

Scott Thompson (continued)

And it so happens that Pueblo Indian rituals and traditions are pervaded by reversals. The difference, as far as I can tell, is that the Pueblos have been utilizing them for 700 years whereas Western culture acquired a serious understanding of the phenomenon maybe 50 years ago. Note the following from Alfonso Ortiz's seminal anthropological study, *The Tewa World*, published in 1969, which focuses on his native Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo: "the Tewa are given to reversals or symbolic transformations...they do it with colors, as when, in some rituals, the colors for north and south are reversed. They also sometimes do it with ideas and institutions they share with neighboring tribes. For instance, among the Keresans of Cochiti [Acoma is also Keresan] the two sacred clown societies, Quirana and Koshare, are associated with summer and winter respectively...while among the Tewa the analogous Kwirana and Kossa are symbolically associated with winter and summer respectively...the Tewa seem to shift easily from one perspective (or transformation) to another in accordance with some consistent set of rules." (pp. 143-144).

This description rings true. In order to utilize reversals in counseling, following a consistent set of rules is essential and learning how to do that takes a great deal of focus, patience and care. It's fair to say that accomplishing these astonishing transformations is a ritualistic process. And once those rules become ingrained and a person begins to follow them spontaneously, the echo chamber of humor begins to resound.

In our culture people think that humor can't be learned from scratch; that it's some mysterious gift selected people have. This is not true. The rules can indeed be learned in an electrifyingly effective way, just as the Pueblo Indians have learned them from childhood in their ritual dances and traditions. In this I suspect they remain far ahead of the rest of us.

After our adventure inside the high solemn space of the church, our guide led us into the heart of the village. Where the kivas are.

There were several in a row along one of the wide dirt streets, each inside a small, square adobe structure. A traditional, white-painted wooden entrance ladder leaned up against each kiva, each one made of two huge tree trunks with thin wooden rungs strung between them up as far as the roof. So that nearly half the lengths of the tree trunks reached above the roofs, making the ladders seem as much symbolic as functional.

The kivas are sacred Acoma spaces dug well into the ground; each features an entrance to a spiritual world beneath the center of its floor space.

Outsiders are not welcome inside kivas.

Compared to other places in our solar system, American culture does a tolerable job of accommodating humor. This is because the First Amendment to the United States Constitution forbids the government from dragging a person off to jail because some prominent fart has an issue with satire. Able comedians have long had the leeway to puncture political gas, flattening nascent demagogues along the way.

The First Amendment is a sacred tradition.

But have you noticed that our sharpest comedians are virtually silent on global warming? Why is that? Consider the recent 30 second television ad touting the mining of tar sands, the one with the professionally clad blonde lady striding across the screen, issued by the American Petroleum Institute ("One Million New Jobs"). People who comprehend what climate scientist James Hansen says about tar sands are astonished by the callousness this ad shows toward the well-being of future generations and other species on this Earth.

My point is that our best and brightest comedians have material for withering satire pouring out of their noses. And the Lord knows there has never been a greater need.

So why are these comedians holding back? Either because they're waiting for a receptive audience or because they're nervous about pissing off the mainstream Colossus or both. In other words, their personal interests are causing them to hesitate in the face of lethal propaganda. This is a clear indication that the First Amendment notwithstanding, in American culture humor is not a sacred task.

The opposite is the case in Pueblo cultures. On page 81 of his book *The Tewa World*, Alfonso Ortiz laid out a riveting diagram of the eight sacred societies of the Ohkay Owingeh Tewas. Their two clown societies, the Kwirana and Kossa, are near the center of the whole structure. There's no mistaking the message. Their job, along with the other societies, is to keep the heart of their society beating.

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Per Ortiz, the sacred societies of this pueblo have these priorities: first, to keep the seasons progressing normally (cf. the effects of global warming), second, peace and harmony in social relations (our political parties can't agree on how to take a shit), and third, to prevent any faction of their society from attaining ritual or political supremacy (in the meantime our financial aristocracy rules). (See pp. 73, 84).

It's a sacred task to protect the capacity of the people to see through bullshit. As a culture we're not doing that, and it's one reason the privileged interests in our country have been able to befuddle the public into ignoring the climate catastrophe that is descending upon our children and grandchildren.

I went back to Acoma some years later for a repeat of the tour, this time with Gail. The tribe had remodeled the old visitor's center, which lies in the cusp of a ridge of rough rocks beneath the mesa. The new center featured handsome stone wall motifs and "T" shaped doorways found in Sky City and also in ancestral pueblo ruins.

Up on the mesa Gary, our Acoma guide, said to us with a nod, "We'll be here a thousand years from now. Our Elders have a good plan." I was struck by his conviction that the Acoma elders were looking out for the interests of their people over the long term. I hadn't felt that way since President Carter talked up the energy crisis in the late 1970s. Tragically, most Americans found his bluntness unsettling, as he hadn't bothered to sprinkle any bullshit in with it.

After the tour Gail and I ate lunch in the new restaurant, which served artfully prepared Acoma dishes. Looking up at the lovely stone walls, I had the feeling Gary was right about the future of the Acomas.

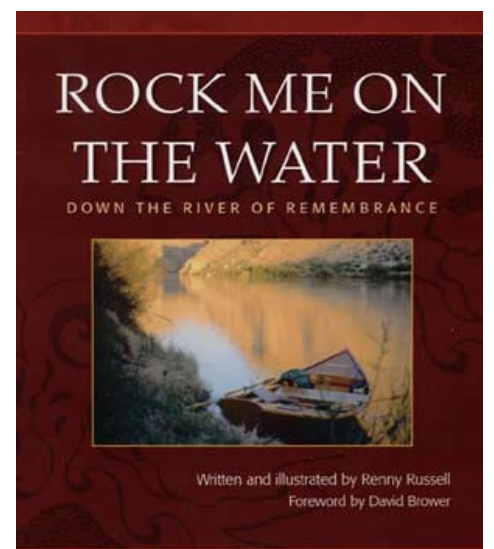
SCOTT THOMPSON is a regular contributor to The Zephyr.

"Renny Russell's *Rock Me on the Water* is at its heart courageous. To return to the same power of nature that took his brother thirty years previous—to be with it, to confront it, to take solace in it, and to be inspired and healed by it—is remarkable in itself. His book is, as well, a testament to the evocative rhythms of the wilds. In this complicated dance, this profoundly personal journey, Renny Russell also gives us an amazingly spirited tour of one of the truly great landscapes of the American West and a keen understanding of its power to shape a life."

Robert Redford

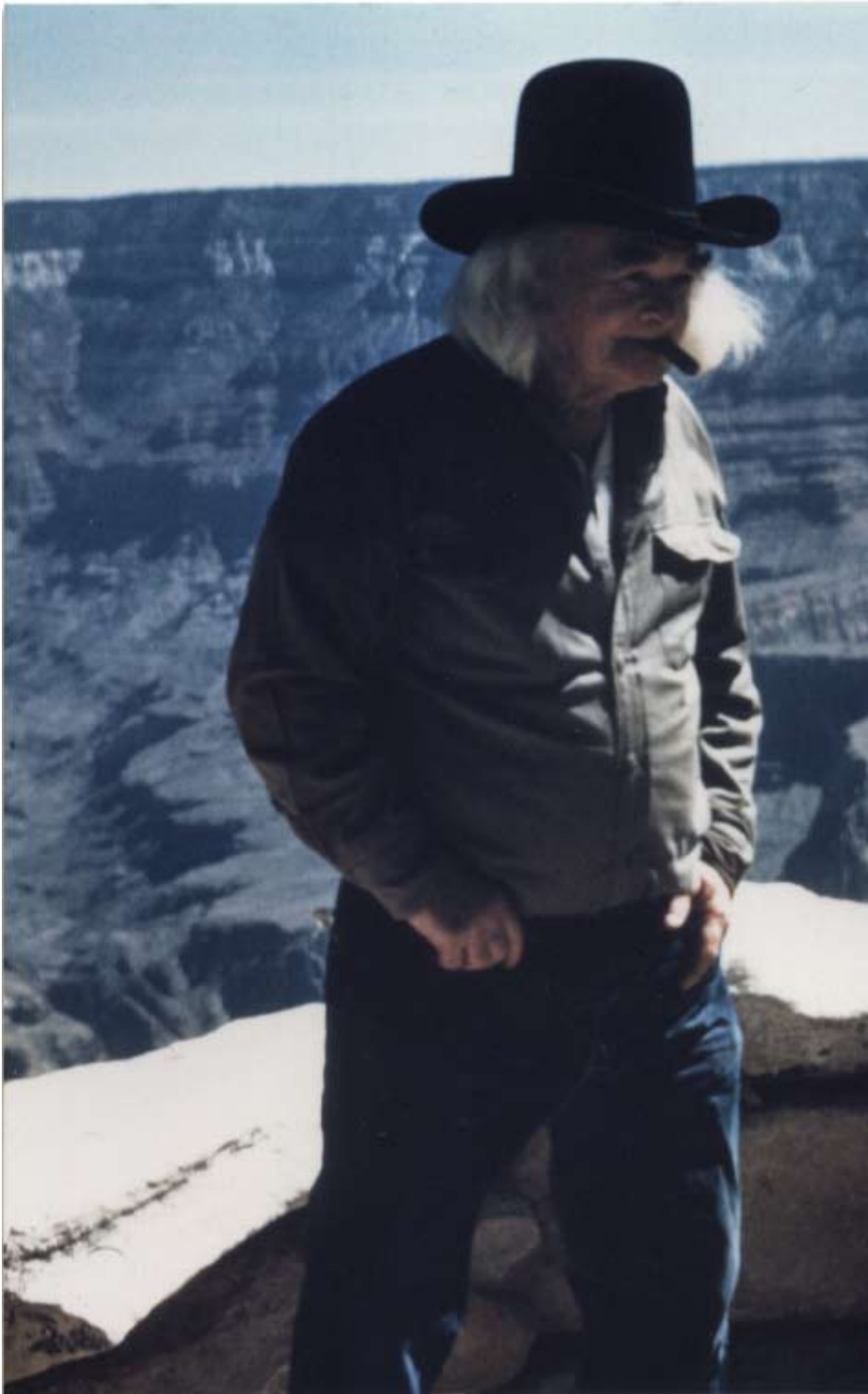
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From Renny Russell,
the author of...





'Shorty' Yarberry & the South Rim



Herb Recalls Shorty Yarberry & the Grand Canyon...

One of the great characters of the Grand Canyon was Shorty Yarberry. His whole name was George Armstrong Custer 'Shorty' Yarberry. He was born on the day of the Battle of the Little Big Horn when Custer was killed. He is buried at the Grand Canyon, right next to the Kolb Brothers, who ran the photographic studio there.

Shorty had been in Texas and he was incarcerated for stealing cattle and then horse stealing. So he spent some time in a steel and concrete apartment, if you know what I mean. He came out to the South Rim and the Fred Harvey people gave him a job, down in the canyon, to erect a fence to lay some rip wrap on Bright Angel Creek. He worked with a pair of big, grey horses, and a Fresno Scraper, which is sort of a glorified wheel barrel without a wheel. Anyway he hauled all these rocks and built up the creek sides. He also planted all the cottonwood trees at Phantom Ranch.

But the years passed and he started getting old and putting on weight. So they brought him out of the canyon...that was a task for a mule...and put him in a semi-retirement building near the corrals. I saw Shorty sitting in front of the corral many times. He was a nice fellow to talk with but he had the smallest feet on a man you can ever imagine. They say he wore a size 4. In addition he always wore Mexican rowels on his boots, so he always jingled when he walked.

He finally died, I guess in his eighties by then, and was laid to rest in the Grand Canyon cemetery.

HR

HERB RINGER came West from his home in New Jersey in 1939. Camera in hand, Herb captured the American West, from the Canadian Border to the Rio Grande and from the Big Sur coast to the High Plains.

We believe Herb's collection of Life in the West is one of the finest. His work has been published in The Zephyr for 20 years. I am pleased finally, to offer Herb's photographs in color. We are also building a new 'album' of his work, elsewhere on this site.

My dear friend died on December 11, 1998...JS

