

Laughing for the First Time

How a Navajo Baby Becomes Fully Part of the Human World

Hannabah Blue

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine...

Recalling my Dad's favorite song makes me smile and laugh—a Navajo laugh that is sacred. The echo of the vibrations, which bounce off my lungs, swing past my heart, and escape out my throat, awaken the ancestors. They smile that their child is well. They give praise that our practices are alive.

Many Native communities value humor. For Navajos, laughter is holy, particularly for our babies. Our babies bloom as beams of precious light. They are our sons and daughters. Our suns. When Navajo babies are born, they have just emerged from the Spirit World. But they are thought to still be split between there and this world, the human world. They are holy beings still, and we circle them with love and care. Navajo babies are not fully in the human world until they have laughed for the first time. Then, they are fully among us,

and they are developing their personalities.

The person who makes a baby laugh for the first time, shares their character with him or

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her. Their light shines on the baby, and the baby absorbs the rays that help him or her to grow. The baby will now have traits that they share with the person who made him or her laugh first. My Dad was the first to make me laugh, and I received marks of his personality: gregariousness, goofiness, a buttoned-up stubborn side, and a love for old school country music.

You make me happy when skies are grey....

A baby's first laugh is a time of celebration and ceremony. The host of the baby's First Laugh



The author, Hannabah Blue, with her niece, Annalie (above), and with her niece, Sialely (next page).

Ceremony is the person who made the baby laugh. This person invites family members and friends to the ceremony. He or she, alone, must prepare a meal for all of the guests. During the ceremony, there are prayers. Also, the person who made the baby laugh takes the baby around and gives each guest gifts and rock salt. The rock salt symbolizes the earth, as well as the developing of the baby's personality.

And finally, that person and the baby are linked for life. The person becomes something of

a godparent to the baby – helping them develop their personality as they grow. It is a lifetime commitment that starts with one laugh – a seemingly simple act with roots that run deep.

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There is a joke among Navajos, when you meet a baby for the first time. You immediately want to hold and play with the baby. But then you ask the parents, "Has this baby laughed yet?" If they say no, unless you want that responsibility, you say, "Someone else hold this baby!"

You'll never know, dear, how much I love you...

Many people *want* the commitment! I have four nieces and three nephews. I have tried to make most of them laugh. I have labored to try to get just one little laugh. I have given my best for just one giggle. I have sacrificed for just one smile. And nothing. I have not been able to make any one of my nieces or nephews utter their first laugh.

One time, I played with my niece all day. I made faces and noises, sang songs, and danced for her. I did this all day with not one hint of a smile. As soon as my sister, her mom, came home, and picked her up, the faintest chortle arose from her lips, and she glowed as the ancestors passed through her, pleased.

They must want me to wait for another time, another baby. They have a plan in mind that I must trust.

But did I make you laugh? You're welcome!

So please don't take my sunshine away.

Hannabah Blue is Diné (Navajo), originally from Kirtland, New Mexico. She is a consultant with JSI, and lives in Denver, CO, with her partner, Jolene, and their two cats. She enjoys visiting her sisters and nieces and nephew on the weekends, and going back down to her and her partner's homelands in New Mexico and Arizona. For her work, Hannabah is committed to addressing health and racial justice issues, particularly those affecting Native and Indigenous communities, LGBTQ+ populations, and youth.



Traditional Practices and Wellness

As a public health advocate, I realize that the First Laugh ritual has another benefit to our wellness. Studies have shown that positive interactions with a baby can help them grow and have healthy development. That connection between babies and their parents and family members is a blessing that can decrease infant mortality and limit neglect. By cultivating this practice, we celebrate Navajo babies' wellness. This is just as the ancestors planned. Their radiance shines through, with each spark lit by tiny bellows of laughter. The smiling, happy faces of healthy newborns sustain our culture, our people, and our ancestors.

Read about other traditional practices, including the buffalo hunt on pp. 4-6 and praying to the Creator on p. 12. How might these practices contribute to wellness?

What traditions do you have in your life? And how do they contribute to wellness?