THE PARADOX OF LOS ALAMOS

Edward W. Wood, Jr.

This essay is dedicated to all natural things, all wildlife, animals and insects and birds, all plants, shrubs and grasses and cacti, and all organic matter, rocks and sand and pebbles, destroyed in the explosion of the first atomic bomb near White Sands, New Mexico on July 16th, 1945, and all people, pets, buildings, streets, and furnishings, killed or destroyed in the explosion of the second and third atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan in the month of August 1945.

Some time ago, I drove south from my home in Denver, Colorado, in search of understanding about nuclear weaponry. From the moment I entered northern New Mexico and drove to Los Alamos, that city where the first atomic bombs were crafted and produced, past the ancient, deserted site of what had once been the village of Tsankawi, I could not believe the startling contrast between New Mexico's primitive beauty, resonant with its past, and the darkly brooding threat of the atomic bomb. I instantly understood this was a paradox I needed to understand, the paradox of our time: humanity now capable of destroying all life, including all remnants of our past, and our resonance with the natural world.

The closer I came to Los Alamos, the deeper I penetrated this paradox of my era. Humanity, wearing the corporate cloak, using earth's natural resources, was able to exterminate all life with modern military technology. Indeed, humanity was scarcely able to control those great military machine so dedicated to destruction. Men (and they were all men) could now abolish earth, its plants and animals, birds and fish, insects and snakes, rocks and soil, people, all human art and artifacts obliterated in final explosion. My heart throbbed faster, lurched with anxiety, that fear so common, so repressed in modern life, as I drove north from Santa Fe, my

frame pack full in the seat behind me. I followed the same twisting, high-desert road the first bombs followed on their route to explosion—Trinity to White Sands, Little Boy to Hiroshima, Fat Man to Nagasaki.

The road to Los Alamos climbs from Santa Fe, rises through reddened mesas and gashed canyons to the Rio Grande River, passes 15th-century Indian Pueblos, and ends on the Parajito Plateau, green with junipers and piñons, site of the 15th and 16th-century ancestral Puebloan villages, called Tyuonyi, Tsankawi and Navawi. There I turned onto the road that would take me to the remnants of the Los Alamos city.

In Los Alamos, I visited two museums that memorialize the discovery, design, and use of the bomb, one sponsored by the local historical society, called the Los Alamos History Museum, centering largely on the lifestyle of those who lived in Los Alamos during World War Two—builders of the bomb and their families. The other, owned and managed by the Los Alamos National Laboratory, which is part of the US Department of Energy, chronicles the history of the development of the bomb.

I visited the government museum first, housed in a modern office building. I parked, nodded to the guard who protected the entrance, then stepped inside. Memorabilia of the bomb were spread over the long north wall, separated by statues of Lieutenant General Leslie Groves, Jr., who controlled the military aspects of the development, and J. Robert Oppenheimer, who directed the civilian scientific effort. I was introduced to them in the documentaries that are stored in that museum. A video machine was embedded in the wall between them. Selections could be made among a variety of tapes about the bomb, its inventors, and its use.

For an hour? Two? Three? I was mesmerized by trembling images of black and white recalling the era of World War Two, the war in which I had fought as a young man. Film clips of

both Groves and Oppenheimer, and of the scientists who helped them, were shown alongside flickering shadows that recalled the Nazis, the Holocaust, Pearl Harbor, the many Japanese-Americans who were wrongly placed in concentration camps, and the explosion of the first bomb, two hundred miles south of where I sat. Satiated and stunned by the memory of that war, the horror of the butchery, culminating in the shock of the atomic annihilation, my heart murmuring again in confused turmoil, I lunged from those documentaries, and stumbled toward the other exhibits. In one corner of the museum full scale models of Little Boy and Fat Man were displayed. My heart seemed to stop for an instant as I reached out and touched their grey, metal surfaces. Each had ushered in a new relationship between man and nature, unleashed a power that could destroy entire cities.

Gripped by sudden nausea, I stepped back from the bombs and almost ran out the door into the parking lot, tugging at my collar. The guard stared peculiarly at me. I wondered as I passed him how many visitors fled as I did, horrified not only by our ability to create such machines of massive destruction, but also by the decision to honor the memory of their creation in museums.

Even the streets glorified our capacity for destruction. The main street was named "Trinity," another was called "Eniwetok," the island atoll in the Pacific where the first hydrogen bomb was tested.

Just off Trinity Street, I turned on the road to Fuller Lodge, once the heart of Los Alamos during World War II, now a community center. The guest house behind it has been converted into the historical society's museum. I wandered through its models, photographs and artifacts, symbols of what life had been in Los Alamos from 1943 to 1945. Several facts reverberated in my mind—first, there were few women involved in the development and use of

the bomb. It was largely a masculine enterprise. Second, the average age of those men was 24 years. Even J. Robert Oppenheimer, the director, had just turned forty. And all were white.

Across from Fuller Lodge lay the pond which had separated the residential areas of the war-time city from the places where the bomb was designed and built. By carefully examining the map I had purchased at the museum and pacing off steps, I located the site of the "Gamma Building" where much of the design work that created the bomb had occurred. The city of Los Alamos had turned the site into a park. I slowly walked over the grass toward the piece of ground where men had stood and talked, thought and worked, busily devoting all their energy to creating weapons of God-like power.

My dread increased in geometric proportions when I stopped at what would have been the front door of the building, where the bomb was first assembled. I lived in both present and past simultaneously. From 1943 to 1945, the discoverers of the bomb had planned and plotted exactly where I stood. I closed my eyes. In my imagination I saw young men rush by me into the laboratory as they struggled to meet a deadline imposed by our demand for the "unconditional surrender" of Japan. They glowed with satisfaction as they solved the design of the bomb, trembled with uncertainty as they neared the test of Trinity. On the night after Little Boy exploded over Hiroshima, they celebrated with fierce delight, the frantic joy of American scientists and military men toasting the death of over 100,000 Japanese.

I turned and fled again, found my car, yanked open the door, and drove from this city of death and destruction as quickly as I could toward the high mesa of Tsankawi. The reds and lilacs and lavenders of those mesas, embraced by clear desert air, served as an unlikely backdrop to my depression: nature's loveliness in such harsh contrast to man's capacity for murderous destruction.

At the bottom of the canyon, I parked in the deserted gravel pit. The high desert sun of August hurt my eyes. I fumbled for my sunglasses and grabbed my pack from the back seat of the car. Slipping into its old, comfortable straps, I followed the path toward the mesa top and the site of Tsankawi. Within fifteen minutes—less than six miles from Los Alamos—I walked on ancestral Puebloan trails that were many centuries old, cut deep into sandstone, and stepped over pottery shards scattered over the trail. To my left, higher up the cliff but below the mesa top, were steps rutted into the stone.

Moki Steps, Photo by Ed Wood

On sudden impulse, I followed them, feeling like I had entered another museum, one hushed and holy, resonant with memories of a lost culture, a people in balance with nature, their artifacts neither arrogant nor vain but rather utilitarian and lovely, a matrilineal people, a peaceful people, if we are to judge by current folklore. Ahead I saw a group of caves.

I stooped and peered into the largest one. The desert sun behind my back still blinded me. I took off my dark glasses. The interior of the cave slowly appeared: smoke-blackened walls, a petroglyph etched into the stone. Carefully I edged into the cave, wary of rattlesnakes that may have been attracted to its cool interior. When assured the cave was empty, I slipped off my pack and turned to face the cave entrance.

Cave Exterior, Photo by Ed Wood

Cave Entrance, Interior View, Photo by Ed Wood

The view exploded before me—sage, piñon trees, bone-white clay spread over the canyon floor. Silence rang in my ears, as I absorbed the hot and golden afternoon. Here I would camp,

here I would meditate on the paradox of Los Alamos.

I stood and left the cave, eager to follow the trail to the top of the mesa, where an ancient town was located. A ladder up the cliff led me to the original site, buried in mounds after so many years. All around me lay the unexcavated ruin of Tsankawi, deserted for over six hundred years, its cliff walls covered in petroglyphs, its ancient trails rutted into red and white

Petroglyph, Photo by Ed Wood

sandstone, its structures now tumbled ruins. Shards of pottery lay scattered over the ground by the hundreds, or the thousands—as if the men and women who once lived here had broken their pots in despair or rage before taking flight.

I reached down and picked up several shards, and it was the oddest feeling to hold remnants of artifacts made a half a millennium before. One had a design of black stripes on a

white background, a design the ancestral Puebloan people had begun using in Chaco Canyon over a thousand years ago. I paused to admire one of the petroglyphs that I found up on the mesa.

I think of the lost world that the ancestral Puebloans had made, and most of all, about their attitude toward war. Men did not worship the danger and rage of combat. A peaceful, agricultural society, with a matrilineal structure, one of its fixed values was commonality with nature. People were seen as belonging to the natural world, not standing apart from it.

In ways I scarcely understood, at the deepest levels of my being, down at the depths of my belly, I sensed that here in this New Mexican landscape—a place that featured religious shrines and ancient caves once occupied by men and women who sat by their winter fires as smoke blackened the walls, who lived in different patterns and ways wise beyond our scientific knowledge and our frightening technology—lay my answer to the paradox of Los Alamos, if I could but penetrate its mystery. Here in this graced landscape that sprawled before me, all red and lilac and lavender and white clay, beneath the dark blue of these clear and unpolluted skies and clouds of billowed white, in this magical landscape of high desert, mountains, mesas, wild rivers, slashed gorges, this land of adobe churches, mosques, and monasteries, here lay an answer that I must discover to live meaningfully and morally in my nation, the one which had invented, used, and continued to build the greatest technological obscenity in the history of mankind.

Returning to the cave at dusk, I unrolled my sleeping bag and air mattress, my orange ground cover protecting them from the dusty floor. The mattress lay across from the

petroglyph: it comforted me to stare at that ancient face.

Cave Interior: Faint Petroglyphs on two-tone wall (left of center), Entrance and skylight opening silhouetted by exterior sunlight (right of center), Photo by Ed Wood

I put some coffee and snacks out for the night, and set aside what I would save for breakfast, more coffee, as well as pancakes, dried milk, honey, butter, orange juice. As it darkened, I started my Primus stove, so familiar to me after all these years. I could almost pump it up by touch, opening the petcock so that a few drops of gas jet through the needle-eye of the valve, then striking a match, hearing the gas hiss until the stove settles into its muted roar, its flame sinking from sputtering, smoking yellow to a pure and heated blue.

Water in my old aluminum pot, dented from use at myriad different campgrounds, quickly began to boil. I made a cup of coffee, dug out the dried fruit I had brought with me, and

sat at the entrance to the cave, staring west at the final remains of the day.

Peace slowly settled inside me, perhaps the first I had known since leaving Los Alamos. The colors of the sky faded from blue to purple to red to grey. The air was absolutely still. My skin shivered in the sudden chill, but the coffee cup warmed my hands.

I closed my eyes, the silence so calm and gentle, the light so clean and pure. These aspects of the place had not changed over centuries, were still as they were when the ancestral Puebloans lived here. The voice of silence, the voice of eons, calls to us out of the night, making our earth-bound flesh tremble with eras when men and women were bonded to the natural world in ways we can no longer imagine.

In this peace, I sank deep within, and heard ancient voices singing melodies I could not quite discern. I cried to understand, to learn new ways of living, in this world of madness dedicated to violence. By what standard could I live, a lonely, weak individual in a world of such terrible power? By what criteria could I maintain some morality in the face of our ability for mass destruction?

When I opened my eyes, the first evening star had appeared. It hung above me, silver in the purple-black sky.

I turned and filled my pot with water again. When I heard it boil, I shut the valve to the burner.

I felt at home, the memory of what I had seen in Los Alamos fading as if I had visited a foreign country whose language I did not understand, and now had returned to a place that had always been my true home.

The stars exploded above me, so close in the desert air they seemed to cover the earth with a blanket of infinite safety. The whole Milky Way shimmered and danced. I almost rose and

danced with the heavens: the awkward steps of an aging man stamped into the solid earth of this cave, for an instant, one fragile moment, part of something bright and clear and much larger than myself.

The moment passed.

I shivered as the air grew cold and retreated back into my cave. The heat from my Primus stove combined with the warmth lingering in the sun-stroked rocks to keep the temperature in the cave warmer than the chill of desert air.

I quickly undressed and slipped into my bag, leaving it half-unzipped. My eyes closed in peace, but just before I fell asleep, I took the time to rummage in my pack for my old navy watch cap, as my balding head needed protection against the cold. Hours later, I woke with my bladder full. I fought the need for a few minutes, the sleeping bag so delightfully warm, the air so cold upon my nose. Finally, the urge rose to a painful demand. I staggered out of the bag, slipped on my hiking boots, laces untied, and crawled out the low entrance to the cave.

A gibbous moon mixed with starlight silvered the canyon floor, shadows mysterious and impenetrable. The air was absolutely still. The stream of my urine splashing on the ground seemed almost a sacrilege.

Just as I crouched to enter, a branch snapped on the canyon floor beneath me. The sound smacked the still desert night. Instantly I turned, swallowing sudden fear. I could see nothing in the canyon, only silver and black shadows. A second rattle shook the air.

What could be there?

I stood alone in blackness. Did the ancestral Puebloans ever crouch outside this cave at night, as terrified of darkness as I? Did this same fear seize their belly? Maybe magic propitiated their fear, and their gods, when properly worshipped, controlled this terror of each sound. But I

lacked their gods. I stood alone, and nocturnal doubts overwhelmed my frightened self.

Light!

Sweet God I wanted light.

I turned and groped my way into the cave and in its darkness fumbled for my stove. Despite trembling fingers, I pumped it up, opened the petcock, struck a match, and lit the gas. I saw the gorgeous smoking yellow flame, watched it sputter, turn to blue, hot and clear and clean, hissing with power, a light in this darkened cave, a light that challenged the night, hurled flickering shadows against these ancient walls once again.

And I did not rise until I saw sunlight shine in beauty upon the canyon floor.

When I finally slid from the bag, I filled the stove with gas, then in a burst of energy mixed pancakes, first one, then two, then four. I ate each as it finished baking, wet with great gobs of butter and golden New Mexico honey, wiped the plate, licked my fingers, then leaned back against the cave wall with my coffee.

The canyon floor lay warm and green and gold beneath me, glorious in the sun. I knew, in a way I had never known before, the meaning of redemption. Night is the time of death, fear, loneliness, terror, the touch of the all-engulfing unknown. Yet in the morning the light has always arrived, the sudden miracle of grace, the end of darkness. If I had been a Puebloan, perhaps I would have dealt with my fear by praying to the gods. But modern man often has no gods, beyond technology. And in the night, in primeval fear, I had turned to a machine myself and lit my way with it, the way of the West. Our technologies hold back the night, but we are also imprisoned by them, no longer able to believe in non-technological redemption.

The ancestral Puebloans had sought to control nature in one way, and we in another. Their way used what a person like me might deem magic, or what another might call medicine.

Our way refuses to accept the terror, creates great technologies to master it, and in that mastery makes an even greater terror: the death of all living things. Since I could not go back to the time of the ancestral Puebloans, since none of us in the West really can, there was no alternative but to accept that I myself was a part of the problem, an embodiment of the paradox.

So I stuffed my sleeping bag into my pack, scooped up my cold stove, washed my utensils, had one more cup of coffee, then prepared to hike back down the trail toward Los Alamos, my excursion into nature and the primitive a qualified success. Like so many who had searched the desert for meaning, in the end what I found was a reflection of my own flawed self.

The pack leaned full and heavy against the entrance to the cave. I took one last look around, then swept the cave floor with a branch from a shrub to obliterate any evidence of my presence. I almost put my arms through the straps but was not quite ready to leave. Tears wet my eyes. I sensed that I had missed some nearby answer: it lay just before me, if only I could liberate myself from the prison of my Western heritage. For one sweet instant the night before, I had plunged deeper into myself than ever before, and had experienced wild delight beneath the blanket of stars, in union with the natural world. But then simple fear and my need for technology had overwhelmed me, leaving me hollow, lost.

Oh, I could not leave yet. This was not how I wanted my visit to end.

I loved this place. So I would hike to the mesa and the hidden village of Tsankawi once more. I climbed the ladder against the cliff. As I stared down at all of the shards, I remembered how the tribes that had created this village had made their pots. Created in coils, without a potter's wheel, the artifacts were never to be sold for profit, but rather were works considered by their makers to be both utilitarian and beautiful, always of deep religious significance. Though a pot might be used for storing beans, cooking corn, or as a water jug, it also contained

the spirit of God. Its symbols were related to worship, even its surface pattern broken, it is believed, so that God could enter and depart.

Of all our differences, was this not the greatest? The ancestral Puebloans had paused to allow God into their items of daily living, so as they went about their tasks, they would constantly humble themselves in prayer, asking for some divinity to guide their efforts. They challenge us to pause in our busy occupations, to break the pattern of our violence so that other voices can enter our souls, ancient voices, ancient ways. Maybe this was what I could try to carry back home, like a shard of pottery, the peace of the Puebloan culture—a kind of peace I had found before in the stillness of Mary, or the resonance of a Quaker Meeting—and their habit of constantly reminding ourselves to appreciate the presence of the divine by staying in close connection to the natural world.

Edward W. Wood, Jr. was severely wounded in World War II. He has published three books stemming from his experience in combat: *On Being Wounded*, *Beyond the Weapons of Our Fathers*, and *Worshipping the Myths of World War II*. His articles, essays, and poetry have appeared in publications ranging from *Parabola*, *Friends Journal*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Western Friend*, and *Flaunt*. He died on April 12, 2021. Learn more about Wood at www.authoredwood.com.