

An Outline for the Blog: Survivors Like Us: What the Horny Toad, the Coyote, and Other Sacred Animals Can Teach Us About Navajo Resilience

A. Intro / Hook

a. Hook:

I brought my daughter with me to a science conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. During our sightseeing, we stood on the original grounds of Fort Pitt. Fort Pitt is known to be one of the first places to give out Smallpox infected blankets to Indigenous tribes. Being Navajo and realizing that we are here because someone in my ancestral line either didn't take the blanket or survived the blanket. It was a powerful moment for me because it spoke to my peoples survival.

b. Intro:

I am half Diné, half Hispanic from New Mexico. I grew up mostly on the Navajo Reservation. I don't speak Navajo. I don't speak Spanish. For a long time, I thought that meant I didn't fully belong to either world. I was wrong. I am the living intersection of two underrepresented Southwestern cultures who grew up on the land they both call home. Both have always turned to teachers (from the land and spiritual belief) for protection, guidance, and survival. The belief is that these teachers wait to provide their lessons. This is me, finally showing up to learn.

B. Background / Context

a. Two origin stories told side by side.

i. The Diné (Navajo People)

One of the largest Indigenous nations in the United States, rooted in the Four Sacred Mountains of the Southwest for centuries. Their survival has been tested repeatedly through the Long Walk of 1864, the boarding school era, land and water rights disputes, and the COVID-19 pandemic, and each time they have found a way to endure and continue forward.

ii. The New Mexico (NM) Hispanos

Descendants of Spanish Conquistadors and settlers who traveled the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro north into New Mexico in 1598, more than two centuries before the United States existed. They built communities, developed a distinct dialect of Spanish, blended with the Indigenous peoples of the region, and put down roots so deep that many families have lived on the same land for four hundred years. They are not Mexican. They are not generically Latino. They are their

own people and that distinction is disappearing from the national conversation.

- iii. Brief, honest acknowledgment: Both cultures experienced deliberate erasure of language and identity. It is not an accident that the author grew up without fluency in either tongue. Both cultures survived that erasure, and that is the story.

C. Characters / Sources

- a. There are five pairings, one animal important to Navajo culture and one spiritual protector (Saint) from NM Hispano culture. Each pairing complements the other across centuries and traditions.

Navajo Animal	NM Hispano Protector
Cheii – The Horned Lizard	San Rafael – The Archangel
Mą’ii – The Coyote	El Coyote – shared by both traditions
Atsá – The Eagle	El Águila – The Eagle
Shash – The Bear	El Oso – The Bear
Naa’ashjé’ii – Spider Woman	The Santeras - The Saint-Makers

*Notable: Coyote is one that both cultures share. He has always understood that borders are human inventions.

D. Scenes / Moments

- a. Five sections, each holding both cultures at once:
 - i. Cheii and San Rafael – The Long Road Home

1. Navajo

The Long Walk of 1864 – 10,000 Diné forced from their homeland, marched 300 miles to Bosque Redondo. Those who survived came home and rebuilt on the same sacred land their ancestors had always known. Like Cheii (the horned lizard) called Grandfather, a figure of protection, they endured by staying close to the earth and never letting go of where they came from.

2. NM Hispano

San Rafael (the Archangel) is the patron of travelers and those on long journeys, depicted carrying a staff and a fish, guiding people safely through dangerous roads. The Spanish settlers who traveled the Camino Real north into New Mexico in 1598 brought San Rafael with them. Four centuries later, his image is still carved into bultos in New Mexico homes.

3. Myself

Both say the same thing – know where you came from. The road home is long, but it exists.

ii. Mą'ii and El Coyote – The Trickster Belongs in Both Worlds

1. Navajo

Coyote is one of the most beloved figures in Navajo tradition, a troublemaker, a survivor, and relentlessly adaptable. During the board school era, when speaking Navajo was punished and children were separated from their families, the language survived anyway. Through stubbornness, subversion, and sheer refusal to disappear. That is Coyote working.

2. NM Hispano

The coyote appears in Spanish colonial New Mexico folklore too. As a cultural mediator, a figure who moves between worlds, who adapts to whatever landscape he finds himself in. This is the one animal both cultures share, which feels exactly right. The coyote has always understood that borders are human inventions.

3. Myself

I grew up without either language. That is the system working as designed. But I am here, telling these stories, learning both. The coyote would call that the oldest trick in the book.

iii. Atsá and El Águila – The View from Above

1. Navajo

The eagle represents vision and elevation, the ability to see the full landscape when everyone is caught in the immediate struggle. Today young Navajo activists, artists, and language revitalization leaders are reclaiming their culture on a national stage, seeing beyond the immediate to the longer arc of survival.

2. NM Hispano

The eagle has carried deep symbolic weight in the cultures that shaped NM Hispano identity. Historians and community leaders working today to distinguish NM Hispano heritage from broader Latino labels are doing the eagle's work, rising high enough to see clearly what is being lost and fighting to preserve it.

3. Myself

Writing this blog is my eagle moment, stepping back far enough to see both cultures in the same landscape, maybe for the first time, and refusing to let either one disappear into a label that does not fit.

iv. Shash and El Oso – Rest, Heal, and Come Back

1. Navajo

The bear is a figure of strength and cyclical return. The COVID-19 pandemic devastated the Navajo Nation at catastrophic rates. The community mobilized in ways that stunned the country (mutual aid networks, donations from around the world, neighbors protecting neighbors). The bear does not disappear. The bear comes back.

2. NM Hispano

After the Mexican-American War of 1848, the United States took control of the Southwest and many NM Hispano families lost their land grants, property promised to their ancestors for generations, stripped away almost overnight. Some families are still fighting for that land. The bear is still waking up.

3. Myself

Recovery is not linear and neither is identity. Both take longer than anyone tells you. But the bear always comes back. That is not optimism. That is history.

v. Naa'ashjé'ii and the Santeras – Building Sacred Things from Almost Nothing

1. Navajo

Naa'ashjé'ii (Spider Woman) taught the Diné to weave. Today Navajo weaving is not just art. It is resistance, memory, and identity made physical. Every rug tells a story that survived.

2. NM Hispano

The Santeras of New Mexico, woman who carved and painted saints from cottonwood roots and piñon sap and local minerals, built something equally sacred from the humblest materials that land provided. For generations when there were almost no priests in New Mexico, these handmade saints were the community's primary connection to the spiritual world. Two traditions of women building sacred things with their hands, on the same soil, at the same time in history. Neither fully recognized. Both are still here.

3. Myself

I am learning to read both traditions, the woven rug, and the carved saints, as chapters in the same story. My story.

E. Insight / So What?

The broader point is twofold and deeply personal. First, survival looks different from the inside than it does in any post-apocalyptic novel, and the people living it do not always look the way you expect. Second, identity does not disappear just because it goes quiet for a generation. I don't have to speak the language to belong to a people. That act of seeking, or returning to stories that were always mine, is itself a form of survival.

This blog exists because something in my recognized two stories worth finding. That recognition is something. This is coyote. That is Spider Woman. That is San Rafael lighting the road. That is Cheii, sitting in the sun, waiting for me to come home.

F. Ending

The Diné are still here. The NM Hispanos are still here. I am still here, half of each, learning both, belonging to the land that held them all. Still here, paying attention to the teachers of my worlds.

I want the readers to walk away understanding that these are not stories from the past. They are alive right now, carried by real people on real land in a country that has not always made space for them. This blog is making that space.

Process Synopsis

This blog began with me recalling a time when I attended one of my husbands' work parties and met one of his co-workers. Once his co-worker found out I was Navajo (Diné), he proceeded to tell me about boarding schools and what they did to Native American children. I know this history very well because my grandparents and grand uncle would tell us about the things that happened to them when they were forced away from their families to live in these schools. I politely explained I know the history and we do not really talk about it. He continued to "teach" me about my own culture. This sparked the idea about how teaching was done before schools in my culture and how we survived through times like boarding schools. As I explored this idea, I couldn't ignore my other half, the NM Hispano side. That is how I came to a dual portrait of two cultures carried in my blood, but I was never fully taught what that meant. I am not fluent in either language and I occupy a complicated and often invisible space between two peoples whose histories have unfolded on the same Southwestern landscape for centuries.

The five-animal structure of Navajo tradition anchors the blog, but each section opens outward to pair a Navajo animal teacher with a corresponding NM Hispano spiritual figure. Like the coyote, I belong to both cultures, walking in two worlds, but following my own path. This structure honors both cultures on their own terms while revealing how deeply their survival stories rhyme. As Losada Diaz and Almela-Baeza (2026) demonstrate, emotionally driven storytelling built around authentic personal experience consistently outperforms institutional content in audience engagement and resonance. This blog is built on the principle, not as a writing strategy alone, but as a genuine act of cultural recovery. I am not writing about these people from the outside. I am one of them, finding my way back to both, at the same time, on the same land.

Reference

Losada Díaz, J. C., & Almela-Baeza, J. (2026). Emotional digital storytelling as a driver of social media engagement in higher education: A multi-platform analysis. *Information*, 7(1), 30. <https://doi.org/10.3390/info17010030>