***Final Paper and Reflection***

***Part 1: Cultural Identity and Places***

***Part 2: Rites of Passage***

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***Part I: Cultural Identity and Places***

I decided to take this course on oral traditions across societies to help explore storytelling as a modality of passing on wisdom in a community. Oral traditions keep alive the thoughts, experiences and stories of a particular people through the process of “language as cultural practice”(Nicholas, 2008). The oral traditions of a particular group are comprised of an array of communication forms and symbols systems. This may consist of prayers, chants, rituals, songs, dance, narratives, storytelling, visual expressions and mundane daily activities.

During this semester I have been struggling with my personal cultural identity. The readings, the discussions in class and our exchange with the University of Alaska have pushed me deeper into a self-discovery of who I am and what I represent.

Upon reflection of my life’s journey I started with my parent’s background. My father was raised in Pennsylvania and comes from what is commonly known as a “Pennsylvania Dutch” family. My father’s parents were from Germany and were first generation Americans. My mother was born in Mississippi and raised with deep southern roots. My mother’s families came from England and Ireland, but have been in the United States for several generations. I even have a famous ancestor by the name of Buffalo Bill Cody.

If I think back to my early childhood I remember the kitchens of both of my grandmothers. The smells and food are uniquely different, and to this day I can recall the traditional potpie noodles of my Nanny from the north and the fried chicken of Mother Grand in the south. However, when I was six my father died suddenly. My mother decided to move out west to escape the turmoil of the events surrounding the civil rights movement in the south during the sixties. I think it was during this transition that I might have lost some of my place and cultural identity by perhaps gaining new ones.

When I started a new life, in a new place, my “roots” were not planted deeply in this new land. As much as I love Arizona and it is my home, I often feel like a stranger in a strange land. In Basso’s book, *Wisdom Sits In Places,* he writes about place names and how the land stalks you. I felt an emptiness of not having local places that looks after me or reminds of how to live right or how to be strong (p. 38-39). My ancestors did not live in this land. There are not stories or traditions to connect me to my new surroundings. It is unfortunate that many social scientist and ecologists are not interested in exploring what people take their environment to mean. They neglect to fully investigate the relationships between the land and the people (p. 66). On a positive note, we can adopt or create new stories and traditions that will bring meaning and build a relationship between our children and the environment in which we live.

In my adult years, I have been fortunate to be able to travel the world and experience many lands and people. In some ways to world has stalked me as I learn to build a relationship with many places and revisit them in my travels. An example of this is when we moved back to Europe. My husband and I had lived in Germany in the early 90’s. We took a backpacking trip through southern Germany and Switzerland before coming back to the United States. In 2006, my husband was working in Germany again. We decided to take our children on the same trip we had done in the 90’s. The land and places did stalk us as we went to places that seem to stand the test of time. Our memories of the stories we told to our children of “our time when we were here before” were so vivid and alive that twenty years seemed to melt away. My children, who are now young adults, still remember our time in Europe with colorful stories from the past and their own experiences from the journey. Maybe one day they too will bring their children to these places and tell “our stories”.

I have always been drawn to people’s stories. One of my favorite pastimes is when we just sit around telling stories about our past. The quote by Clyde Kluckhohn in Basso’s book states, “the most interesting claims people make are those they make about themselves”(p. 37). This statement has made me want to listen deeper to people’s stories, not only when I am doing fieldwork, but throughout my daily life. I believe that stories give the listener a glimpse into a person’s soul, their identity and their beliefs, but only if they are truly listening.

Basso passes on many gems of wisdom he learned from truly listening to Nick Thompson. One statement that made an impression upon me is, “That is what we know about our stories. They go to work on your mind and make you think about your life…” (p. 58). This is a powerful statement to consider as I venture into my research on the use of narratives for assessment purposes. Stories do work on your mind and make you think deeper. Stories help you define yourself, where you come from and what you know.

Another powerful idea coming from Western Apache storytelling is the idea of not “speaking too much” when narrating a story. When a speaker describes too busily, supplies too many details or repeats too many times it takes from the listener the ability build freely or act creatively their own depiction of the story. The speaker demands that the listener experience the story as “I do” and insult the imaginative capabilities of the listener. An effective narrator should “open up thinking” of the listener, not “hold down their minds” (p. 85). This is an effective technique in storytelling I hope to pass on in my own stories as well as sharing with others who will practice storytelling for various academic purposes.

As my research evolves into studying the practice of storytelling for academic purposes I will keep in mind the thoughts of Witherspoon and his study of the Navajo Universe. When listening to and telling stories, it is important to remember that human beings actually create the world within which they live, think, speak and act. And even though they occupy the same globe, they traverse very different worlds” (p. 3). Through the telling of stories and creation of art man relates to one another. With language man has the ability to express himself actively, creatively and become a powerful part of his universe. If he is void of language, then he is impotent, ignorant, isolated and static (p. 62). Our language and our stories become a vital piece of who we are, where we come from and ultimately assist in pointing us to where we are going in this life.

Our journey throughout this life is witnessed and guided by language and stories. It is a dynamic event, not one that stands stills. Witherspoon shares the Navajo view of this truth with the idea that the experience of creating and expressing art is the true beauty, not in observing or preserving the final product. The beauty is not static, but dynamic. The beauty flows from one to another, it is more of a relationship among things, instead of a thing to be preserved and pondered (p. 178).

This is a difficult concept for someone from my culture to grasp, as we are constantly preserving and tagging value to the end product of the process or journey. We are always reaching for the goals as we race through the experience, one example of this the journey to get a college diploma. Some of us may take our time and enjoy the journey, but most are so focused on the end that much is missed along the way. As I make my way through the journey of my degree and career, I try to enjoy the moments, but I also try and reflect inwardly upon my experiences and how these experiences can form me into a better educator, researcher and person.

In the Griffin-Pierce book, *Earth is my Mother Sky is my Father*, the Navajos perspective on life is revealed and is very different from the Western viewpoint. In the western world, we seek to change the world as an adaptive or problem solving strategy. However, the Navajos take on a more epistemological approach where the change happens in the perception of how one views the world. It is more of an inner conscience or gestalt change, which ultimately leads to an outward change (p. 197). The course has enlightened me to the Navajos way of thinking and in turned has helped to change my perception. The quotes from one of Griffin-Pierce’s colleagues helps me to understand the power of the Navajo way, “When I am lonely, the Mountains call to me.” The Mountains are alive and full of power. By listening and aligning ones self with the earth and the universe we can become connected with what is timeless and eternal. We must change ourselves and adapt to the earth, if we are to succeed and survive.

Another way of surviving in this world is to coexist with people from different cultures. We need to be respectful of each other’s belief systems and ways of thinking. In the book, The Yaqui Deer Songs, the author Maso Bwikam is very sensitive to the entwining of beliefs and traditions of two very distinctive cultures. Throughout the book, there is the weaving of the Yaqui belief system with that of Catholicism. Yet the Yaqui make the Catholic Church give them something that is distinctly their own culture. The Yaqui add the traditions of another’s belief system, while remaining significantly apart with their own stories and traditions. This merging helped the Yaqui to survive and coexist with the Spanish Jesuit missionaries who came to their land (p. 39-40).

We must learn to listen to the earth and coexist with each other as we strive to survive in this life. We can learn lessons for each other’s culture, traditions and beliefs as we journey through our existence on this plant. As we get to know each other and listen to one another’s stories we can start to understand and connect on a much deep level.

***Part II: Rites of Passage***

Rites of passage are the milestones that guide humans through the journey of life. However, today the term “rites of passage” is not often used in the common vernacular. Rites of passage have evolved into customs or events’ signifying a change is occurring in the person’s life. These customs become rhythms woven into the passages of our lives. Many of these rites of passage are passed down through the generations by oral means rather than written or recorded methods.

Rites of passage are found in all cultures and usually include three phases or changes in one’s life pattern. These pattern changes are: separation, transition and incorporation. In the contemporary American culture, we celebrate birth, puberty and marriage as the three major rites of passage. Each of these trigger the three phases mentioned above: 1) birth is a separation from the mother’s body, 2) puberty is a transition from childhood to adulthood and 3) marriage is the incorporation with another human being.

The visual recording of a rite of passage has become an important part of the current American culture. With the advent of cameras and video devices many treat the recording of an event as much a rite of passage as the event itself. One example of this is the senior picture taken before the actual graduation. Official photos are more widely seen for high school graduation, but occur at every level of academic achievement. This became evident to me on one occasion, as my five year old and his peers were preparing to walk across the stage to graduate from kindergarten, I ran up to adjust something on the stage, when I turned around I encountered a sea of cameras that were overwhelming. Every parent, grandparent and friend was posed to capture this small rite of passage on film. In some ways, these recording become our way to create an oral narration of a cultural tradition.

We use these rites of passage to define who we are and the relationship we have with others. These rites or customs help us to mark time and to shape our lives based upon the prescribed patterns of our culture. Most of us have the choice about whether to complete a particular rite of passage forged by our culture or to forgo the less traditional path and adopt customs from another place or time. Through these choices we establish the itinerary of our life, shaping ourselves in the present, planning for the future and reshaping our pasts. As individuals from future generations make decisions about customs, do they in fact lead the culture down their own pathway or on a different journey? Could this be an insight into how cultures survive and thrive through the turmoil of time?

 There is the issue between the young people of an ethnic culture having to decide between the customs of their culture and the customs of the mainstream culture. For example, a girl from a Catholic Mexican-America family may be given the choice to have a Quinceanera to celebrate her coming of age or instead use the money purchase her first car. This type of choice is usually for economic reason and not for the shunning of the custom, however it is a decision that puts the ethnic and mainstream ideology at odds with each other.

Another issue that arises around rites of passage is the legal definition of the age in which a person crosses over to adulthood. In the Jewish religion, a young boy goes through the Mar Mitzvah at the age of 13. In the traditional Jewish society, once he completes this ceremony has become a man and takes on the responsibility of adulthood. However in the United States, he is legally still a child. This ceremony then becomes an important step toward his maturity as an adult, but through time the outcome of the event has been defined and diluted by the mainstream culture and laws.

The mainstream culture in the United Stares has become increasingly hedonistic in nature, as it tends to find pleasures based on technology and in materialism. However, we do find both traditional and new rites of passage playing an important role in the development of coming of age young people in today’s society. The one major rite of passage happening with today’s teenagers is the passing of the driver’s license test. There are many events leading up to the test that are definitely more oral and physical in nature than academic or written. We teach our children to drive first by example and then by guiding them through the practice of driving a vehicle. We give instructions, telling stories and quiz them on the rules of the road. Finally, they need to pass both a written and driving test set by the community. Once they have their driver’s license they are given more rights in the adult world. They have more independence and responsibility. The freedom that comes with being able to drive around the community without the supervision of parents is a major step on the journey from adolescents to adulthood.

In reflecting upon the rites of passage through epistemology, ontology and axiology, there is a thread or pattern that shows us the importance of these traditions in our cultures.

Epistemology is the study of the origins of knowledge. It explores what knowledge is, how it is acquired, and the possible extent to which a given subject or entity can be known. Rites of passage assist an individual in gaining and achieving knowledge of the community or culture. The individual usually has to pass a test or perform in some way to show the community they are ready to go on to the next level. They need to prove they have gained the knowledge to be proficient in whatever they are achieving.

Ontology is the study of the origins of being or existence. In exploring the spiritual or state of being side of rites of passage we need to look at ceremonies that take this side of the equation into account. When a ceremony denies the physical and puts more emphasis on the spiritual, then the rite of passage taps into the nature and relations of being. The Sunrise Ceremony of the Western Apache Tribe is one example where the spiritual being must over come the physical to persevere in making to the end of the ceremony. For anyone who has ever set aside the physical to achieve a goal, there comes a time during the event when something inside of you takes control and pushes through. I believe the origins of being or knowing happens when an individual goes through a special ceremony or event taking them to the next level existence.

Finally, in looking at the axiology or the study of the origins of value in rites of passage, we find there is a longing or desire for a pivotal moment to assign value to the transition from one phase of our life journey. It is worth taking the time to honor an individual as they pass from one stage of life to another. In the season of graduation, we find there is a coming together of family and friend, to appreciate and celebrate a young person’s accomplishment. This is for many the rite of passage from being financially supported by their parent to living a life separate, independent and fully on their own. In dissecting the axiology of graduation from college in terms of a rite of passage there is the thought of instrumental (good for some purpose) value and the intrinsic (being good at doing something) value. Are there both good in this journey as a mean and or as an end? On another level is there contributory value (being good as part of a whole) or final value (being good as the whole)?

Having experienced the college graduation as a rite of passage, I believe it has value in all of these arenas. There is value in the journey through the college experience and there is a satisfaction in walking across the stage and being honored by your family and friends for an accomplishment. Another aspect of valve would be the example that adults give to children as they complete a journey and cross over into another realm of reality. It is vital that children embrace the importance of moving on to other phases of life.

In summary, rites of passage have evolved over the generations, but still remain as a necessary and important part of every culture and society around the world. Some rites of passage may be more formal and ceremonial, while others are informal and casual. However, they are still prevalent in our modern cultures, helping to define and identify who we are and where we come from and where we are going.

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