

Sheila Goldtooth Transcript

Amy Chatelaine: Welcome to Chinle, Arizona, the center of Navajo Nation. In the Navajo language, Chinle means “where the water flows out,” and references the location where Chinle Creek flows out of the Canyon de Chelly. These waters contribute to the fertility of the valley, sustaining the centuries-old relationship between the Navajo, the land, and all that dwells in the shelter of the canyon walls.

When John first spoke with our next teacher, Sheila Goldtooth, she was teaching Navajo culture and philosophy at Diné College in Chinle. Sheila devotes particular attention and care to young people in her other role as a traditional healer. It's this image of “flowing out” that I hear in her story, as she holds ceremonial space for the emotions that arise in navigating the conflicting values and expectations of Western and Navajo society.

Here is Sheila's American story.

Sheila Goldtooth: Hello, yá'át'éeéh. I am Sheila Goldtooth. I am of the Coyote Pass clan, which is the Ma 'ii deeshgiizhnii clan, and then I am born for the Red House people, Red House clan. My maternal grandfathers are the Under His Cover clan, the Bitáhnis, and then my paternal grandfathers are the Mexican clan, Naakai dine'é. And I'm from Round Rock, Arizona, within the Navajo Reservation and Navajo Nation.

I am a traditional healer, practitioner, chanter, medicine woman. The name of what I do changes or is different, you know, for people. But I call myself a traditional practitioner. I do ceremonies, Navajo traditional ceremonies, from the Blessing Way. The Blessing Way is basically putting a person back in balance, putting a person back in harmony from anything that they've done wrong or anything where they need to get back into a healing path. So that's what I do.

I am also an adjunct faculty within a college, so I teach mainly Navajo culture, Navajo philosophy. And then I am a mother. That's who I am.

I grew up in, I call it, a very rich environment of my Navajo culture, the Diné culture. So I learned a lot of the ceremonies. I learned a lot about nature. I learned a lot about our culture when I was young, growing up. So I always say that I grew up in a culture where I was able to taste it, feel it, touch it, smell it, hear it. So I grew up in my culture in that way, as a practitioner and in the fields that I've been in.

Working with youth, a lot of times they need somebody to listen to them. They need somebody just to sit and listen to them, and not prejudice them or not have assumptions already before they can talk to somebody. And I have found that that is usually the situation. The mom does not hear out the child. The dad does not hear out the child. The grandma, the grandpa don't hear out the child. And a lot of times it's just a big struggle. Before they could finish a sentence, they feel like they're not respected.

And that's when all these other things will start to happen. They will start to get defiant. They will feel that they're not important. They will feel they're not respected, not loved. When you have the discipline of understanding who you are and what you can do when you

struggle, these struggles that come about, you're going to know how to be able to challenge them, and you're going to be able to overcome the obstacles that come your way.

Some of the obstacles I always see is just the difference between the Western society and then the Navajo society. In a sense, one thing is wealth. We measure wealth a little differently, where in a Western society, wealth is usually measured by money, financial stuff, and how much a person has. In our culture, it's more by the love that we have. It's more by the children, the family that we have, the relatives. Love is a big factor of being wealthy.

I think those are some of the struggles that we don't really understand. When we're young, we want to be successful, but we don't know really what success is because Western society measures success in a different way than you would in a Navajo society. When our young people go out, they kind of struggle with that, because they don't know which is which, and they don't really understand. Because they're taught one thing at home, and then when they go out into the Western world, it's a little different.

Then definitely with just the language itself, Navajo language is descriptive language, and it's something that we speak in the home. We speak to our children in the Navajo language. So when you go out into the Western society, you have to learn the English language, and sometimes you can't pronounce certain words or you can't say certain words or you're unfamiliar with the language and you're trying to learn it. If you speak broken English, you're kind of seen as uneducated. You're kind of looked down upon. So that also I think is a struggle and a barrier to some of our kids out there.

When I used to work with adolescents over at *[inaudible]* Hospital, they had an adolescent program there. One of the things that a lot of the youth were struggling with was the grief and loss. They never had the opportunity to talk about their emotions. They never had the opportunity to talk about the struggles that they were having with having lost a loved one. So it was something that was just building inside of them. And so they never got the opportunity to really speak about it. That led them to have suicidal ideation or another type of affliction.

When we worked with them, they were able to finally get out a lot of their emotions. You don't talk about your problems or your situations. That's where you internalize it, and it becomes baggage and it becomes something that can make you sick. And that's what we have with a lot of our patients that come to us.

Some of it could be things that they've done wrong. It could be things that have happened to them, and they kind of keep that in sight. And it goes on for years, until finally they start getting some sort of physical illness or maybe some sort of mental type of illness and so forth.

So we're going to have different sets of ceremonies that will help depending on what the situation is. So we always say that let there be peace, let there be harmony from these directions, and then even from ourselves. We're going to speak with kindness. We're going to speak with appreciation. We're going to speak with good words.

In order for somebody to be happy, in order for somebody to be whole, the spirit of the individual or the soul of the individual has to also be at peace. And that's kind of what we teach with a lot of the spiritual interventions and spiritual healings that we do.

Amy Chatelaine: We're grateful to Sheila for sharing her story. Before you go, here are your prompts toward deeper listening.

First:

How often do you have the opportunity to honestly express yourself? How has having that opportunity or the absence of that opportunity affected you?

And second:

What role has listening played during a period of healing in your life?

We're so glad to continue this practice with you. We'll see you next time.