings of much of their culture consist of the synthetic and creative blending of the old and the new, the native and the alien, the pragmatic and the idealistic, the familiar and the unfamiliar.

Synthesis has been a major feature of Navajo history. Many aspects of Navajo life today are practices the Navajo have adopted and adapted from alien peoples and cultures. In the area of subsistence, these include most noticeably agriculture, the pastoral economy, wage work, building trades and skills, automobiles, and

a cash and capitalistic economy. In the recreational arena, most noticeable are rodeo and basketball. In the artistic arena are silver and turquoise jewelry, weaving and painting, as well as country and western music. In the non-material realm are political institutions, religious institutions, and educational institutions. In the media realm are Navajo newspapers, radio stations, and a TV station.

None of these features of contemporary Navajo culture has been adopted wholesale. In each case, the Navajo have blended the new components of their culture with older, more ancient ones, and in the process have given a distinctively Navajo style and composition to all of them, making the result a successful, non-disruptive integration. Even in the case of imposed institutions, such as political, educational, and religious ones, the Navajo have eventually taken control of these institutions, re-oriented them, and thus effectively integrated them with more traditional practices and concepts.

The most interesting aspect of this process of absorption is that the result of the synthesis of the old and the new remains uniquely Navajo. The Navajo absorb without becoming absorbed; that is, they absorb from other cultures without being absorbed by those other cultures. Under enormous pressures and against great odds, they have generally retained their unique identity and style, as well as their cultural integrity.

The Navajo are opportunistic in their view of external and new phenomena with which they come into contact. They approach these new phenomena without fear or anxiety but with the excitement of prospective synthesis:

The fundamental pattern of the Navaho world view is dialectical: thesis, antithesis, synthesis . . . Kierkegaard, I think, called anxiety the dizziness of freedom. For the Navaho, anxiety . . . is the dizziness of prospective synthesis which, raising life to the highest degree of power and control, is the consummation of the Navaho way. (Mills 1959:201-202).

The Navajo passion for synthesis does not just apply to opposites (thesis and antithesis), but also applies to anything that is diverse and unrelated. Navajo pat-

terns of synthesis relate these previously unrelated, diverse phenomena into new and creative syntheses. In this diversity the Navajo see a primary dualism between static and active phenomena, analogically if not intrinsically associated with thought and speech, inner and outer, male and female.

In Language and Art in the Navajo Universe, I discussed how static and active seemed to be the most fundamental observation in the Navajo view and classification of the world (1977:63-202). The intellectual style found in Navajo cultural formulations is not content, however, with the static nature of simple dualism. It reaches for the dynamic and aesthetically pleasing nature of creative, holistic synthesis.

The generation of life and the creation of form involves the transformation of the static condition into the active dimension, but the bidirectional aspect of movement, life, and creation always returns movement to rest, life to death, order to randomness, and beauty to plainness. Therefore, life must be regenerated, movement rejuvenated, order restored, and beauty renewed. This infinite process goes from static to active and from active to static. Not surprisingly, then, Changing Woman, the very essence and personification of regeneration, rejuvenation, renewal, and dynamic beauty, is the Mother of the Navajo and the most beautiful and the most blessed of all the Holy People. Appropriately, she is the child of the male **Sa'ah Naaghái** (thought) and the female **Bik'eh Hózhó** (speech). This is the model of creative synthesis that underlies Navajo language, history, and culture. This same model or pattern also informs the dynamic, holistic symmetry found in Navajo art.

The passion for synthesis, integration, and assimilation is also exhibited in Navajo grammar. The Navajo verb compacts or synthesizes an enormous amount of meaning and a variety of parts of speech into a single lexical item. The basic element of the Navajo verb is the stem that carries the verbal meaning. All other meaning is conveyed by an elaborate system of prefixes. Many ordered prefix slots, into each of which only certain kinds of information can be installed, convey such information as subject, direct object, indirect object, verbal modifications such as aspect, mode, and theme, and adverbial information such as repetition, revolution, and serial sequence. Directional and postpositional prefixes also have their pre-ordered slots in the verbal system. Plurality of subjects and objects is

also indicated within the prefix system. In some cases, the translation of one Navajo verb might require nearly an entire English paragraph.

The Navajo not only assimilate all this information and all these parts of speech into a single complex lexical entity that we call a verb, they also show an insistent pattern of phonological assimilation within the morphological elements that are used to indicate all the varieties of information potentially conveyed by the verbal system. The phonological rules that govern these patterns of sound assimilation in the morphology of the verbal system are quite complicated and are beyond the scope of this chapter. The point here is that synthetic assimilation is a major feature of the Navajo language and that it occurs both in the phonology and in the morphology of the verbal system.

The Navajo passion for integration, synthesis, and assimilation of diverse elements into a holistic pattern or structure is likely related to the absorbant nature of the Navajo verb. If this is true, it is an element they must share with other Athabaskan speakers, because this absorbant verbal pattern is shared with all of them. This means that this passion for synthesis is a very ancient tradition among Athabaskan speakers, but this does not mean that it is necessarily given the same meaning, expression, or prominence in every contemporary Athabaskan-speaking community.

Navajo world view focuses on holistic patterns, and this holistic emphasis generates in part at least the Navajo passion for synthesis. To be Navajo in outlook and practice is to look for relationships, for prospective synthesis, and for holistic essence. Although the Navajo recognize the existence and even the structural necessity for disorder (**hocho'**), they cannot tolerate disorder for long periods of time. To them, it is sickness -- illness in both the mind and in the body, fragmentation in the environment and in the universe, disharmony in customary relationships and holistic schemes. When it occurs, **hózhó** -- holism, health and harmony -- must be renewed, regenerated, or restored. That is the purpose of prayer, ritual, ceremony, myth, song, and art.

Living, playing, thinking, and speaking with Navajo people in their own contexts and in their own language has required me to think in relational, holistic terms. The tendency toward relatedness, synthesis and holism is not only deeply

imbedded in the conscious and in the unconscious Navajo mind; it is also practiced every day in ways one might not expect or imagine. An example will illustrate this point.

While I was director of the Navajo Language Institute at the Navajo Academy, a common problem was solved in an uncommon manner. One night my secretary's husband was on his way home from a trip. The fuel pump on his car became dysfunctional. No shops were nearby, and those faraway were not open. The response to this situation among Anglos -- even among those who are very good auto mechanics -- would likely have been to give up until a replacement part could be found. Fuel pumps are rarely if ever repairable. This man, however, saw a relationship -- an analogy -- that would probably have escaped even the most mechanically-minded, non-Navajo person. It occurred to him that the windshield wipers on his older car were also made functional by a pump. He took the vacuum pump from the windshield wiper apparatus, attached it to the fuel line, turned on the windshield wiper switch, started the car, and drove home.

I am not saying that such an event would never happen among those whose collective heritage produced the automobile, but I am saying that such an event would occur most frequently -- in terms of statistical significance -- among the Navajo. This is not because the Navajo know more about automobiles than we do, but because they have a greater tendency to think in terms of relationships -- analogical as well as logical, functional as well as visual, and material as well as conceptual.

In the Western intellectual tradition, we tend to dissect our world, to divide and subdivide it in terms of domains and categories, and to analyze it in terms of part-to-whole relationships and functions. This is why when a part on our cars becomes dysfunctional, we think of replacing the part with another part, or with the larger part within which the smaller is contained, not by replacing one function with another function. Function requires a relational analysis and contextual perspective.

Now I am not saying that the Navajo do not ever make part to whole distinctions, or that Westerners never think in terms of relationships, analogical or otherwise. But I do contend that there is a distinct and a significant difference in how



much the Navajo tend to think in terms of analogical relationships and how much those trained in the Western tradition tend to think in analogical relationships. The Navajo did not discover the cell, the atom, DNA or nuclear reaction; their attention has been focused on integration, not dissection, macro order rather than microscopic subdivision, cosmic scheme rather than atomic reaction, and synthesis rather than fragmentation.