



# A CONVERSATION WITH **TERESA JORDAN**

## RENAISSANCE WOMAN OF THE AMERICAN WEST

WRITTEN BY June Pace | PHOTOS BY Nick Adams

To be called a Renaissance man or woman is to acknowledge that the individual is well-educated, well-mannered, and has talent and profound knowledge in more than one field. That definition is fitting for Teresa Jordan.

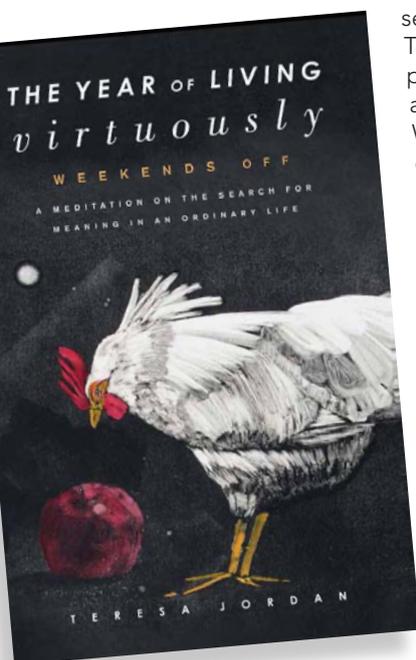
An award winning author of several books and an accomplished artist, the cover of her most recent book *The Year of Living Virtuously*, (*Weekends Off*) won the Eric Hoffer Da Vinci Eye Award for cover art

featuring one of her monotypes from her series, "Chickens from the Dark Side." Teresa is a songwriter as well as sings and plays the tin whistle and recorder. She is a scholar of the history of the American West. Raised on her family's working cattle ranch in rural southeastern Wyoming, she lived a way of life that has almost been entirely lost in her lifetime. Literally growing up on a horse, Teresa's childhood revolved around calvings, brandings, and cattle drives. Her great-grandfather, grandfather, and her father who built and ran the ranch were strong, powerful, and stoic men who could, in her words, "do things." They all had the multiple abilities and skills necessary to survive the challenges of making a living out of undeveloped land.

In seventh grade, after outgrowing the one-room schoolhouse she'd



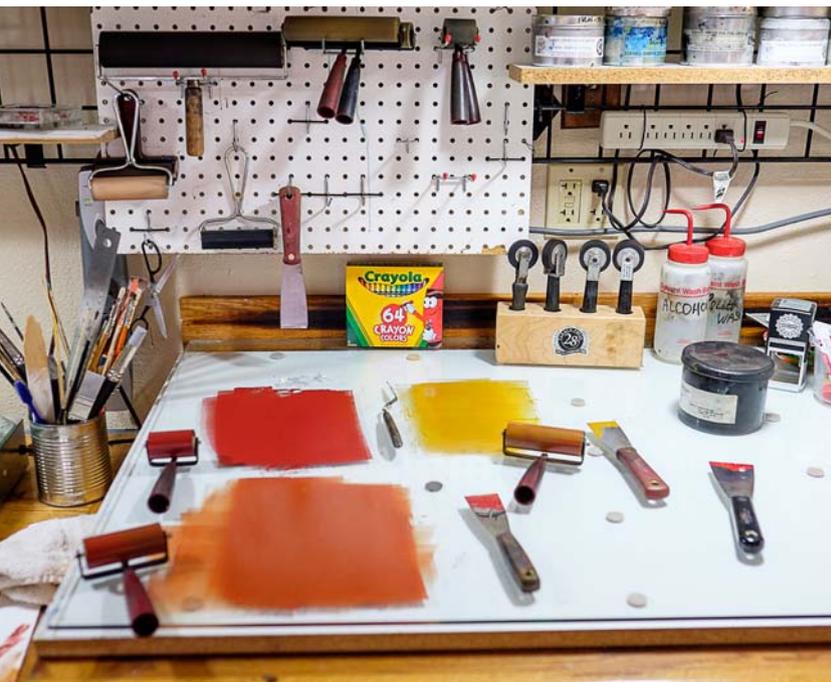
been attending and where her mother taught, Teresa was sent to Davenport, Iowa to boarding school. From there it was moving several times through high school and then into college. During her junior year at Yale University, her mother died unexpectedly from a brain aneurysm, and the bottom fell out of her world. Stunned and heartbroken, she left college to return home to the ranch to help her father, who was also lost and reeling. Having thought she wanted to





be a journalist in Latin America, she received permission from Yale to do an independent study program from the ranch and switched from Latin American studies to American history with an emphasis on the American West. In 1977, Teresa graduated from Yale and her thesis, *Wyoming Ranchers During the Great Depression*, won the McClintock Prize for History of the American West. That same year, due to economic pressures, her father sold the ranch that had been

in their family for four generations. In her book, *Riding the White Horse Home, A Western Family Album*, she writes "My sadness over the loss of the homeplace is my dark side, my grief, but it is also the source of my deepest knowledge. Perhaps it is only through this experience of loss that I can value a sense of place, that I can question how thoughtlessly—even how contemptuously—we are taught to cast it aside."





Teresa and her husband, Hal Cannon, a Renaissance man in his own right (he is the founder of the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, public radio announcer, folklorist, and accomplished musician currently playing in the group 3hattrio) now live on their own small “ranch” in the town of Virgin, Utah. Populated with Navajo Churro sheep, chickens, cats, gardens, and a delightful pup named Chaco Cannon, they have brought their gifts of music, art, conversation, and friendship to this small gateway community to Zion National Park.

The idea behind her book, *The Year of Living Virtuously (Weekends Off)*, came when Teresa read Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography and his experiment to write about 13 different virtues as a way to work toward moral perfection. Franklin’s lists of virtues were as follows: Temperance, Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Tranquility, Chastity, and Humility. However, she added her own twist, taking weekends off to ponder the seven deadly sins. She made a commitment to write an essay on a different virtue or vice each week and post to her blog every Sunday night. This blog became the book, which also includes the views of theologians, philosophers, ethicists, scholars and scientists, and her own research and story-telling. The book was been extremely well-received, including positive reviews in *The Wall Street Journal*, *O Magazine*, and *Radiowest* to name a few.

I recently caught up with Teresa, and we discussed her new book, her artistic endeavours, and life in southern Utah.

**JP: What would you like to say were the lesson(s) you learned from writing this book? I know that the concept of resilience runs throughout ... You say that unlike Franklin, you were not using the project to aspire to moral perfection, but rather “to examine the ordinary strengths and weaknesses, that shape the quality of our relationships, to see how virtue and vice play out in ordinary life.” Can you expound on that?**

**TJ:** I started the project as a writing practice. I had been focusing on visual art and my verbal skills were rusty. I wanted structure, a series of prompts or triggers to get things started, sort of like finger exercises for a pianist. When I ran across Benjamin Franklin’s list of virtues, it fit the bill – we all have opinions about virtue and vice, right?

Honestly, in the beginning, I thought this was something I could toss off in a couple of hours each week. But the experience was profound. It made me ask: what was I raised to believe? What do I believe now? Am I living by what I believe? I realized I had never taken time to ask those questions on a deep and sincere level before and immediately



they stretched me beyond my own experience. How have others dealt with this throughout history? Why do we fall short of our aspirations? What can we learn from ethics and philosophy? What do new breakthroughs in neuroscience tell us about human behavior?

I think it's easy to assume that when you publish a book, the project is done, but I've found that is never the case. For my first book, *Cowgirls*, I interviewed over eighty women on ranches and in the rodeo. Ordinary people have extraordinary wisdom when they talk about what matters to them most, and even now, over thirty years later, a week never passes that I don't think about something one or another of those women told me. The burning question that drove *Riding the White Horse Home* was why, when my people – not only my family but ranching culture in general – were so stoic and strong, were they not resilient? That question continues to engage me, and underlies much of the inquiry in *The Year of Living Virtuously (Weekends Off)*.

I suspect that *The Year* will affect me more over time than anything I've written before. As we become clear about what we believe, it's easier to recognize when we aren't living in accord with our values. I don't have any illusions about perfection, but I do hope I can become more aware, and ultimately, a bit kinder and more loving. I tried to capture a sense of that in the last paragraph of the book:

*Aristotle saw happiness not so much as a state of mind as an activity, and in the end, practice interests me more than perfection. The Oxford English Dictionary's first definition of practice is eloquently simple: "to pursue or be engaged in." This project started as a way to practice writing. It continues to engage me, long after my self-assignment of weekly reflections has expired, as a way to practice life.*

**JP: The first book you wrote, *Cowgirls, Women of the American West*, I feel a real affinity for and find it more relevant than ever in the rapidly changing agricultural world in our country. The stories of these ranch women, not dude or hobby ranches, but real working ones, are fascinating. The harshness of the environment, the unrelenting needs of tending to the livestock, and their own families and health seem like almost overwhelming circumstances. However, these women persevere continuously year after year, working "out" in the real sense of the word and all seem to share certain things in common. They express a deep satisfaction of a job well done, no matter how demanding the task, or how harsh the weather is. That there is a true sense of satiation and satisfaction; from the physical exhaustion that follows that exertion. In the words of one of the women, Carol Horn, "We lived real harsh, real close." The first edition of this book was in 1982, Doubleday. How do you think their stories would differ today?**

**TJ:** As far as the physical work and its challenges goes, little has changed. On the other hand, it's easier for a woman to have visible authority. Thirty years ago, it was rare to see a woman serve as a county commissioner, on a bank board, or as an officer in a stock growers' association. Now women take on all sorts of visible authority, even at the highest levels. Anne Veneman from California served as Secretary of Agriculture from 2001 – 2005, for instance, and a ranch woman I grew up with, Cynthia Lummis, has been Wyoming's sole US Representative for the past four terms.

**JP: You mentioned a William Blake quote about the "Power of Art—creating form out of chaos" influenced you as you began your journey into visual arts. You have done monotypes, paper cuts (such as the illustrations in *The Year of Living Virtuously*), published several illustrated Fieldnote books, and now you are returning to painting. What do you think creates an artist and what drives them to create? What drives you personally to create?**

**TJ:** Actually, I had it wrong. It was Samuel Taylor Coleridge who wrote about the esemplastic power of the artist to make sense out of chaos, to "shape into one" the many truths around us.

Coleridge coined the word "esemplastic" based on *es hein* or *es hen*, Greek for "from one." I find it a helpful term to refer to the way that art informs us. Think of that word, "inform" – in form. Putting into form. An artist, through his or her work, literally gives form to what has not been clearly understood before. And I think it's the urge to understand that drives many artists, and perhaps particularly writers.

Many writers love to write. I don't. In fact, for me, it's usually miserable. Most of the time when I'm working on something, whether it is a single essay or a book, I feel completely inadequate, like I will never be able to understand whatever it is that I'm trying to figure out, or that I won't be able to say it in a way that someone else can understand, or that I simply don't have anything of interest to say. But some mad urge keeps me struggling, and somehow out of the darkness and frustration, usually just moments before suicide (I'm joking, but barely), something starts to make sense. And then it's worth it.

Many visual artists report something similar. I came to art, though, as a respite from this sort of struggle. Many years ago – it must be something like 25 years ago – I was asked to teach a class on writing for artists. I was blocked in my own writing at the time and my students told me, “You’re making us write; we think you should draw.” I took a “Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain” class, based on the book of the same title, and I found, to my huge surprise, that I could draw. I loved it. I loved the sense of complete attention I fell into, and how deliciously lost I became in it. If writing was an attempt to make sense out of something, drawing and painting was an attempt to *participate*.

“Participate” is the word that came to me from the very start. To draw an apple was to become an apple, to lose that sense of being separate from it. Once, when I was reading about a Japanese born California artist that I particularly like, Chiura Obata, I learned about the Zen concept in painting of *kiin-seido* or “living moment,” defined as the intuitive expression of a subject’s essential nature. It begins in observation but is not a slave to observation. Rather, it transcends observation to capture some deeper essence or reality. The artist experiences a sense of stepping beyond that veil of separation between self and otherness. Finally, I had a term for what I was feeling when I sat on a rock and sketched a tree.

**JP: You have been a writer in residence several times and have taught writing extensively throughout the West. What advice do you have for aspiring writers?**

**TJ:** Write a lot, read a lot. The reading is as important as the writing. I’m always surprised by how many people want to be writers who don’t read much. Perhaps they have a romantic idea of what it means to be A Writer, in capital letters. But in my experience, if they aren’t interested in writing as a noun, they won’t end up practicing it as a verb. Writing schools are quite recent—until the mid-twentieth century, almost non-existent. Throughout history, writers have learned to write by reading good writing and putting in the hours necessary to learn how to write that well themselves.

**JP: What might the future hold for Teresa Jordan?**

**TJ:** I want to narrow my focus and get better. You call me a Renaissance woman. I think “desperate dilettante” might be a more accurate term. I love to make things, and I want to make *everything*: music, art, books, radio, film .... A Jane-of-all-trades dabbles in many things but has mastery of none. As I “mature” – a term I prefer to saying “as I age” – I’m increasingly interested in mastery. I realize I don’t have all the time in the world. Late in life, the novelist Philip Roth placed two signs on his desk: “Stay Put” and “No Optional Striving.” I need to adopt those intentions as my own. 

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Photos by Nick Adams.



# SACRED SHEEP REVIVE NAVAJO TRADITION

WRITTEN BY Hal Cannon and Taki Telonidis

*note: This article was first produced as a NPR radio feature in June, 2010 under the auspices of the Western Folklife Center. Since this was produced Hal Cannon and Teresa Jordan have joined the movement in raising Navajo Churro Sheep at their home in Virgin, Utah.*

For as long as anyone can remember, Churro sheep have been central to Navajo life and spirituality, yet the animal was nearly exterminated in modern times by outside forces who deemed it an inferior breed. Now, on a Navajo reservation of northern Arizona and New Mexico, the Churro is being shepherded back to health.

The Navajo Nation is the size of West Virginia, and at last count, 300,000 people live here. Most people are spread out in small clusters that you see off in the distance from the highway. Amongst modern prefab houses and hogans, the multisided traditional homes of the Navajo, are often corrals with small bands of sheep grazing nearby.



Tanabah Natani, Navajo weaver, blowing healing smoke on sheep.



Photo by Nick Adams.



Roy Kady, Navajo weaver

**“Sometimes you find me, and I just want to sit in the corral with them,” Navajo weaver Roy Kady says. “Just find a corner and I sit there. They motivate me, even just to see them; it’s that strong to me.”**

Churro sheep are smaller than most breeds and have a long, wavy lustrous fleece, low in lanolin, which is valued by Navajo weavers like Kady. He lives near Teec Nos Pos, where he is the former chapter president — sort of like being the town’s mayor. For him, this flock is part of something larger, something he calls “din’e bi iina,” the Navajo way of life. “Din’e” is the preferred name for the Navajo, and “bi iina” means “way of life.”

“Sheep is your backbone,” Kady says. “It’s your survival. It’s your lifeline.”

For centuries, the Churro was all these things, providing the Navajo with what they needed to survive in the stark desert: meat for sustenance, wool for weaving clothing and blankets, sinew for thread. It’s no wonder the Navajo are grateful, even reverential when it comes to the Churro.

“Sheep is a very important part of this whole cosmology to us,” Kady explains. “You know, there are songs to where it refers to ‘the first thing I see is the white sheep to the East when I wake up to make my offering. It stands at my doorway.’ And that’s how we know that the sheep is something that’s very sacred to us.”

### WHERE THE CHURRO WENT

The Churro were the first domesticated sheep in the New World. Most historical accounts maintain the sheep were brought to the Southwest by Spanish Conquistadors in the 1500s, though for some, it is thought these sheep came to the Navajo earlier as a gift from the Creator. In any event, Churro sheep and the Navajo have woven a life together in a balance of nature. However, by the 1860s, America’s westward expansion collided with Navajo resistance. In a tragic move, Kit Carson and his troops were ordered to relocate the tribe and destroy their livestock. “The eradication of this particular sheep breed — because we are connected to it with songs and prayers and ceremonies — when it was taken from us, that part of our life was also destroyed,” Kady says. Eventually the Navajo were allowed to return to their ancestral lands, where they built their herds back.

That is, until government agents returned in the 1930s — with orders to eliminate the Churro. “The U.S. government thought that they had too many sheep — and the wrong sheep,” says Lyle McNeal, a professor of animal science at Utah State University. He says the reason the government gave was environmental. The Churro “were causing premature siltation on a new dam being built on the Colorado called Hoover,” McNeal says. “They felt that the runoff and the overgrazing would make that dam worthless in a few years.” In 1934, the federal government started a stock reduction. Killing off the Churro sent the Navajo economy into a tailspin. Realizing the tribe could not survive without their herds, the government introduced standard breeds, whose meat and wool were more uniform to market demand.



Lyle McNeal, Animal Science professor, Utah State with herd of Churro Sheep.

## REDISCOVERING THE CHURRO

For decades, most people thought the Churro had been eliminated. But in 1972, when McNeal was teaching in California, he took his students on a field trip to the Salinas Valley where he noticed some strange-looking woolly creatures as they stopped to visit a rancher. "At that stop is where I really first saw a living Churro. I'd read about them before then, but I had never seen one up close," he says. The discovery spurred what can best be described as a personal and professional calling — a 35-year mission to bring the Churro back from the brink of extinction. McNeal and his supporters scoured hidden canyons on the reservation for surviving Churro, and eventually found enough animals to begin a breeding program. This led to the establishment of the Navajo Sheep Project, which is dedicated to bringing back the Churro.

"When I had sheep in the truck and we were making deliveries down there and I'd stop to get some gas, some of the elders would be attracted to the truck," McNeal says. "They would say, 'These are the real sheep. Where did you get them? That's when I started getting the signal that these are more than just sheep, so it added a dimension to the Navajo Sheep Project effort that I hadn't expected."

## A BLESSING OF SHEEP

The road between Gallup and Shiprock, N.M., leads toward a sheer sandstone cliff. In a corral with a few dozen Churro, weaver Tahnibah Natani gathers her ewes and rams as her husband prepares for a ceremony to bless and protect the sheep. Anderson Hoske is a medicine man. He's lit up a mix of local plants, making sure all the sheep breathe in the thick aromatic smoke from the smoldering fire. "The smoke is like a flu shot to them," he says. "It's all about chasing away the sickness spirits, different sicknesses." Hoske begins to chant. He sings an ancient prayer, then Natani fills a sacred pipe and blows smoke into the face of each sheep. This is a family that shows its gratitude for the gift of life that is given each time it takes an animal for food. This is a family that will shear these sheep, clean the wool, spin it into yarn — which then goes to the loom to be woven, not just as a work of art, but a visual representation of heaven on earth. "So when you are weaving, actually you're doing a prayer because the warp is considered a representation of rain," Natani says. "The tension cord is lightening. The top of the beam of the loom, the very top, represents the sky, Father Sky. And the bottom bar represents Mother Earth. Everything on the loom has a special song for it. So it becomes a prayer."

## A TRADITION ENDANGERED

Natani and Hoske are committed to keeping the traditions of their ancestors alive in a modern world. They're active in a region-wide community of herders, weavers and restaurateurs who are dedicated to the Churro. Even though the breed is a small minority of the sheep on the reservation — there are just over 4,000 of them — it's no longer considered endangered.

But while the Churro are thriving, it may be that this weaver and medicine man are becoming the rare breed, even within their tribe. Like most Americans, Navajo have become tied to a paycheck economy and a new generation is growing up mesmerized by what's beamed in on the satellite dish. Navajo Sheep are just one indicator of the health of a culture and its traditions.

On a background of pink sand, golden brush and a pewter gray sky, Kady and his mother enter their remote hogan to escape the cold. They occasionally trade words in Navajo, but otherwise she sits expressionless in her long skirt and bright scarf as her son reveals a deep worry for the survival of his tribe's traditions.

"I think we are at the point where, yeah, it could die out — tomorrow," he says. "But coming from my heart is that this is good and has to be continued. You oftentimes hear the phrase, 'The youth are tomorrow, they are our future.' But I always say, No. They're now. It has to happen now. We as teachers need to stop and say, 'Let's get with it and teach them before it's forgotten.'"



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