

An Ending, a Beginning: Markings on Two Shields
Charles C. Finn, January, 3, 2010

A big event has just happened, or rather two big events—the ringing out of 2009 and the ringing in of 2010. I suspect some of us may still be recovering from all the ringing?

I'm going to draw from several sources this morning in an attempt to show just *how* big the birth of a new year is, and how this relates to us. The first source will be cultural anthropology, the second, science, and the third, Native American spirituality.

Let us begin with the anthropologists who have learned from their studies of native peoples around the world that nothing in the course of the year is more sacred to them than the end of the old year and the beginning of the new year. In their cyclical, mythical sense of time, the beginning of the new year is actually for them a re-Creation, a literal return to the original Creation of the cosmos. No event could be holier than this, more filled with awe than this—such was the belief passed on not only from generation to generation but from millennium to millennium—“from time immemorial.”

But then science came along and opened up for us a whole new vista. For one thing it has revealed that this mythic consciousness of our human ancestors prevailed for hundreds of thousands if not a million or more years! No wonder we find deeply embedded in our psyches this awe before the phoenix birth of a brand new year rising from the ashes of the old.

But in place of this *mythic* sense of time, eternally returning each new year to the original Creation, science has been progressively revealing a radically *different* sense of time—instead of being cyclical it advances. The universe had a literal beginning, some 13 or so billion years ago with the Big Bang, and it keeps moving forward, it keeps expanding, it keeps unfolding. Had the ancients known about this stupendous evolutionary story they would have had reason for even greater awe. The new year, while still symbolizing the original “fiat lux” that ignited Creation, in a way our ancestors couldn't grasp actually *extends* Creation. The cosmos in which we live and move and have our being, rather than being created once upon a time, is really a cosmogenesis, a cosmos that *continues* to be created. It's still being born!

What does all this have to do with you and me? It has *everything* to do with you and me. Consider that what happens in our individual lives is literally a microcosm of what's happening in the great story of the universe progressing, over billions of years, from matter to life to mind to spirit! Could anything more enhance our self-esteem if we fully grasped it? We matter in the grand scheme of things! We are stardust coming to consciousness, not only reenacting but extending the upreach of evolution towards that fullest, widest, deepest consciousness which we call love.

So when we begin a new year as we're now doing, we're not starting from scratch. "The past," as Shakespeare told us, "is prologue." Yes, the 2010 chapter in our lives is beginning, but it's a continuation of where 2009 brought us, builds upon what 2009 taught us. Ah, but what *did* 2009 teach us? What has been 2009's *spirit* harvest for each one of us?

It's time to bring airy abstraction down to solid Earth, and who better to guide us than Native Americans? Did you ever wonder what markings they put on their shields? I suggest it was symbols and colors depicting visitations of spirit, breakthroughs of spirit whether through great conquest or great dream or great realization. And why do they put these markings on their shields? Less to tell world than to remind self, less to protect against spear than to protect against fear and forgetting. Warriors of spirit put on their shields what they need *never* to forget about the fortifications against fear they have gained from their encounters with the Great Spirit.

Now we're not Native Americans and we don't go around carrying shields, but here's a possible creative adaptation, a project for you if you're up to it. Just what you needed on a Sunday morning, isn't it, a new project.

On a piece of paper, the larger the better, put 2009 at the top and then draw a huge circle with a much smaller inner circle in the center big enough for a few enlarged bold words. At the top of the large circle write January and then clockwise around the circle write the names of the other 11 months. Then get out your 2009 calendar if you haven't already pitched it, or better yet your journal if you keep one, and slowly remember back over each month of 2009, jotting down in your outer circle under each respective month things of significance to your spirit journey. This is going to take some thought and time. And it's also going to take some courage. Some of the things you'll be remembering a part of you would rather forget.

Here's something I wrote that gets at the deep ambivalence we can feel towards a year when that year has brought us darkness and sadness:

Bid Adieu to it Gently

Struggle and heartache can so crowd a year
it can feel like a curse,
but bid adieu to it gently.
Previous hollowings have been known
to make for winds singing through.
Working dry soil with patience
has been known to bear fruit.
Deep mystery the procession of our years
intermingling dark and light.
Perhaps apparent year of curse
is carrier of seed of light.
Bid adieu to it gently.

Some questions you might keep in mind as you try to re-collect your past year: What things deepened you, opened you up, stretched you almost to the breaking point, stopped you in your tracks whether with indescribable beauty, or with a crushing, or with realizations almost amounting to revelations? Was there an event that felt like a turning point, a book that blew open your mind, a movie that touched your heart, a work of art that held you spellbound, a piece of music that carried you away? Were there moments of great pride, of passionate community involvement, searing moments that shook you to your roots, moments of such sweetness that your heart sings just to remember them? Was there an ending that still has you reeling, or a chance encounter that has opened up for you a very bright new door? Make markings for each of these gifts, each of these challenges, each of these teachings, in the outer circle in the month when they occurred.

And when you're done filling in that outer circle, look back over all of those markings in search of a theme, a prevailing tone, perhaps the *core* teaching of the entire year for you, and boil it all down to a few words of summation that you place, bold and enlarged, in that small inner circle. When you look at your year's harvest, the bold words of power in the center will stand out for you, will sing out to you things that only you will fully understand. And if you have trouble fitting all this onto a piece of paper, remember the shield, and create your own variation. Maybe get a huge poster board and paint all

these gifts and challenges and teachings across it in wild colors of your choosing, turning it into a kind of mandala to meditate on. Every time your eyes fall on your 2009 mandala, you'll remember gifts and challenges and teachings unique to you in all the world.

And if you want to do this again in 2010, but not have such a huge project on your hands at the end of the year, get a head start by doing it month by month. Come the end of this January, you could review the month for its spirit moments and begin your markings on a *new* shield in honor of the relationship with 2010 just beginning. And then when February ends you can do likewise so that as 2010 progresses you'll have a visual depiction of its advancing gifts and challenges and teachings. Keep the small inner circle blank, though, because the dominant theme of the year, the core teaching of the year, might not become apparent till the end.

The Sioux Indians have a refrain they repeat before, during and after many of their most sacred rituals. Translated it means "all our relations" or "we are all relatives." They of course include their human relations in this but they're also talking about relations with the animals, with the 4-leggeds and not just the 2-leggeds. But they go further, for they also see the winged people in the sky as their relatives, and the finned people in the rivers and sea, and the creepy-crawlers, and the rooted tree and flower and grass people. But it goes still further. They have relationships with each of the six great Powers. They turn to the power of the East for illumination and wisdom, to the power of the South for the strength to live and grow, to the power of the West for thanksgiving and turning within, to the power of the North for endurance and trust. And of course there's the powers of Father Sky above and Mother Earth beneath. What a sustaining vision of things—nothing is not kin!

Following the lead of these Earth mystics, let us imagine 2009 as a beloved Grandfather who brought us magnificent gifts of beauty and friendship, stern challenges inviting us to befriend even darkness and difficulty, and wise teachings enriching our journey towards that greatest consciousness of all which we call love, love not just for our fellow humans but for the *whole* family. Then let us imagine 2010 as a beloved Grandmother who has just arrived, bringing with her who knows what *new* gifts and challenges and teachings? Goodbye, Grandfather. Thank you! Hello, Grandmother. Welcome!