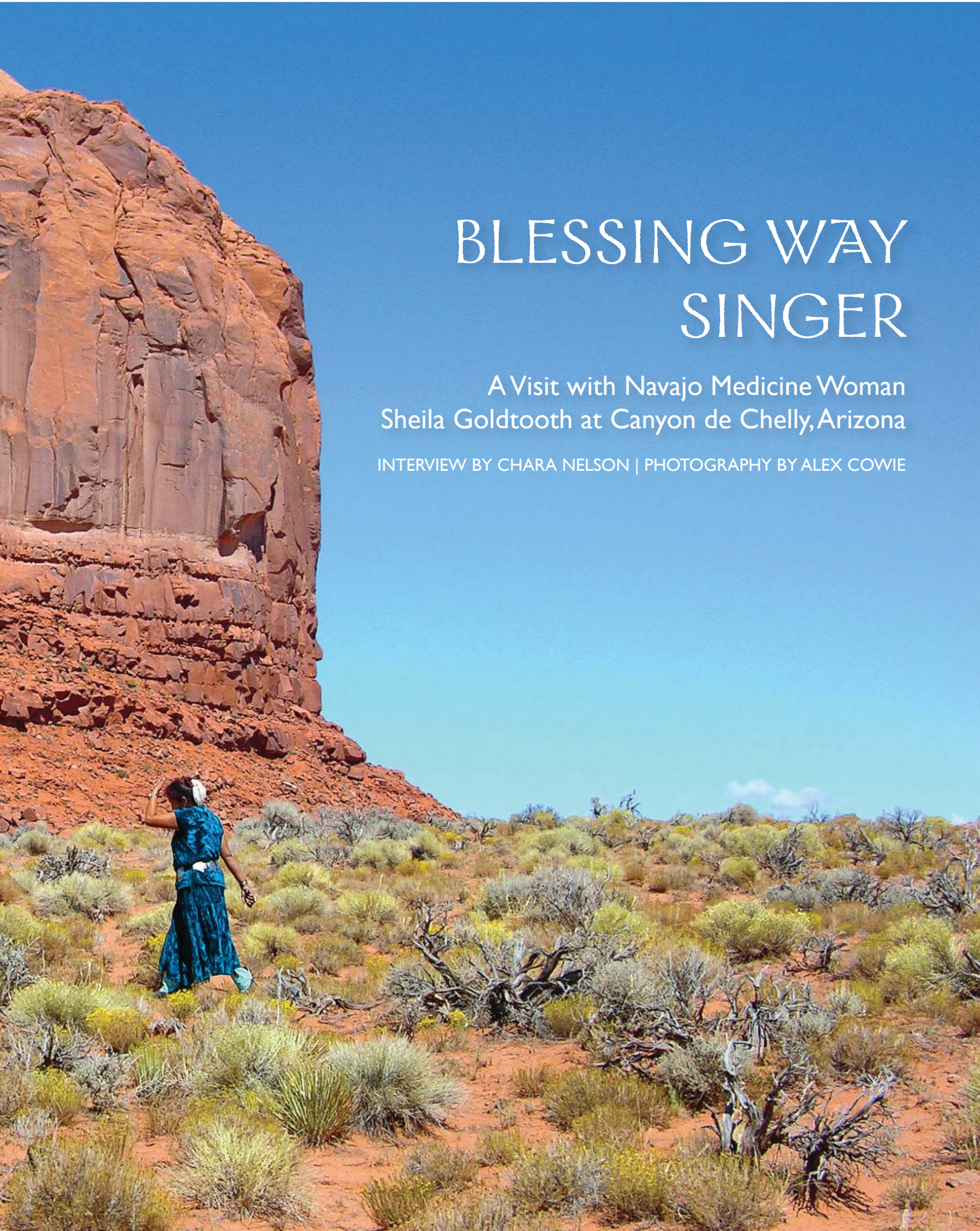




# BLESSING WAY SINGER

A Visit with Navajo Medicine Woman  
Sheila Goldtooth at Canyon de Chelly, Arizona

INTERVIEW BY CHARA NELSON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX COWIE





Much of Native Tradition is based on the idea of harmony—with nature and with self. For Navajo healer Sheila Goldtooth, a life out of balance can lead to disharmony and manifest in illness. But imbalance can be realigned through the sacred chants and songs of her healing tradition, called the Blessing Way, passed down from her mother’s brother and the generations before him. Goldtooth tends to the women and families of her Arizona community, performing puberty or coming of age ceremonies, but is well known throughout the area for her strength in treating all those who need to be brought back into harmony.

Goldtooth was born and raised in Round Rock (*Tsénikani*), Arizona, north of Canyon de Chelly. She grew up tending sheep and cattle with her uncle and learning about healing herbs from her aunt. Tradition and a closeness to the earth and nature were essential to her upbringing, all part of the path that led her to become a healer.

It’s a bright morning when we begin our interview at Thunderbird Café, Canyon de Chelly in Arizona. Navajo culture, which is matrilineal and matrilocal, holds the clan system to be central to its culture and identity as a people. For this reason Goldtooth tells the story of her life and her work as a medicine woman (or *hataalii*) by first recounting her clan lineage.

**W**hen we first meet people, regardless if they are matriarchal or not, whether they are Native American or not, wherever we go, we have to make a proper introduction: My name is Sheila Goldtooth. I’m Coyote Pass-Jemez Clan (*Ma’ii deeshgiizhinii*), which is my mother’s clan, going back many generations. In that clan group alone I have the Salt Clan (*Ashiihi*), the Cliff Dwellers Clan (*Tsenjikini*), and the Black Sheep Clan (*Dibelzhini*). There are three other group clans that I belong to. My paternal clan is the Red House Clan (*Kinlichii’nii*), and in that group there are six more clans.

**Would you tell me about your childhood?** I was born premature and weighed four pounds. My brother always made fun of me and would say, “You were born too small for your skin. A bag of sugar weighed more than you.” I use to tell him, “From all small things comes something great.”

During my mother’s pregnancy, she took care of my grandma, who was very ill. Two weeks after I was born my grandmother passed away, and my mom became very depressed. So I was given to her brother and his wife to be raised, while my sister stayed on with my mom. My uncle is a rancher and I lived with him and my aunt in a remote area where early on I was exposed to the traditional lifestyle and the traditional healing ceremonies. As a little girl, on week-

ends I would be bundled up and, wearing my Navajo jewelry, taken to the ceremonies. When I started school at age five, I would stay with my mom during the week and my aunt and uncle on weekends. I really looked forward to the ceremonies on the weekends.

By that time [the 1980s] many Navajo people were taking up a modern way of living. My childhood was different. Much of my time was spent herding sheep and cattle on horseback, and when we went to town I had to translate for my parents, who spoke no English. On entering high school I went into culture shock because I was the only kid who spoke Navajo. Until then I had thought that everyone grew up like me—rich in the culture. The kids thought I was strange, but I really felt bad for them. There were a few other kids that were somewhat like me and we became medicine people. We were always the quiet ones.

**What does it mean to grow up rich in the culture?** I teach in a local college and I tell my students that to understand who you are as a *Diné* person...you have to experience it: live it, taste it, smell it, hear it, touch it. That’s what happened to me. I grew up in a regular house and also a *hogan*. When people come to the reservation from the outside, they see the *hogans* with the dirt floors, no running water and no electricity; they see that as “poor.” But to us, materialistic goods are



not really part of our culture. Living in a *hogan* is a luxury to us because it's the closest we can be to Mother Earth (*Shimá Nahasdzáán*) and to being in harmony with nature.

During my childhood I spent most of the year at our winter camp with the livestock. It was only from May through September that we would move to the mountain on a two-day cattle drive on horseback. In those days we used to drive the sheep up there, too. My daily life centered around shearing the sheep, gathering the wool, helping during lambing season and bottle-feeding the lambs. When I was growing up my pets were orphaned lambs or sometimes a young calf, or goat. I didn't have anyone to play with so the lambs were my playmates. And I did a lot of horseback riding with my uncle. As I got older I was able to do that on my own. I learned about the local plants and herbs from my aunt—what was edible and what was for healing. I was always around animals and nature.

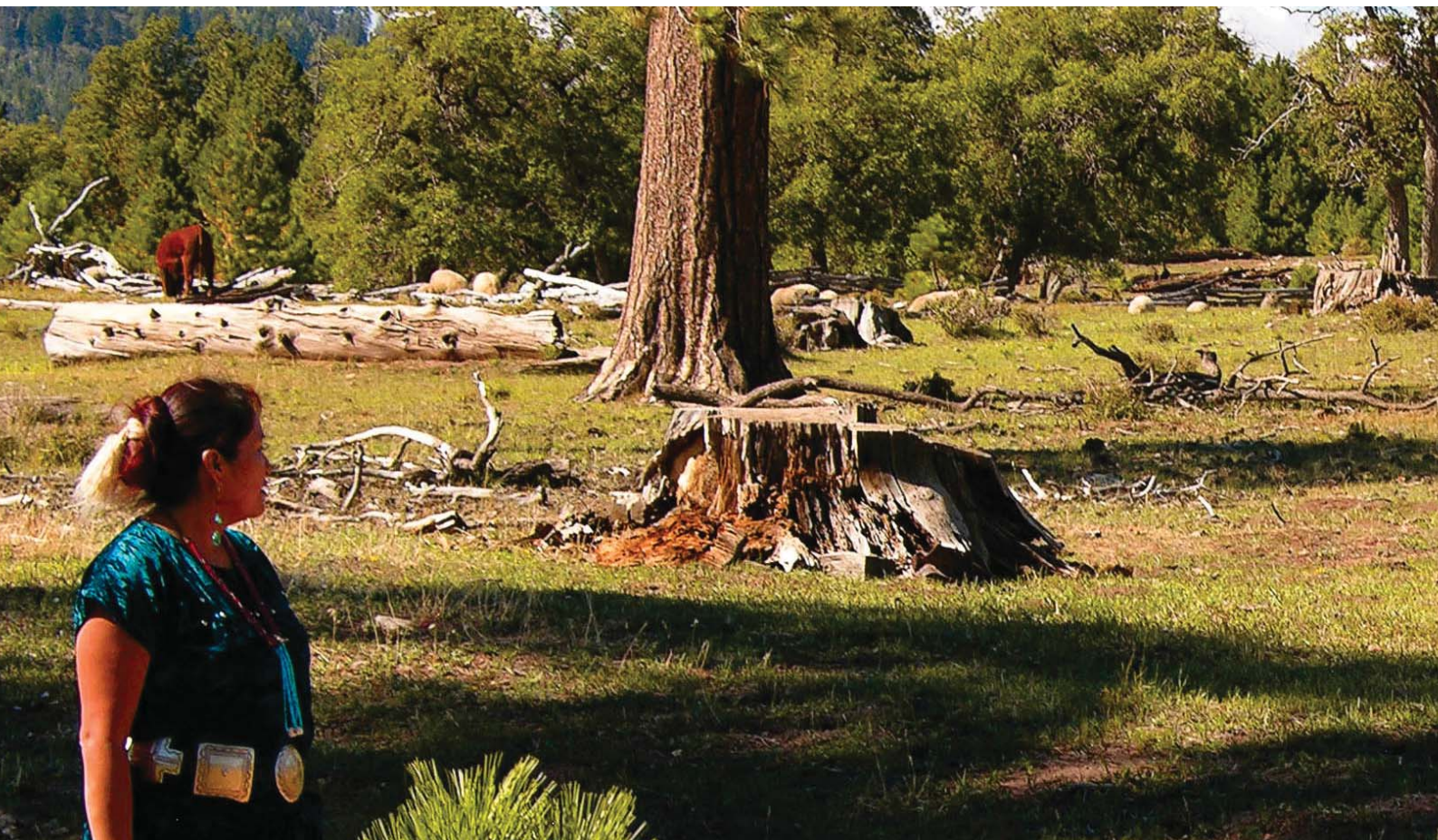
**What else was there about your youth that influenced your desire to become a healer?** Praying was very important. We prayed at dawn with white corn, and in the early evening with yellow corn. As a child I went outside with my aunt and uncle and would repeat the prayers after them. As I got a little older they would go out to pray without me. They would wake me up and say, "Go and pray." I would go outside and wonder what I was supposed to say. And eventually I remembered

and began to pray on my own. At dawn and twilight, you have your audience—the deities, the holy people—that you are talking to in your prayers. There is reverence in the everyday things we do.

I was taught to respect everything—people and nature. Through our clan system, you are taught who is closely related to you. Even if people aren't related to you, you are obligated to help them.

People here live far apart. So when you hear of a ceremony being held for someone down the road, it doesn't matter if the people who are having the ceremony are related to you or even if they have never helped you. You are going to bring something, even if it's just a small gift of food, or just to participate in the whole healing process, to help that individual.

**How did you become a healing practitioner?** When I got older my mom took me to my other uncle, on my mother's side, who was a medicine man. At some age you become aware of yourself as an individual. For me, it happened when I was around seven. I remember my uncle was conducting the Blessing Way Ceremony (*Hózhóóji*) inside the *hogan*. Besides us, there was the patient and only one or two other people. Suddenly, watching how my uncle worked with the patient, I had an awakening. I knew then that I wanted to become what he was. It didn't matter that I was a female and



he was a male. From that day on I asked my mom to take me to his ceremonies. I was just a little girl, but I was helping my uncle during the ceremonies by singing and praying.

In our tradition there is a ceremony when one reaches puberty; for a girl it's called *kinaaldá*. It lasts four days and is performed two times. When I reached mine, my uncle conducted both ceremonies for me. It was there that he announced to everyone that I was going to become a healing practitioner.

At that time I was in high school and getting good grades. I was on the national honor society and graduated in three years. I had plans to devote myself to a healing apprenticeship with my uncle and also to start a cattle business. But my parent-uncle, the rancher, insisted I get a college degree, so I ended up attending Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona. And on top of that, I got married, gave birth to a baby boy, and got divorced—all while I was attending college. I graduated with a degree in Liberal Studies with concentrations in psychology, sociology and Native American studies. After graduation, I moved back home and took a job as a school administrator, a position I held for eight years.

**So you didn't start the healing practice until later?** No, when I moved back, I also started to follow my uncle because he was still doing the healing ceremonies. I apprenticed with him.

There's a story I want to share. When I was still in high school, my sister had a baby girl. And you know the importance of being a woman in our society's clan system. When

my niece was three days old, my sister told me that she wanted me to perform my niece's puberty ceremony when she came of age. She said, "You should be finished with your apprenticeship and by then you'll be a chanter" (a medicine chanter, or *hataalii*). When that day came, I knew I had to do the ceremony. But I was very nervous because my uncle-parent would be there. He was very loving to me while I was growing up, but very straight to the point and strict on things. At the end of the ceremony he looked at me and said, "You have really learned it." This was a great compliment from him and a big moment in my life.

After the apprenticeship, there is an ordainment process one has to go through to become a medicine chanter. I was given the elaborate ceremony where I received the medicine bundle (*jish*, which holds a powerful collection of paraphernalia given for everything you are going to use) and the blessings that accompany it.

My uncle, who had now become my master, conducted the ceremony and conferred the healing way on me. The ceremony includes an elaborate prayer that says that I am going to serve my people and protect my people.

**In the Navajo tradition, your connection to your land and your people is very important, isn't it?** Yes, everything is connected. You have to have compassion for your people, for nature and for the earth. As a healing practitioner, you have to be able to withstand certain physical conditions (just like a



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regular doctor) to help your patients and you have to follow certain ethical and moral laws. For example, you have to love everyone, even your enemies. It is our whole life.

**Do you have different kinds of practices for people going through life transitions than for those who are really ill, physically or emotionally?** I deal with many different types of patients, both women and men. In our culture we have different categories of ceremonies that have to be done. Other practitioners do the ones that lead up to the ones I do. But sometimes patients just want the ones I do and not the others.

**What is the healing process?** What I do may be described as bringing a person back into balance, as rejuvenating a person. When we talk about the healing process, we have to consider all the parts of an individual—the mind, the emotions, the physical body, the spirit and the relation to the society. The mind is very powerful, and because our thought processes go on most of the time, in our culture to be healthy requires us to think positively. Emotions relate to the soul. Our mind can say we are happy, but is our soul happy? The social part is our connection to everything—other people, animals, the land and our social environment. The physical part is our body

and all its parts. The spiritual part is the songs and the prayers.

All of these aspects need to come into balance in the person, and it is this re-balancing that occurs in our ceremonies. A healing practitioner has to work on the whole of the patient to achieve wellness or well-being for that person.

**There are many kinds of illnesses and calamities your healing addresses. What are the sources of some of these sicknesses?** There are many reasons why an illness may occur or affect an individual. A proper diagnosis by a traditional healer is necessary to determine the cause, which may be due to environmental factors, interactions with other people or from the patient's conduct. It could be from killing a certain animal, or the breaking of a moral or ethical law by harming another human being; or it could come from harming oneself with drugs. In fact, the breaking of moral and ethical laws often results in illness at some time in a person's life. Ceremonies help cure these kinds of illness and to restore balance in the individual.

**Can bad emotions over a long period of time turn into a physical illness?** Yes. For example, a person may be attracted to or fall in love with someone. A close relationship begins

but then is broken off and the person's soul is still suffering from that. Outwardly the person acts as if they were fine, as if they have dealt with it. But that emotion stays in the body and eventually turns into an illness.

**How essential is chanting or singing for the healing ceremony?** All practitioners within the different fields do singing and chanting. You have the Bear Way, the Ant Way, etc. Their songs and their prayers are all different. The Blessing Way is mine and the songs are different for each patient.

All the songs are ancient. They have existed from the beginning of our time. My master learned them from his master, going back in time. So there is a lineage from master to master. But sometimes the names of the healing ways change with the different apprentices. Some variation occurs through the lineages. The songs will pertain to different time lines of the history.

**Are these ancient songs also a way of re-connecting with the wholeness of being?** For some who have this awareness, it could be a remembering of coming into wholeness or what we call Harmony. For others it is just a re-grounding to cope with their life. For example, if a person is going along their life path, then later does some crazy things, the person may have the ceremony to rebalance themselves. There is a coming into forgiveness, coming back into the life they were meant to lead, restoring the balance from where they went wrong. Support from family and friends also plays a part.

No matter what the person has done, the practitioner is going to put personal judgment aside, even if the person committed a crime. This is the oath you take in your ordainment. You are going to help that person no matter what.

**While chanting during these ceremonies are you projecting some quality from the heart?** Yes, that's why my master always said to me, "You have that power as a woman to touch people because it really comes from your heart." Women are full of nourishing emotions, and it produces something really beautiful that touches the heart of patients and aids the healing process. There are different chanting tones—high tones, low tones. It depends on the moment, the patient, and what is needed.

**I've attended the *Shalako* ceremony at Zuni pueblo in New Mexico. Before the dancing starts, the chanting goes on for hours. I found that it really changes my consciousness. Is it like that?** Yes, that's why I tell my patients to fully relax and be open to it, even meditate, and feel what's happening in the ceremonial process. The patient and the guests must really be in the moment to experience the spiritual reality of the ceremony. A lot of people today cannot do that.

**They cannot quiet the mind? Are you taught to do that?** There are many disciplines that the masters teach to help their apprentices quiet their minds and become chanters. Doing the prayers helps focus the attention through the singing. It also depends on your master.

**Are some masters more advanced than others?** Yes. Some really have the heart for it, while others just look at it as a job. So it depends on your master and how you learn from your master. A master teaches you that you have to give the same to everyone no matter what they have to give or cannot give.

**It seemed like for a long time Navajo men were the main healers. Were women always healers as well?** Women were always healers, although many women could not become healers until they were older because giving birth and taking care of their children took so much of their time. Also, female healers cannot do ceremonies during menses, and women generally cannot attend certain ceremonies while they are pregnant.

I live in a central area where there are about five women chanters, but the male chanters from outlying areas think that I am unique. So it was not a big thing to me that I became a female chanter. The male chanters in my area have always been accepting of me. It may be different in other areas.

**How has becoming a healer affected your life?** I think one thing is that people see you in this role and have certain expectations of you. People are always watching what you do, what you say, what you wear. You have to be mindful and aware of yourself and your actions. You have almost no privacy. My master told me that there will be people who are going to talk about you in a negative way. I have experienced all of the things my master told me I was going to experience. You have to learn how to cope with this negativity.

You also have to accept your role as a public person. You have made a commitment "for the people, by the people."

In addition, there is a danger of getting sick from time to time, but we have connections with other practitioners, both in and outside of our community, to help us cleanse and purify periodically to avoid getting sick. It's important to have support with family, friends, associates and community.

I enjoy this work. I love what I do. It has down days and up days and many responsibilities. But I realized early on, I just want to help my people.

**You seem like a woman who has crossed over and is living in two worlds—an academic, so-called modern world and the world of traditional culture, practice and values. Would you talk about the challenges this poses?** I feel that one can walk in both worlds and speak both languages, but there are challenges. Some of the activities and situations that occur in the modern world are prohibited in our society, so one has to know how to maneuver around them, to understand which laws or rules can be broken and which ones can't. It gets difficult when you are faced with situations that non-Navajos do not understand. You have to be strong and hold your ground when others see your law as being ridiculous or absurd. Or when you have to do a certain ritual or custom for certain things and other people find it funny or unnecessary. You have to be confident and stern in your belief. \*