

**Sedna and the Seal<sup>1</sup>**  
(An Inuit Oral Tradition)

Your last piece of soap stone is brought out. With eyes focused, the stone is held in hand under the flickering light of the oil lamp. It's turned this way, then that, catching the eye and the light in the contours of the stone. Who's within the stone, to be released as the stone is chipped away? Held under the flickering light . . . , it's her! There's no mistaking it. It's Sedna, she who lives at the bottom of the sea! And the hands become busy. With steel axe and knife, the stone covering is carefully removed from Sedna. The chips fly from and fall to the floor of the igloo. In no time, the image of Sedna is released from the soap stone and held close in hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

The world is an empty place....

All is dark..

There is nothing,

flat earth in all directions.

There are no animals,

no seals,

no fishes,

no birds.

All is empty,...

earth everywhere.

There are two men.

They are already full-grown when they came from the ground. They live together there,

but it is not a very satisfactory life...

With the words of a song,..<sup>2</sup>

they sing.

"A human being here

A penis here.

May its opening be wide

And roomy.

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<sup>1</sup>The story text is from the Iglulik and Netsilik Inuit, two central Eskimo peoples. This account is similar to that found throughout the oral literature of all Eskimo peoples. For additional ethnographic background, see Boas 1888, Nelson 1983, Rasmussen 1929 and 1931, and Speck 1935.

<sup>2</sup>The notion that spoken words have the power to transform the world is widely shared among indigenous peoples everywhere. Hence the Apsáalooke expression, *dashússua*, "breaking with the mouth," that which comes through the mouth – voiced words, sung song – has the volition to affect and transform the world – "stories make the world."

Opening,  
opening,  
opening..."

These are the words they sing..

One of the men is turned into a woman,  
she is soon with child...

From these three come the peoples of the earth,...  
though some children are found in the earth.

A girl child,  
she can be found near the camps,  
without much searching.

A boy child,...  
you must journey far,  
with much difficulty,  
to find him in the earth....

The camps of people grow.

Life is hard.....

The people have no animals to hunt,  
people live by eating the earth.....

There are only so many ways you can prepare a meal with earth!..

The people move about,  
they camp,  
they break up the soil for their food.

Their clothes are bad,  
full of holes..

Their kayaks are no good,  
full of holes as well.

They sink in the water!...

Their summer tents are bad,  
as the wind always blows through.

They have no seal oil to heat their igloos in the cold winter,  
no oil to give light in the dark winter,  
no oil to cook their earth food.

It's a hard life.....

There is one thing the people have....

They have no fear!..

They do not live by,.  
endangering the souls of others!

They fear nothing....

In the camp there is a beautiful girl.

She is named Sedna...

She is a hard worker,  
can prepare the soil for eating with the best of them!

She is desired by many young men.

They come to marry,  
    but each is turned down.  
She is very particular....  
One day a handsome bird arrives in camp.  
He wants Sedna...  
He gives promises of a good life,  
    tents without holes,  
        warm clothes,...  
            good food.  
Sedna hears these words of the bird,  
    she joins this bird....  
Together they fly off to the land to the north...  
What Sedna finds in the camp of the bird,  
    is bad.  
The tents have holes,  
    the clothes are bad,  
        the soil is no good!..  
Her husband,...  
    he is no good as well.  
He spends his time gambling with the other birds,...  
    pays her no attention.  
Tears fill the eyes of Sedna....  
Sedna's father decides to pay her a visit.  
He travels north with his dog,  
    in his kayak.  
He arrives,  
    he sees his daughter.  
The birds are out gambling.  
The father puts Sedna in his kayak,  
    they head back to their camp....  
The birds return,  
    find their Sedna gone..  
They fly high in the sky,  
    look in all the directions.  
They see her down there,  
    fly toward the kayak..  
They hover just above the kayak,  
    small in the water,  
        the power of their wings causes great waves to form in the open sea..  
At any moment the boat will capsize,  
    they will be lost....

The father fears for his life,  
    he knowing what the birds want.  
The father throws Sedna into the sea...  
She can not swim,  
    she grabs hold of the side of the kayak.  
The father pulls out his knife,  
    he cuts off the first joints of Sedna's fingers.  
At that moment something happens....  
The flesh,  
    the bone of Sedna's fingers hits the water,  
        they are fishes of all kinds,  
            seals,..  
                    walrus..  
Sedna has a second set of finger joints,  
    she continues to hold tight to the kayak.  
The knife cuts away.  
The flesh,  
    the bone hit the water,  
        caribou,..  
            bear,.  
                    wolves roam the land...  
Sedna grabs to the kayak with the last of her fingers.  
The birds hover close.  
The knife cuts.  
Birds of all kinds,  
    all the other animals come forth from the earth...  
Without fingers,  
    Sedna falls to the bottom of the sea.  
The birds leave.  
The father has saved his life...  
He makes his way back to the land,  
    sets up a camp...  
From the bottom of the sea,  
    Sedna makes her way to the land.  
She is very disappointed in dad!..  
That night Sedna comes into her father's camp,...  
    she kills that old man,  
        she kills his dog.....  
The ground opens up,  
    the three fall to the bottom of the sea..  
That's where they are now...  
Sedna is the spirit of all the sea animals.

She lives at the bottom of the sea,  
in an igloo that opens to the above world,  
she can see everything...

She sits there on fine furs.

On one side of her,  
a spring of fresh water flows all the time.

On the other side,  
a lamp that lights the inside of her igloo...

In the dark reaches of the igloo,  
the father is ready to,...  
grab at you...

The dog is out there,  
ready to bite.

It's a dangerous place,  
huge rocks roll about that can crush...

There is an abyss that must be crossed,  
if you are to enter Sedna's igloo....

The people become great hunters.

They hunt the caribou,  
the walrus,  
the seals..

The seals give warm clothing,  
coverings for tents that keep the wind out,  
tools of bone,  
tools of ivory...

From the seal come our kayaks,  
and umiaks that don't sink in the sea,  
oil to light the darkness,  
oil to heat the cold winter.

The people eat meat...

They no longer live,  
by eating the earth.

\* \* \* \* \*

But there is one other thing the people have that they didn't have before. Now they live by endangering the souls of others. Now the people have fear! Before Sedna, the people didn't have fear. But why should the people have fear?

We must ask what it is that the people hunt? That which they hunt is made from whom?

The people hunt the animals made from the flesh and bone of Sedna. The people eat of the body that is from Sedna. And, as Sedna had a soul, did not the animals also receive souls?

\* \* \* \* \*

It's been a difficult winter for your family. Not many seals have offered themselves up to the hunters. The wind blows a cold wind today, and the children and the elders need the warmth of the food and oil the seal could offer. So, with harpoon in one hand and the stone image of Sedna in the other, you go to the ice and the breathing holes of the seal. Words are given.

Beast of the Sea,  
Come and offer yourself in the dear early morning!  
Beast of the plain!  
Come and offer yourself in the dear morning!

It's a long wait. Watching, without moving, with harpoon ready. Then something stirs in the water. A seal comes forth for a breath of air..., and some fresh water!

\* \* \* \* \*

As Sedna is our kinsmen, so too are the animals, in body and in soul. When we hunt the animal, are we not living by endangering the souls of our kinsmen? When we eat of their flesh, are we not eating of ours?

As with all kinsmen, the people enter into an exchange with the animals.<sup>3</sup> The hunter never tries to take the animal in the hunt, but instead offers it a gift. If the gift is judged worthy, the animal will offer itself up to the hunter. The animal, on its own, gives itself freely to the hunter. That which the animal gives is, after all, only its body, and not that which gives life and is most important, its soul.

The gifts given to the animals are offerings of respect. Dogs are not to chew on the bones of animals. Mittens of caribou fur are to be mended only at certain times of the year. When a seal offers itself up to the hunter, it does so for a drink of fresh water. The fresh water must be given. One hunts what one needs to hunt, never taking more than the family can use. And the taboos, ways of respecting the animal, go on.

Having given its body in the hunt, the soul of the animal remains in the camp of the hunter, watching the actions of the people for three days. If respect is shown, the soul of the

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<sup>3</sup>This Inuit animal-hunter relationship reflects a pervasive and predominate North American indigenous attitude, i.e., you give before you can receive from the animal and you hunt only what you can use and use all that you hunt. "Use" is defined in terms of family sustenance and not excess.

animal returns to Sedna. There at the bottom of the sea, Sedna places a new body on the soul of the animal. And the animal goes on.

However, if the soul returns without the respect it's due, it returns with larvae, worms and mites. In turn, the impurities gather in the hair of Sedna and, having no fingers to remove these annoyances, they continue to accumulate and grow. It does not take long for Sedna to become angry. When this happens, she no longer places bodies on the returning souls. Without bodies to hunt, the people are without meat to eat, oil to heat and hides to clothe themselves. The people suffer for what was not given the souls of animals. Sedna is to be feared, for she controls life itself.

When respect has not been given, the animals and Sedna withhold that which the people need, and the balance must be restored. In a specially-built igloo that holds the entire camp, the people gather around and sing the words of the shaman's songs.

\* \* \* \* \*

The great sea stirs me.  
The great sea sets me adrift,  
it sways me like the weed on a river-stone.

The sky's height stirs me.  
The strong wind blows through my mind.  
It carries me with it,  
so I shake with joy.

Earth and the great weather move me,  
have carried me away  
and move my inward parts with joy.  
(from Uvavnuk, an Iglulik woman)

\* \* \* \* \*

Soon the air is filled with words and the helping spirits of the shaman. The shaman dances about. And then it happens; the shaman's soul leaves his body, and the body dies. A most difficult journey takes place. The soul of the shaman travels to the bottom of the sea to the abode of Sedna. Challenges await at every point. He must watch for the huge boulders that roll about. He must cross the abyss. And then there is the old man and his dog. He must avoid their grasp. There are dangers to be avoided.

Standing before Sedna, the shaman must remove the impurities infesting her hair. If he is successful with all of these challenges, the shaman must promise that the people who have not shown respect will, along with all the people, now show the respect due their kinsmen. If Sedna agrees, she will again start placing bodies on the souls of animals. The

shaman returns among the people, his body alive again, as the songs continue. Then all present, one by one, speak of the taboos each may have broken. The words reiterate to all what it is that must be given in exchange for what can be received.



Shaman's Journey  
(inspired by a drawing by Jessie Oonark 1970)

\* \* \* \* \*

Soon after his parents had died, an Iglulik man was visited by this melancholy spirit, *Issitoq*. It said to him, "You must not be afraid of me, for I too struggle with sad thoughts; therefore I will go with you and be your helping spirit." Its specialty is finding people who have broken respect rules and taboos.



The Wandering Soul



\* \* \* \* \*

There's a young girl who's foolish,  
    she's with child,  
        not married....  
She leaves camp alone,  
    lets the unformed child go from within her..  
On the ice,  
    the body of the child is dead....  
The girl returns to camp,  
    no one learns of her misdeed..  
The dogs are always hungry,  
    they come along,  
        they eat the flesh of the child....  
The body is dead,  
    its soul remains.  
Among the dogs,  
    the soul is as a dog,  
        travels with them.  
It's a bad life,  
    that of a dog,  
        little food,  
            always fighting amongst themselves....  
It happens that the dogs come close to the waters,  
    the soul of the child goes among the seals,  
        becomes one of them....  
It likes the life of the seal,  
    plenty of food,  
        always playing with one another...  
The child's soul is restless.  
It moves among the walrus,  
    becomes one of them....  
But they are a lazy animal,  
    always battling themselves with their huge snouts....  
The child's soul moves among the caribou,  
    becomes one of them....  
But they are forever roaming about for food,  
    food of moss,  
        grass!...  
The soul of the child returns among the seal.  
It's a good life.....

One day as the seal is swimming about,  
     a man in a kayak paddles over head....  
 The seal knows that the wife of this man is without child...  
 The seal allows himself to be caught..  
 When the wife takes in the flesh of the seal,  
     she takes in the soul of the child...  
 She soon learns of a child within her,  
     and gives birth to a beautiful son...  
 The boy has a wondrous ability,  
     no one knows why....  
 He can speak the languages of the dog,  
     of the walrus,  
         of the caribou,  
             of the seal..  
 He becomes a great hunter....

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In order to convey a sense of the oral nuance of those stories emanating out of an oral-based tradition, I have re-formatted these story texts in a "poetic style." The resulting endeavor tries to retain some of the dramatic rhythms and pacing. Identified within each text are groupings of morpheme clusters or "verses" separated by pauses of varying lengths which are marked with commas and periods. Approach oral-based texts as a performance event and not as a reading from a fixed object on a page. Each text presented here is based upon a re-telling I have performed in class, inspired by a traditional narrative.

This Inuit animal-hunter relationship reflects a pervasive and predominate North American indigenous attitude, i.e., you give before you can receive from the animal and you hunt only what you can use and use all that you hunt. "Use" is defined in terms of family sustenance and not excess

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