A Laughing Party

"Has your baby laughed?" On the Navajo reservation, that's a common question posed to parents who have infants around the age of three months. The first laugh of a Navajo child is a very significant event.

By: Mark Charles

At her First Laugh Ceremony, a relaxed baby offers the community sweets and rock salt, symbols to guide her toward generosity as she grows up. Photo by Bob Rothman

"Has your baby laughed?"

On the Navajo reservation, that's a common question posed to parents who have infants around the age of three months. The first laugh of a Navajo child is a very significant event. It marks the child's final passing from the spirit world to the physical world, meaning he or she is now fully human and present with us. This milestone warrants a party, and what a party it is!

The honor of throwing this party, including covering the expenses, falls to the person who made the child laugh first—a parent or someone else. That person takes charge of butchering sheep, preparing food, gathering rock salt, putting candy and gifts into bags, and inviting friends from near and far.

Once a baby has laughed, training in generosity begins immediately—a value held in high regard among our people. At the party, where the baby is considered the host, the parents or person responsible for the first laugh help hold the baby's hand as he or she ceremonially gives the rock salt, food, and gifts to each guest. The rock salt is eaten immediately, and then the plate is received. There are also bags of candy, money, and other presents that the child "gives" along with the food.

When our daughter, Shandiin, was a baby, my niece came for a visit and made her laugh for the first time. It wasn't a burp or a coo; it was a definite laugh. My niece was both proud and horrified. Proud, because she was the one who initiated this significant step for our daughter. And horrified, because as a teenager, she knew she did not have enough money to pay for the entire party herself. My wife and I quickly assured her we would help cover the expenses.

The Planning

So the planning began. A menu was prepared, a guest list written, and a date set. We had just moved into a small house in Fort Defiance, but for the previous three years we had been living in a traditional Navajo hogan in a remote section of our reservation. (Traditionally, the hogan is not only the center of *family* life but also of religious life. Even today when many Navajo families live in modern houses, they keep a hogan where important family celebrations and traditional ceremonies are held.) So we knew where we would hold the laughing party—at our hogan. It was farther away and, depending on the weather, could be difficult to reach, but it was by far the most appropriate place.

Creating the guest list was a challenge. For the past ten years I have been involved in seeking ways to *contextualize* Christian faith and worship for the Navajo culture. Unfortunately, when the first Christian missionaries came to our people, they brought not only the Good News of Jesus Christ, but also Western culture and taught it as the most appropriate context in which to worship. I typically refer to this experience as being "colonized by the gospel." And many other indigenous tribes in our country and around the world have endured similar experiences.

Because of this influence, many Navajo Christians are strongly opposed to using many aspects of traditional Navajo culture in Christian worship. Some Navajos also argue that the traditional religion is deeply intertwined with cultural practices, making distinctions difficult. But I also have many Christian partners from our tribe who also question those views. When we get together, we like to share practices we have discovered that contextualize worship for our culture. Ninety-nine percent of the time, such sharing takes place in our homes or hogans, not in church.

Now, I wanted to invite people from both camps to Shandiin's laughing party. If we were only going to enjoy a dinner, give out gifts, sing hymns, and pray, there probably wouldn't be any chance for controversy. We might even be able to get away with holding the party in a church because among church-going Navajo Christians, this is one of the traditional celebrations most widely practiced.

But we wanted to *contextualize* this celebration as much as possible. We had asked one of my elders to sing worship songs that he wrote, which drew on our cultural traditions. He likes to take passages from the Navajo Bible and simply sing the words, allowing the natural intonation of the Navajo language to dictate the tune instead of the Western music. The result is that his songs sound like those sung by traditional medicine men, and many Navajo Christians believe that sound is inappropriate when worshipping the God of the Bible. He would argue that the primary difference is that the medicine man knows how to sing the Navajo language, while the missionary does not. Navajo is a tonal language, so intonation affects the meaning of words, while the opposite is true of English. English intonation can easily conform to the melody of a song and not lose meaning. Most Navajo churches sing songs from the *Navajo Hymnal*, which contains English hymns translated into Navajo. Unfortunately, the melody was not translated along with the words. The result: many Navajo words in the hymns are no longer pronounced correctly, making them nonsensical or even take on different meanings.

In the end, we decided to invite people with strong opinions from both sides of this issue. I have to admit that on that morning, I was questioning our judgment and felt nervous. I did not want a passionate, divisive theological debate dominating my daughter's laughing party.

The Celebration

As soon as our guests began to arrive, we put meat on the grill, and the celebration began. Our group was diverse: culturally, theologically, and even socio-economically. Navajos, Americans, and Canadians came. Indigenous people, as well as first-generation immigrants from the Netherlands. People fluent in English, Navajo, and Dutch. We had shepherds, pastors, political leaders, computer programmers, teachers, missionaries, and rug weavers. There were Christians and those who practiced the traditional Navajo religion. But we were all there to celebrate one thing: my daughter's first laugh.

Shandiin learned her lessons in generosity by giving food, gifts, and even blessings to everyone in attendance. She honored her elders and paid respect to her relatives. Then I invited my friend to share some of his contextualized worship songs. He took out his drum, tightened his headband, and led us in worship. His words were from the Scriptures, but the tune and melody of his songs came from the Navajo culture.

I waited for people to walk out, but no one left. I watched for expressions of disapproval or discomfort but saw none. So we continued. After a time of singing, I invited people to pray for Shandiin—that she would grow up to be a generous and loving person and that she would know the joy that comes from the Lord. Beautiful prayers were offered in Navajo, English, and even Dutch.

As conversations concluded and people began leaving, I once again listened for voices of disapproval. Instead, I received comments such as, "This was one of the best worship times I have ever experienced!"

True worship, like true love, can be illusive. It cannot be demanded, concocted, or coerced. Instead, it must flow out naturally from a heart uninhibited in enjoying the presence of the Creator.

Our worship that afternoon did not take place in a church; it was not led by a theologically trained member of the clergy. I cannot even know for sure that everyone present was worshipping in the name of Jesus. But I do know the Creator was there, and I trust he was pleased. We experienced a small taste of Heaven that afternoon, all because we chose to contextualize our worship, so it made sense for our surroundings:

- We met in a hogan.
- We heard the name of Jesus proclaimed in three different languages.
- We worshipped with songs reflecting traditional Navajo ceremonial singing.
- And we celebrated a gift that the Creator had given—the gift of laughter.

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Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

1855 Knollcrest Circle SE Grand Rapids, MI 49546-4402 USA
(616) 526-6088 worship@calvin.edu

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