

My thoughts on the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Albert “Ahbihay” Hale Special to Navajo Times

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of a three-part series written by former Navajo Nation President, former Arizona State Senator and Representative, Albert Hale.)

As I write these thoughts, the COVID-19 pandemic has reached the Navajo Nation, our Nation. It has impacted many of our People.

I am sharing my reflections about the pandemic, what I believe this means in the Navajo context, and how we move forward after the pandemic. I include challenges we face because the Navajo Nation government continues to be structured in such a way that leaves the local chapters little authority to help respond to the pandemic and other persistent problems.

A pandemic problem of this magnitude and other unrelenting issues cannot be adequately addressed by an antiquated centralized overly bureaucratic form of government. My intent is not to be critical of the government leaders but urge the Diné to open their eyes and change the government to a more responsive less centralized form of government. Empowering the local units of government is empowering the People!

This is the time when we can truly say, “We are being attacked from places we cannot see. We are attacked by things that we cannot see. We have been put into a state of hardship.”

CAUSES

In 2012, during the general uproar about the meaning of the end of the Mayan calendar, in a peyote crystal way ceremony (dées't'íí' bée naahagha), I asked, “What will happen the day the Mayan calendar comes to an end and the days after? There is a lot of talk about how that it is the end of time or the end of time as we know it. Everything will stop and change. They say (Da jini).”

The medicine man asked the déest'íí' and responded, “The pace the dominant society is going, cannot be sustained. At some time in the future, they will run into a brick wall.

They will search for the way forward. The way forward will be us, the Native Americans, the Navajos. It is because we still have our ceremonies, our prayers, our paraphernalia, our belief, our faith, our sacred corn pollen (tádádíín). These will sustain us. They have sustained through difficult time and through many hardships. All the talk about what the end of the Mayan calendar means, is just for show, a way to make money and to gain prestige in the discussion.”

The pandemic reminds me of the suffering our People must have endured from first contact with the bilagáana (white man), to Bosque Redondo and to the federal government's many attempts to terminate us as a people and make us bilagáana, to recreate us in their image. We have suffered attempts to terminate us, terminate our treaties, the massacre of our sheep and goats - our livelihood and attempts again at termination through lack of appropriation of funds to address deplorable third-world conditions on Indian reservations.

On Indian reservations, we continue to be prisoners of war, wars that have long been fought to save our way of life, our freedom, our independence. We are not a part of the American history that is taught in schools; an education system that attempts to erase us a distinct people capable of thinking, planning, pursuing a livelihood and “keeping hope alive.”

After four miserable years at Bosque Redondo, the Navajo leaders negotiated a treaty to allow us to return to our beloved homeland. It is said (jini), as the People walked out of the Bosque Redondo valley, away from all the misery, starvation, disease, suffering, dehumanizing treatment, a once proud independent self-reliant People reduced to beggars, returned to a path that sustained them during those four years and throughout their history. They returned to their prayers, their ceremonies, their paraphernalia, their belief, their faith.

It is said, at a distance away from Bosque Redondo, the Navajo leaders (naat'áanii) and the medicine people (hatáli), performed a ceremony, “e'cha hodzo”. They drew four lines in the ground. Those four lines were to contain and keep all the suffering, disease, pestilence, ill treatment that they endured and suffered behind those lines. It was for the protection of all generations of Diné to come.

It was decreed that no Navajo shall return to this place of suffering and death; no Navajo was to ever cross these lines. If they do, then the protection put in place, the protection lines, the barriers that held back all the suffering, death, disease, and destruction, would be broken. The disease, suffering, ill-treatment, destructive forces, and all negative forces would come upon us again in our sacred homeland.

I hear Navajo leaders have crossed the barriers; a monument has been erected at the Bosque Redondo site. The barriers have been erased. The decree has been violated. The gates holding back the suffering, disease, destruction have been flung open. We have disrespected and violated the naat'áanii and the hatáli. We have become vulnerable to the suffering, disease, and destruction. Tornados are scarce on Navajoland; now they visit.

Is this why we are now suffering this pandemic? Look around, see the wall that we ran into, realize that the bilagáana way can also come to a stop, and you decide.

EVERYTHING STOPPED!

In these times of the COVID-19 pandemic, everything has come to a sudden stop and we struggle to find a way forward, I reflect on the words of the naat'áanii and natáli of old and the protection lines drawn so many years ago. I find meaning to the words and the decree of the naat'áanii and hatáli. I share my interpretation in hopes that as Diné we are reminded to stop and think of where we are and where we are going as a People. Is the bilagáana path also our path? Do we strip ourselves of

what makes us uniquely Diné? Do we continue to strip ourselves of our language, our culture, our tradition, our prayers, our ceremonies, our paraphernalia and continue to think that the bilagáana way is invincible? In my view, we are almost there.

We have been so caught up in the bilagáana world, accepting his view of everything, we have bought into the bilagáana world view and the value the bilagáana places on individualism at the expense of the community, and at the expense of the world we live in and share. The view that the individual is mightier than all things and is destined by God to exercise dominion over everything including people. We are an excellent example of exercise of that dominion by the bilagáana government and laws that control us to this every day.

But the pandemic has shook that belief, the foundation of that view. It has hopefully opened our eyes that our use and throwaway society is not the way. We are at that wall! It is time to choose. We can wallow in the negativity of it or do we reflect and meditate on what this means. It is time to reset and move forward with a new view of our selves, of other people, of our world and all within our world; and the sacredness of our relationship to each other and to our world.

In our absorption chasing the almighty dollar and trying to keep up with the bilagáana in his race, we lost touch with our traditions, our teachings, our faith, our prayers, our ceremonies, our paraphernalia. We have begun to think that those have no meaning and of no use or application in the present technologically fast paced world. I beg to differ.

All of us, each one of us need a foundation to stand on and from which to go forward, experience life and develop our world view. Our life experience shapes our world view. We are losing that foundation. What are developing in its place? What foundation are we leaving with our children and grandchildren, and generations of Diné to come?

RESPONSIBILITY

We each have responsibility not only to ourselves, but to our children and those who will come after us. Diyin Dine'é (the Holy People) have provided us with land to nurture and grow our food. Our ancestors signed a treaty that enabled us to return to our homeland. Yet today our homeland is not taken care of. Drive along the road and see the shimmering glass, the trash that is surrounding the wash and the many pieces of Styrofoam and trash tossed after each gathering. This is not caring for our home, for Nihimá Nahasdzáán (our Mother Earth). This is polluting the environment we have been given to care for.

Often, we see dead animals left to rot alongside the highway. Many dogs are starving and even horses. We are not being responsible for the animals who we share the earth with. This is not our teaching! Being responsible is not only to yourself, but to other living things including plants and animals.

We are in a dire situation with the pandemic. Our resources are limited, they have been for decades. We hear how critical it is to stay home and to wear a mask when we must go out for a short period of time. Yet many of us are complaining. Some do not want to wear the mask or stay home. They are upset that the government has told them to do so. Where is the responsibility to ourselves and to our families? Why do we wait until the leaders told us to stay home and follow a curfew? Why would we expose our family and young children to a deadly virus?

The government had no choice other than to impose a curfew because of the irresponsible behavior of many. This is a critical period, yet some of us complain when we are asked to be responsible. We have a choice. Be responsible to ourselves and to others or infect ourselves and others with a potentially deadly virus. The choice is ours.

The second part of this three-part series will be published in the August 6 issue of Navajo Times.

My thoughts on the COVID-19 Pandemic

**By Albert “Ahbihay” Hale
Special to Navajo Times**

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second of a three-part series written by former Navajo Nation President, former Arizona State Senator and Representative, Albert Hale.)

EDUCATION

In our chase, we are constantly rushing. In our chase and constant rush, we have left behind our children, our elders, and those who need our help. We left our homes, no one is left to keep the home fires going, the home fires that use to shine brightly to lead us home. We have left our traditions, our teachings, our culture, our language, and a way of life that have sustained us and our ancestors.

This pandemic has caused us to stay home, to stay home with our children, to tend to our homes, our children, and our elders. We can be angry and curse or we can take this pause as an opportunity.

I say let us take it as an opportunity to be with our children, to teach them, to learn about them, to have them learn about us. It is an opportunity to do things together with our children. We do not have to rush off to work and come home when they are already in bed. Or if we come home early, they are watching television, on their phones, or playing video games. We have allowed them to isolate themselves in their rooms. It is time to pull them out of their rooms, away from the television, away from their video games and begin acting as parents again. We have to and we can! We can and we will retake our role as the primary teachers of our children.

Remember the time when we lived in a hooghan, all in one room, eating together, eating food in a skillet or pan or bowl using a piece of tortilla or fried bread to pick up the potato, the mutton. It was a time to talk. My grandfather said, “It is the best time to teach or to tell stories to the children. What is said they hear with their ears. They also get the stories and teachings through the food. The stories and teachings attach to the food and they swallow them. Double

the way to enter the mind.”

Now we all have separate plates, we go to our separate corners and eat alone watching TV or being on the phone.

It is said, the hooghan, the home is sacred. It is the place where all teachings take place, it is the place where all thinking and planning takes place, it is the place where life begins, it is where the foundation of life is planted and nurtured. It is said, you should always keep a fire going in your hooghan, always have a “honeeshgish” (fire poker). The honeeshgish contains all the Diné teachings.

It is said, there are honeeshgish prayers. The honeeshgish is used to pray with it. It is a prayer stick. It is said, the ancestors used it to pray with in time of great difficulty. We are in time of great difficulty. We need to return to the honeeshgish, learn its prayers and use it. Teach our children the honeeshgish prayers and songs.

It is said, the honeeshgish is within the dominion of the women of the family. The women have the critical role and burden of passing along the language, tradition, teachings to the children and the next generation. They have the task of keeping the language, culture, and tradition alive and moving them forward.

The honeeshgish is a reminder of the women’s critical role in the survival of the People, survival of the language, survival of the culture. Many of our mothers and grandmothers no longer honor that role because the current society’s ways that to have value you must have money, you must work. The women go to their jobsites every day. The children are left home alone. The primary teacher of Navajo language, teachings, and tradition is no more.

The children are left alone to find ways to entertain themselves and to continue their education at home. But there is no teacher. So, they find their own. They find each other. They find the Internet, the television or worse yet, they find drugs and engage in destructive behaviors. The

Internet becomes their teacher and the content become their teachings. Rather than finding ways to help them channel their energy and actions toward learning positive life lessons, we criticize them, and we do not build facilities that support them such as recreation centers.

Now we have an opportunity to reverse that trend. Mothers and fathers are not allowed to go to work and cannot leave the home. Children cannot go to school because the schools are shut down. Fathers and mothers now have the time and opportunity to find their traditional roles in the family - the father the protector, the provider; and the mother, the primary teacher, and the giver and nurturer of life. We have an opportunity to get reacquainted with our children, our grandchildren.

FOOD

The pandemic has cleared out the stores and grocery store shelves. There is a shortage of food and other items that we deem necessities but are really not. We should be reminded and should learn that our reliance on others to produce our food and for grocery stores to make available the food we put on the table could be gone without notice. It is our responsibility as parents to put food on the table for children. So, what do we do? What can we do? Surely it cannot be that the stores do not have groceries, so I guess we starve!

What was the teachings? The teachings of my mother and grandparents was, “learn how to do this. I am not going to be here forever to do this for you. Do for yourself! Learn! T’áá hwó’ ají t’éego! One day when you become an in-law, when your in-laws call upon you to do something, you will embarrass us if you say I do not know how. They will say his/her parents, grandparents and his/her relatives did not teach him/her anything?”

We now have an opportunity to go back to this teaching; to make it come back to life...again! Teach your children how to hunt. How to skin a rabbit, a prairie dog, a squirrel, a

chicken, a pig, a sheep, a horse. Yes, a horse! At the beginning of winter, the Diné use to kill a horse and prepare all the parts and consume them during the winter. The sacred horse protected the People from all the illnesses that winter could possibly bring.

Teach your children how to plant and farm without much water. Grow your own food! Do not depend on the grocery stores and an unseen food production and supply chain to provide for you. The benefits of growing your own food and hunting for your own food are enormous! The food you grow with be full of nutrients. They will not be laced with additives that can cause diabetics, cancer, and other illnesses. You can teach your children the planting songs, the farmland songs, and the prayers. The corn that you grow will give you tádidíin, the sacred pollen used in all Navajo ceremony.

You can tell them how the first children were found under a corn in the cornfield. That can be your way to teaching prayers related to the farm and to the children. You can tell them the story of how the four sacred foods - corn (six different color corn), squash, beans, and tobacco were brought from the prior world. You can teach them the song that is sung for food.

It is said, starvation will never visit if we have the grinding stones (tsédaashjéé’), the grass brush (bé’eshóó’), the wooden stirring sticks (ádistsíin), and land upon which to farm and raise sheep, horses and cows.

There are so many traditional teachings that we should relearn and teach our children and grandchildren. We must get reacquainted with these teachings and sit our children and grandchildren down and teach them. Some may say those are, “old stuff; they have no application to today,” or “those ways are gone.” I beg to differ.

These ways have become more relevant today than ever before. But we are losing those ways. The reasons are many. We are treating the bilagáana teachings as more

important than our own. That acceptance has consequences. We are seeing those consequences now. In our rush to become more like the bilagáana, we have left behind our teachings, our language, our culture, our prayers, our ceremonies; we have left behind our children, our elders. The elders’ teachings are of life ways that can sustain us even though the pandemic that we now face.

SURVIVAL AND THE WAY FORWARD

As a People, we have survived all the atrocities that have been inflicted upon us. We are resilient. We can survive again! We cannot continue to allow ourselves to think and accept that the bilagáana way is better than ours. If we do that then we continue to leave our teachings behind, we leave behind all that make us Diné. We become the instrument of our own demise. If we look at our history and our relations with the bilagáana, we can see all their efforts are to destroy us, to recreate us in their own image, the more we act like them and look like them, the more we are valued by them. We are losing our language in the process becoming more bilagáana. But we continue to be shunned because we are different.

It is said, when we totally lose our language, it will be end of Diné as we know it. The language is the way culture, tradition, ceremonies, prayers, paraphernalia are transferred from one generation to the next generation. Without the language, we will become Diné in name only. Sadly, it has happened to Native Americans of other Indian nations through forced assimilation.

The path forward will not be like the path that got us here. It will be different that is for sure! Yesterday is different than today; today is different than yesterday; tomorrow will be different than today. Time moves forward and waits for no one. We evolve and hopefully learn the lessons of today and apply them to tomorrow.

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SURVIVAL AND THE WAY FORWARD

CONTINUED FROM PART 2

My grandfather taught, “The way forward is unknown. The only known is that it will be full of hardship. All I can do to prepare you for the hardships is to get you up at dawn, get you out to pray, and run; in the winter time, to roll in the snow, come in and run; to sit in a sweathouse and at night to listen to the stories; in the winter time, sit still through the night to hear the coyote stories, the origin story and other stories.

“In times of hardship, when you have a personal hardship and there will many such as a loved one leaving you, I do not want you cower in the corner, crying and feeling sorry for yourself, blaming others, getting drunk or taking drugs, threatening to kill yourself, making excuses for your dilemma.”

The lesson: how you respond to the hardship, how you rebound from those hardships, determines your path going forward. You can let the hardship consume you or you can rise above it, dust yourself off, get back in the saddle and go forward - the choice is yours. The past is gone. There is nothing that can be done to change it. So, the path is forward only.

PRAYERS

It is said, good things exist in the dawning of a new day. At this time, the Diyin Dine’é walk back into the heaven. It reminds me of the yei bi chei with their masks and 12 eagle feathers atop their masks, walking back to yei bihooghan, their feathers moving sideways, back, and forth. It is the holiest of time. If you pray into the dawn, the Diyin Dine’é will take your prayers into the heaven and share them. When you pray, they will

recognize you and say, “Listen, what is our grandchild saying?” They will take your prayer and say, “Let’s go help our grandchild.” If you are one who prays only when in need or only to ask for something, they will not recognize you and ask, “Who is that?” Each day, the Diyin Dine’é bless you with opportunities; opportunities only you can take and reap blessings of.

It is said, pray into the dawning of a new day with white corn meal; at noon, pray with “tádádíín” (sacred corn pollen); at dusk when the ground has a yellowish/reddish hue, pray with yellow corn meal; and in the evening before retiring for the night, roll mountain tobacco, smoke and reflect on the blessings you received that day. Repeat this every day. We need to teach this to our children.

Returning to our ancestors’ teachings will start us on our journey away from dependence on others for the basic necessities of life. We can begin our path towards independence, freedom, and reliance on ourselves. It is said, everything has a good side and a bad side. The bad and good were created together at the beginning to give balance, to balance each other out. It is the balance of the two that is the state of “hozho”, the state of harmony upon which Navajo beliefs are based. The abuse of the good can turn the good into bad. The songs, prayers and ceremonies are there to return you to “hozho.”

WORDS

It is said, “words are sacred.” The sounds that form the words come from the animals. The animals gave up their ability to speak, to form words. They gave their voices to us. They are left with only the sound that they now make. With the gift that they gave us, we are the only specie that can form the voices of the animals and imitate the sounds they make.

Words once spoken cannot be retrieved, they cannot be taken back. They have already entered the ears

of the hearer. They have already travelled to the heart and stirred reaction and caused an emotion, a feeling. For that reason, you do not misuse the sacred words when you speak to others especially true for the children. Children’s minds are still developing. Abusive words can and will interfere with that development and move the mind towards negativity.

So, we must be extremely careful that we do not use words to cuss, to abuse, to create animosity, confusion, and misinformation. We should not abuse the sacredness of our words. All too often this happens in the age of face book and social media. We can now shoot words from the dark, from the unknown, and use them to strike fear or embarrassment or to slander and libel others with impunity.

It is said, you should not talk about others because you do not know how they live, you do not know their relatives, and their life. You do not feed them or help them to live their lives. So, you have no basis to criticize or talk about that person. You may one day be suffering from an illness or injury, that person may be the only who knows the way to help you. Or you may become an in-law to that person. Jiní. The future is unknown.

We should never forget the sacredness of words and the sacrifices that were made so we may have them and use them. Words are used to communicate with each other and with the Diyin Dine’é. Words are used to pray, to ask the Diyin Dine’é for blessings and for help. So, why do we use the sacred words to hurt and injury others. We now have an opportunity to teach our children the sacredness and power of words.

During this pause, our children are relying on the computer and the Internet to get the bilagáana education. It our opportunity to also learn the ways bilagáana teaches and the technologies that are used. But more importantly, we have an opportunity to use that technology to teach our children the teachings and world view of the Diné. We have an

opportunity to balance the bilagáana teachings with Diné teachings. It is a way to restore hozho in ourselves, our children, our home, our People, and our nation.

Too often, I hear our leaders make promises and tell us that when elected they will do this and that for us. With their words, we have allowed them to take from us our ability to take care of ourselves even in a pandemic that we face. They say to us, “I will do this for you. I will build you a house.” If they do not, we cuss and criticize them and talk about them and say, “They lie. They promise to me and they did not do it.”

Yet we do not realize that the things we ask for, “do this for me,” are things we should do for ourselves. They are things that are basic to our lives, to everybody’s life. The education of our children, the shelter for our children, the food for our children, the health and welfare of our children are our responsibility, not that of a government or government leaders. However, if the government hinders or prohibits us in the execution of those responsibilities, we must correct the government.

When we buy into the promises, we give up our independence, our freedom to live our lives and our children’s freedom to live their lives. When we no longer accept that we are primarily responsible for ourselves, our children, our home, and our livelihood we become dependent on the generosity and actions of others. Our children, our home, and our livelihood are OUR responsibility, no one else. They have been from the beginning of time and they will be into the unknown future.

It is said, the words of a leader are most sacred. When they say something, it will come to pass. What they say will happen. For that reason, it is said, there are certain words that a leader should never use. Too many times, I hear leaders speaking those words and words that create confusion, give misinformation, slanders. Just because leaders speaking in council sessions and

in committee meeting are legally immune for the words they speak, it is not a license for them to use words that abuses, criticizes and obfuscates. Leaders are supposed to hold up the People through their words, words of support, of encouragement and of gratitude for helping especially during difficult time. The leaders must remind the People of prayers, songs, and ceremonies.

THE DAY AFTER

Life after this pandemic will not be the same. It should not be. It will not be. How we respond will determine how we go forward after the pandemic. The critical question is will we resume the old path and to blindly race into the next wall or do we learn and apply the lessons learned to determine our future.

We are at a crossroad. We must choose wisely. Our children, our grandchildren and generations of Diné to come depend on us to make the right decision. It must be a decision to revitalize and rediscover our language, our culture, our teachings, our prayers, our ceremonies, and our ways that have historically withstood whatever was thrown in our way, in our path. We must find a way to incorporate our language, our culture, our teachings, our prayers, our ceremonies, and life ways into everything we do but most critically in the education of our children and grandchildren. We cannot return to life as usual, life before the pandemic.

We will survive. We must survive. Our language, our culture, our ceremonies, our prayers, our paraphernalia will provide the way. As long as we have them, we can depend on them. We have depended on them before. They have not failed us. They will not fail us. As long as we have our language, our culture, our ceremonies, our prayers, and our paraphernalia, we will survive. We will survive as the “Nihooká’ Diyin Diné’e” (the Surface Holy People).

Diyin Dine’é be with you and bless you and your family...always.