Traveling in the Circle of Reciprocity

by Jacob Zuniga
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**Note: In this article, I use the words Navajo and Dine interchangeably. Dine is the Navajo word for themselves, and I feel that it is important that we are aware and literate about what tribes call themselves.*

On July 19th, a group of 13 youth from the Diocese of Northern California arrived in Teec Nos Pos (pronounced tees-nas-pas), Arizona. This was the beginning of what would be an incredibly profound and affirming weeklong journey. We worked under the banner of the Sierra Service Project (SSP), a youth-led immersion experience. SSP typically has three locations. This year we ended up in the Navajo Nation.



Each day began the same way for us: Waking up at six in the morning to a song sung by our SSP coordinators. After some breakfast, we would head out to our work groups. Each group was assigned a long-term project, like building a ramp, or fixing a roof. Over the course of six weeks, different groups of volunteers would add their labor to this project.

My group's project was working on a ramp. It was an exercise in patience and teamwork. The previous group had made mistakes in placing the cement post-holders, and it took not only my group, but members of another group to dig out and move all the cement tubes, and get the project back on track. Even in that struggle, there was a holy connection, however. More hands came to help carry the burden, at the moment when we needed it. Neighbor helping neighbor, friend showing their Christian love to another friend they had met only that week. The Spirit wove between all of it, like the thread that weaves the design of a Navajo blanket.



In Teec Nos Pos, I learned about the juniper tree. It is a common tree in the part of the desert where Teec Nos Pos is located, but an important one. The juniper's berries, which are actually cones, are collected when they fall to the ground and used for ghost beads. The needles are burned to make juniper ash, which is added to blue corn cakes to add calcium and vital nutrients. Juniper is a small tree, almost a shrub, but for such a stunted tree, it gives with such generosity.

The juniper tree is the best metaphor for the people of Teec Nos Pos. They were our juniper tree. They gave, from their own limited resources, to help us in whatever way they could. They allowed us into their homes, shared their food, and talked with us. Time and again, the theme of the week was gratitude and mutual reciprocity. Teec Nos Pos means “circle of trees” or “tree circle” in Diné, a fitting name for such a tightly woven community.



As we drove away from the place we had lived and worked for a week, I felt soberingly full of despair. We drove past many more houses on our way out of Navajo Nation, and what I was most struck by was how severely the people of this land had been starved of resources, be it access to water, traditional ways of living, or reparations for the damage caused by many years of oppression. Yet, there was still an impact made by our presence. Though our projects are a mere drop in the bucket against the systems of racial and cultural injustice, they have a real impact on the individuals they benefit. Even more, the projects made an impression on me and my cohort. By participating in this program, we have learned compassion, which has made us more culturally literate citizens of this country.

I close with this incredible image a friend of mine captured in between the unpredictable lightning storms of the high desert: a shard of rainbow, cast over the stark desert landscape. To me, it is a sign of God’s promise for peace and healing despite, and even because of the brokenness of this world. It is a promise not to forget the tragedies of the past, but to bear witness and seek for reconciliation. Even when all seems lost beneath the waves of despair, there is always the rainbow, shining as a beacon for a new world.

