

DINÉ DOCTOR: A LATTER-DAY SAINT STORY OF HEALING

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“They say that they are like firemen. They know what they signed up for. They must fulfill their call for duty.” This is what my mother told me when I asked why my dad had to continue working in the clinic during the first waves of the coronavirus outbreaks in 2020.

We come from the Kinyaa’áanii, Towering House, clan of the Navajo Nation. We call ourselves Diné. My father is born for the Tsi’naajinii, Black Streak Wood People, clan. He is in his seventies and has been practicing medicine since the late 1970s. He is a family and community medicine physician who retired from the Indian Health Service but has continued to practice medicine in Monument Valley, Navajo Nation for several years. I used to joke that he would work until he died, but I now sense that fear every day. Service, care, and healing have been his purpose. His forebears were hataalii—Diné healers—before him.

My father is one of my heroes, but I never imagined that he would be a hero on the frontlines against COVID-19. He told me and my family in a Zoom video meeting from his trailer in Monument Valley on Easter of 2020: “I do not do what I do because I’m a hero. I do it because I care.” He works with some Diné elders who are over ninety years old, and some of his patients only speak Navajo—his first language that now only a few medical practitioners in the world know fluently like him. Since time immemorial, Diné have passed on teachings of *Si’qh Naaghái Bik’eh Hózhó*, simply translated as “walk in beauty” or “live to old age in beauty.” Healing is an essential part of this never-ending journey and cycles through generations and time, as we

constantly seek to restore balance and harmony—*hózhó*—in all things within and around us. My father's stories, as a Diné Latter-day Saint convert, have illuminated varied meanings of *hózhó*, faith, and healing.

Our Diné ancestors have faced many *naayéé'*, monsters, and not only survived but thrived as a people through generations. In oral tradition, the Hero Twins defeated *Yé'itsoh*, who was covered in metal, and then applied the monster's broken armor for common purposes such as cutting knives. The twin heroes did not kill all the monsters that have plagued humanity such as poverty and sickness. Diné heroes have come and gone, continuing the fight against the monsters of their eras. Growing up, my father heard the stories of warriors such as Monster Slayer and Child Born for Water and of their mother *Asdzáá Nádleehé*. He learned that the twin heroes could not defeat the monsters alone, and they continued to develop their strengths. Little did he know then, as a child, that he would one day fight the *naayéé'* of disease through medicine.

When my father was young, his kin called him “*ashkii yázhí*,” or “little boy.” He was the youngest son in his family. His grandmother, *bimá sání*, told him and his siblings stories at night in their hogan, especially during the winters. He remembers how she recalled the Long Walk, when our Diné ancestors marched eastward under the removal force of the US military. *Bimá sání* showed him the census number that she tattooed on her wrist so that she could always know it for rations that the government provided as part of the negotiated terms after Navajos returned to their ancestral homelands. They remained, however, restricted by the US government and by the marked boundaries of a reservation. *Ashkii Yázhí* learned Diné *bizaad*, the Navajo language, from his mother and *bimá sání* before he was sent to an Indian boarding school by the time he was five years old. As *Ashkii Yázhí* cried with the other boarding schoolchildren who longed for home, one of the dorm aides started to sing about Jesus. That was the first time that my father remembers hearing the name. He had no idea who that was. But

the song comforted him, and he later claims that he was feeling the spirit of Christ with him at that moment.

As an oral historian, I have interviewed my father on several occasions. In particular, I have asked him about his boarding school experiences and his conversion to the Latter-day Saint faith. I once interviewed him in his native tongue, Diné bizaad. The interview was brief because of my limited ability in the Navajo language, but I am grateful that I was determined because one of his responses continues to resonate with me. My father told me that the Navajo language is sacred: “Díí Saad díyíín nahalin.” He has reminded me to always value our ancestral language, stories, and people. Diné bizaad and Diné stories connect us to beings beyond this mortal world—it connects us to our past and ancestors.

As media, stories, and cries of my people and community have shown the rampage of Dikos Nstaaígíí-19—the coronavirus monster—in Navajo Nation, I reflect on my father’s ongoing story of healing as a Diné doctor. I have been asking my father questions more frequently, trying to understand, document, and share the struggles that the Navajo Nation and Diné health services are facing with COVID-19 outbreaks. My father once told me that he decided to become a doctor during his mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. After a series of conversations in the spring of 2020, I had a moment to pose the question to him: “When and why did you decide to become a doctor?” His response inspired this narrative, because he answered with a story.

Ashkii Yázhí’s father was a hataaíí, like his grandfather. His father raised him with ceremonies while preparing Ashkii Yázhí to become a healer according to Diné ancestral practices and knowledge. During a break from his studies at Brigham Young University, Ashkii Yázhí visited home to announce to his family that he had joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was excited to share his joy and testimony of the Latter-day Saint faith, especially with his father.

But Ashkii Yázhí's conversion infuriated his father, who then banned him from their home and family. Although he grieved the prospects of never seeing his father and family again, Ashkii Yázhí chose soon after to become a missionary for the Church. On his mission application, he intentionally omitted any information about his Diné background and claimed residency in Idaho, but he was still assigned to the Southwest Indian Mission that included the Navajo Reservation.

In 1969, during his mission, Ashkii Yázhí and his mission companion, Elder Anderson, were visiting and teaching Diné families in the Whitehorse community. They tried to serve the people whom they visited. For one family in particular, Ashkii Yázhí and Elder Anderson helped tend to the children and changed their diapers without being asked. One day when they came to visit the hogan, the pregnant mother of the home, Mary Smith, started to go into labor. She begged the missionaries to drive her to the nearest hospital in their pickup truck. The father stayed with the small children while the missionaries rushed with Mary to the hospital. Elder Anderson drove the truck, and Ashkii Yázhí sat in the back of the truck with Mary, who was lying down on a set of blankets and sheepskins that they arranged for her.

On the bumpy dirt roads, Mary's cries and moans intensified. The baby's black head of hair began to appear, and Ashkii Yázhí was the only one there to catch *awéé'*, the baby, in the truck bed. Mary told Ashkii Yázhí how to tie the umbilical cord. When they finally arrived at the Crownpoint hospital, Ashkii Yázhí and Elder Anderson assisted Mary with *awéé'* and the umbilical cord still connected. Mary Smith would then always tell people that my father, Ashkii Yázhí, delivered her baby. My father recounted this story with a knot in his throat and teary eyes, sharing how he thought that after these experiences on his mission: "Maybe, I will be a doctor." This is when he started to envision himself as a Diné doctor.

In early May 2020, I had to tell my father that his sister, *shádí*, was dying from the coronavirus. I woke up that morning, thinking about

my aunt and crying. I just knew that she was struggling. Then, my cousin called to tell me that my aunt was getting worse. Through tears, my father's voice quivered as he tried to console me: "It's okay to cry. We will see her again." Many of my father's loved ones, like his own father, were never baptized in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints before they passed on. When possible, Ashkii Yázhí goes to the temple for his family with faith in eternal life and happiness. Before Church officials closed the temples due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my father and mother would go to the temple every week. My father firmly views the temple as a sanctuary and a holy place, while he also recognizes the sacred mountains and homelands that bimá sání, his father, and ancestors taught him to know. Healing underlies *Si'qh Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhó* as a cycling journey and process of restoring balance and well-being. Ashkii Yázhí did not become the healer that his father expected him to be, but he has continued the path of healing and walking in beauty that his father would have honored.

In remembrance and honor of nihimá Florence and other victims of Dikos Nstaaígíí-19. "They called her Náánábaa'—She Returns from War."

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