

## The Peyote Eaters: A Visit With the Native American Church

The way the ceremony started was this: An Indian Woman got separated from her family while they were in the desert. She was ready to give birth and she was lost, hungry and thirsty and when she found a tree she fell asleep in the shade beneath it. Above the tree the buzzards circled, waiting for her to die. But while she slept a voice began talking to her. It told her to eat the plant she saw when she woke. That plant was the peyote cactus. It was very bitter but she ate it and she was no longer hungry or thirsty, and when she gave birth her breasts were full of sweet milk.

When she fell asleep again the spirit of that medicine told her some songs and how to conduct the ceremony. When she woke she kept eating the cactus. She got her strength back and began to look for her family. When she found them she told them about the medicine.

"It's a blessing," they said. "We must give it to all our people."

The version told to me of How Peyote Came to be the Indian Medicine

"We don't know how long the medicine, the peyote, has been used. We do know that the religion came from the South, from Huichol country in Mexico. But it has become the heart, the very heart of the Indian nation. There is a great spirit about these meetings.

We're privileged to be guests here."

I was listening to Duke White, a member of the Ghost Clan and a man with some Shoshone blood running through his veins. It was an early Spring evening and cold in the high Rockies. With us were two friends of mine, Larry Lavalle and Chuck Dudell. We were awaiting the start of a Native American Church meeting, a peyote ceremony. Of the four of us, only Duke had attended previously. It was through his friendship with the people running this service that we'd been invited. Even then it had taken some time to get the approval to attend: Because the Native American Church uses peyote, it is often wrongly thought of a drug-church, and the appearance of a story about it in High Times magazine was thought to be a bad political move as it might reinforce the idea of the Church being pro-drugs. Nothing could be further from the truth. The most basic beliefs of the Church forbid the frivolous use of peyote and most members I've spoken with also oppose the frivolous use of other medicines, including cannabis.

"This is really their story, the Native Americans, so I shouldn't say too much," said Duke. "It's hard to describe a peyote meeting. It's a very solemn thing, but it's also full of warmth. It's a time for shoring up relations and renewing ties. This meeting is being held for a young boy, a birthday meeting. We'll go into the lodge singing."

The lodge was a tee-pee. It had been erected earlier in the day on the same place these Southern Utes have held ceremonies for four generations. All through the afternoon people had arrived, some from as far away as New Jersey and Western Canada. All meetings were important, we'd been told, but this one perhaps even more so than usual: The boy, Joe, was turning 13 and so this was a manhood initiation. Joe's parents were both out of the picture and the courts had decided it was better to place him with a white foster family than allow him to be raised by a peyote eating grandmother. The meeting then, was not only an initiation into manhood, it was a reminder of his roots, of his real family and their ancient traditions.

We were still standing outside the tee-pee when the altar-fire was set: The burning cottonwood illuminated the canvas and silhouetted the lodge poles. As the flame grew the tee-pee began to take on a life of its own, something altogether removed from 1990 and the confines of reservation life, a strange beast whose ribs heaved with the pulse of the fire within.

Around us the Church members began to congregate. There were murmurings in Indian dialects and someone began to sing. A line formed and we were given places in it. It moved clockwise around the outside of the lodge, pausing at each of the four directions: West, the place where water comes from and the direction of the Thunderbird; North, the direction from which man comes; East, the direction of the sun and all illumination; and South, the direction of the Good Red Road, the path the spirit takes when we die.

When we finished circling the line formed at the door, which faced East. We entered and moved in the same direction, between the fire and the tee-pee wall, to places on the ground we'd been assigned earlier. Larry was seated next to me. Opposite us, Chuck sat next to Duke. Of the others, seven were women, some with small children; the rest were men. There were 26 of us in the circle altogether. Some people sat on pillows, some on couch cushions, others on the floor. We were told to sit cross-legged and given blankets to wrap around our shoulders to ward off the cold.

In the center of the tee-pee was the altar, a semi-circle of packed sand perhaps six inches high and wide, and eight feet in diameter. It was square-edged and flat-topped, with a thin line etched down its center, which represented the road we are on. It's two open ends pointed to either side of the tee-pee door. The centerpoint of the altar pointed due West. At its head sat the Roadman, the one who shows the road. It was he who would run the meeting. To his right sat his Drummer, the man who would construct the water drum and play while the Roadman sang. To the left of the Roadman sat his woman companion, the Water Bearer who would bring us water during the night-long ceremony and provide us with food at dawn. Opposite the Roadman, to the right of the tee-pee door, sat the Fireman, the man who tended the fire and who would arrange the coals into the shape of a Thunderbird within the confines of the semi-circle of the altar. His assistant sat on the opposite side of the door.

In the center of the altar's circle the fire burned. The flames rose toward the heavens, drawn by the natural draft of the tee-pee's top-flap opening. On those flames the prayers of the congregation would rise.

Once we were seated conversations began: One man apologized for the way his wife had spoken about another man's woman. Someone else wanted to know why his uncle had instructed a best friend to sever ties with him. Some of the conversations were in English,

others in Ute. All of them rang of clearing the air of things which had been said or done so that the meeting would have no ill will impeding its progress.

While people spoke the Drummer made his drum: He stretched elk hide across the top of a cast iron cooking pot half-filled with water and laced it tight with thongs. When the drum was ready the Roadman, Junior, stood. He was a huge man of about 40, with thick black hair and an aura of strength about him. Deep lines were etched into his face.

"I want to thank you all for coming to this meeting," he started, "to show your affection for my nephew, Joe. You know, it's important for him to understand his place in this world, both as a man and as an Indian, like that. I want to ask you all to think of him in your prayers tonight. This is a good time for him."

When he'd finished he sat and opened his medicine box. He took out eagle feather fans and a bone whistle and lay them by the altar. He tossed cedar chips into the fire, filling the space with the sweet and cleansing incense. He made a bed of sage on the flat top of the altar and on it he lay his Grandfather Peyote, an unusually large and perfect button. It was the button he'd used for years, the button which had been instructed in teaching the Road by other Roadmen's Grandfather Peyotes, so that the line of peyote, like the ceremony itself, retains a vital connection from one generation to the next.

A pouch of loose tobacco and a packet of dried corn husks was passed; we rolled cigarettes and shared a ceremonial smoke. The corn husk cigarettes were the only ones permitted within the tee-pee and they were brought out on several occasions. When we finished smoking the harsh tobacco the husks were arranged around the altar so that their burned ends pointed toward the fire.

While we were still smoking someone brought out the peyote to be used during the ceremony and put it by the altar's head. It was kept in three jars: A quart jar full of fried, ground buttons, and two gallon jars of peyote tea, both of which were fill with chopped peyote. One of the teas was made from dried buttons and was dark brown. The other, made from fresh peyote, was a beautiful, luminous glue-green. The water in the clear glass jar seemed to almost shimmer with a life of its own.

Junior made an invocation over the jars, blessing them with cedar and cleansing them with his one of his eagle-feather fans. Then he opened the lid of the jar full of dried peyote and took a spoonful with his right hand, poured it into his left, and ate. He drank three large swallows from each of the two teas, then passed the jars to his Drummer, who did the same. Once the Drummer had finished, the jars were passed to the left, in the direction of the Road. One by one each person helped themselves to the peyote. While they did, Junior picked up a ceremonial staff—a simple stick dressed in beads, feathers and incense—and a gourd rattle and began to sing. The Drummer played an accompaniment on the water drum using a short, flat stick worn smooth by use.

The drumming was quick and rhythmic; the sound of the rattle lending an insistence to the beat. The song itself was low and droning, its words unrecognizable, its power unmistakable. Instantly there was a kind of magic in the air, a riveting electricity. The Roadman's song was short and ended abruptly. Moments later he began a second song, then a third and fourth, before he passed the staff and rattle to his Drummer, took the water-drum and reversed their rolls.

By the time he too had finished four songs and the rattle and drum had been passed to the next two men in the circle—the women did no singing or drumming; neither did we guests—the peyote jars had made their way to me. I'd only eaten peyote twice before, neither time in sufficient quantity to feel an effect. Now, with a large tablespoon of dried buttons in my hand, I had a moment's hesitation: While I knew that this was the right time and place for the experience, I still found myself questioning whether I should go through with it or leave the ceremony. I didn't know these people, after all, and they owed me nothing. What if I embarrassed myself by acting crazy, or worse, ruined their sacred ceremony?

I closed my eyes, felt the air in the tee-pee, knew that no harm would come from something as sacred as this, and ate. The peyote was hard and bitter and I had to fight to keep myself from spitting it out, and force myself to swallow it. When I was sure it was down I reached for the first tea and gulped the water and soft peyote bits. It was bitter beyond imagining. I remember thinking that anyone who could imagine that the Native American Church members would indulge in this frivolously need only try it once to realize the absurdity of the idea.

The luminous tea was not nearly as bitter as the first had been. There was a kind of sweetness about it, though sweet was only relative to the other tea. There was something refreshing, quenching in it and as I swallow it I felt as though my insides were becoming as beautiful and luminous as the tea itself.

The peyote was passed to everyone and everyone but the small children took part. When it had finished the circle the jars were recapped and help near the altar's head. The drum, staff and rattle, however, continued to circle among us. Each man sang four songs before passing on the staff, ancient songs handed down by grandmothers and grandfathers and some said to have been taught by Peyote itself. Some of the men were beautiful singers, others merely mumbled, but as the evening grew late the quality of the singer's voices became less distinguishable than the strength and beauty of the intent of their songs. Most were sung in Ute or Comanche, but there were occasional phrases sung in English for those of us who couldn't understand. "God bless our little children, keep them safe and guide them," someone sang, and Duke, sitting cross-legged across the tee-pee, Duke who had begun to almost glow, sang a birthday song, calling on Father Peyote to bless Joe and make his year one full of good things.

The stongs seemed to focus my attention on the fire and I sat staring at it for hours. The fire burned like no fire I'd ever seen; it pulsed with the rhythm of the singing, changing as each new singer took the staff and shook the rattle. It became a consuming object of interest: Within its flames animals danced and leapt skyward—deer and beaver and buffalo alal dancing to the rhythms of the drum and rattle, becoming

eagles and hawks and lifting their wings skyward, flying through the tee-pee flaps for the heavens. These were the animals of these Plains People, and they were here with us as spirits, crowding in with us, making the tee-pee close and warm. And after the eld and buffalo and coyotes left, my own friendly spirit, an anaconda, appeared and moved about the flames in flame itself. It came to teach me things I never known and remind me of others I forgotten: The quality of spirit, gentleness, the strength to look within myself and see where courage had fallen short or been ignored. I felt those things well up within me and knew that I had not come this far to simply eat peyote, that this was not what this meeting was about at all. It was about having a glimpse at a tradition which had helped heal a people who had suffered indignities beyond imagination at the hands of invaders bent on genocide. It was about the recovery of their spirit and a reminder of their strength and resiliency. It was about their oral traditions, their music, their songs, thier spirit.

These were the things I saw and felt when I looked into the fire. What others saw or felt I've no idea. No one spoke then or since about what the fire showed them; even my friends and I have never discussed it.

Some time after the drum had made its way around the circle twice the peyote was passed again. I found it even more difficult to swallow the second time and had to excuse myself and leave the tee-pee to keep from vomiting. Outside the air was crisp. Overhead the stars dressed the midnight sky. The fire threw the shadows of the celebrants against the canvas and for a moment it might have been 100 years ago. On another night I would have liked nothing better than to have spent a few hours alone; as it was I saw the circle of shadows was broken where I'd been sitting and hurried back inside.

I made my way around the altar in the direction of the Road and took my seat again. Tobacco was being passed for those who wanted it. I passed, wanting to let myself go into the flames again.

The Fireman and his assistant had kept the fire bright and even all night, working the cottonwood coals away from the flame with firesticks and shaping them into the image of a huge thunderbird, the outline of which defined the interior circle of the altar. The shape of the Thunderbird the Fireman had created glowed red and powerful, always renewing itself with fresh coals. The rhythm of the fiddereent songs became one rhythm and our breathing one breath. Somewhere far away and yet as close as here the drumming focused us and our breathing became one breath which the fire danced to. It was a fire like none I've seen, a thunderbird flying to the heavens.

When the staff had reached the Roadman for the fourth time, he stopped singing. He tossed cedar onto the fire and again the sweet smell filled the air. His companion, the Water Bearer left the tee-pee. While she was gone the peyote was put away. When she returned it was with a bucket of water. Junio blessed the bucket with his eagle-feather fan, drank, then passed the bucket so that each of us drank, and when the circle was completed he glr3ew his bone whistle four short times. We stood and left the tee-pee as a group, leaving Junior alone inside to say his private invocations.

Outisde again, I was suddenly aware that I was not in my normal state of consciousness, something I hadn't realized before. The ground moved beneath my feet, the trees around us swayed despite the absence of wind or leaves. Chuck and Larry seemed to feel the same way as I: they mentioned that they too hadn't been aware of the effects of the peyote while inside.

Within a few minutes—time enough to stretch and grab a cigarette—Junior joined us outside. We formed the same line we'd used at the beginning of the ceremony, made our way around the lodge, filed in and moved around the altar to our seats.

After we were seated and Junior had said some prayers, the singing and drumming began again, and the peyote was passed for the last time. I hadn't noticed it while were were coming in, but Joe had joined us for the first time and sat with his Grandmother, Bertha Grove, a medicine woman in her own right. When the peyote came to him she had him take a token amount. I too only took a small portion the third time, knowing I wouldn't be able to keep a large one down.

The remainder of the night, until false dawn, was deep and moving. Nothing had changed about the meeting physically—the singing continued, the frum and staff were passed from hand to hand, the fire burned and the beautiful thunderbird of colals was renewed again and aain. Still, something about the character of the meeting seemed to change. It became impossible to identify my own thoughts from those of the others. The songs, while still in native languages, began to be intelligible. It was as though the single breath we'd breathed earlier had become a single mind and we were no longer ourselves but the sum of our parts. I don't know how else to describe it. I think that part of the night was the heart of the ceremony. The air itself grew dense with spirits.

I had no visions or dreams, no hallucinations. I was simply part of a larger organism than usual, not thinking, just being.

By false dawn, the first change in the night sky, the communal spirit had taken its toll. My back ached and I was suddenly hungry and cranky. Ti was as though the unwitting effort I'd made to subdue my ego had suddenly failed and I came roaring back, wanting my own identity, with my own petty concerns. I wanted the ceremony to be over. I wanted to stretch, smoke cigarettes, drink coffee and I wanted to do them all at once. I struggled to keep quiet and maintain myself.

I looked around the tee-pee: I was not alone in my feeling that the center of the single-mindedness was over. The other participants seemed to be recovering their identities as well. People had begun shifting, yawning, stretching and a few began talking quietly. Junior blew his whistle, stood and threw cedar onto the Thunderbird. The peyote was put out of sight.

The Water Bearer stood and she and some of the other women present left the tee-pee. While they were gone the drumming and singing continued. By now the songs we'd heard repeated all night were so familiar that I found myself beginning to sing along with them. Others began to sing along as well, so that they began to take on a renewed sense of powers. Several voices echoed across the fire and the words

resounded. Whatever my petty concerns, the music diminished them with its sense of urgency. The last of the songs were near and no one wanted the spell broken. The rattle was shaken more and more feverishly, the drum and staff were passed, it seemed, faster and faster. The singing grew louder and the fire danced higher. My blood raced, my heart pounded. The focus of the meeting, broken by that first light of false dawn, had become clear again. More than that, it had become a point of catharsis. And then, unexpectedly, the first light of real dawn glanced off the top of the lodge poles and a beam of sawn burst through the tee-pee's fire flaps into the very heart of the fire. The stinging stopped abruptly, the last notes flying up that shaft of light and into the morning sky.

Just then the women returned. All except the Water Bearer made their way back to their seats. She entered last and brought with her water, three pots of food and a birthday cake for Joe. She arranged the food in a line, facing into the fire from the East, then sat behind them so that she sat with her back to the tee-pee door, opposite the Roadman. She called for a corn husk and tobacco and rolled a cigarette, lit it and spoke.

"I bring food and water, the things of life. I want to thank our Father in heaven for providing them to us, so that we may live. I want to thank thee, oh heavenly father, for all of the blessings you have bestowed on us, for allowing Joe to be here to learn, so that he may grow up to be strong enough to face the challenges he will meet. For the Medicine, peyote you have given us so that we may learn the right Road. For the beauty of this land you have given us so that we may have a good place, oh heavenly Father, in which to raise our children."

She named the things that were important to her and prayed for things important to all of us. She prayed for the health of sick relatives unable to attend the meeting and the spiritual health of those unable to see the light. She prayed for many things and when she had finished she passed the food around the circle in the direction of the Road.

Everyone ate from the pots of traditional food: a corn gruel, a dish of meat and pine nuts and a sweet syrup drink, and when we had finished others began to speak. They prayed for their families who were already on the Good Red Road, and for health and for the health of crops and farm animals. And when they had finished Joe's grandmother, Bertha, lit a cigarette and began to speak. She was a beautiful, elderly woman of immense compassion and heart.

"I don't have many requests for myself," she started. "I think you all named the things I want, so I'll concentrate on my grandson here, and do some things I wanted to do when I called this meeting."

She turned to Joe. "Joe, you don't have it easy, what with your parents gone, but the Indian way has always been a big family, so I'm going to give you some family now. This is real family, Joe, because I'm giving them to you like this, in this meeting here, and I hope you like them. because they're going to be looking out for you, like that, whether you want it or not."

She laughed and her laughter was infectious. "O'm going to give you my brother first, as a godfather. He can teach you many things. He's a sundance warrior from his mother's side and that's another good medicine, like our peyote. There's a lot of power in that. You listen to him and you go to him when you have questions about what it means to be a man. He'll tell you right, Joe, set you on the right Road."

After she'd given him a godfather, she gave him a brother, uncles, cousins and assigned specific duties each would perform in his life. Some were blood relations, others were not. It was the creation of an extended family we were witnessing, something I'd never been part of before.

When she finished, she and Joe stood and began to make their way around the circle. Joe received gifts from each of us, and his grandmother, in turn, gave something to each of us.

When they had finished, Junior spoke. He thanked each of us for coming, then thanked the peyote for making the meeting strong. When he was done he blew his bone whistle to the four directions, then put it, along with his feather fans and Grandfather Peyote, back into his medicine box. The meeting was over.

The morning was fresh and clear, the sun bright and warm. The women made a traditional breakfast feast while the men dismantled the lodge. While we ate I spoke with Bertha.

"It's good you came with your friends to be in this meeting," she said. "It's good Joe got to see white fellows come here and show respect for our traditions."

I told her that it was we who were thankful for having been invited.

"A lot of people think we have these meetings just so we can use drugs. But you saw that's not true. They think we're bad for having these meetings. But our medicine is good. It's one of God's creations. The Grandfathers have been teaching us a lot of things for a long time."

## About the Author