

Ontological Principles and Teachings – the Gifts and Bones in the Indigenous Landscape

An outline

ISEM 101

The Creation

An example of an **Oral Story Text**: [Salmon Always Goes Up River](#) (PDF)

The place to begin is with the Creator and the Animal Peoples, such as **Amotqn** “the one who sits at the head mountain” (Schitsu’umsh - Coeur d’Alene) - the “Creator,” **Akbaatatdia** “the maker of all things first (Apsáalooke - Crow), and the **Titwa-tityá-ya** “Animal Peoples” (Nimíipuu - Nez Perce) - the Animal or First Peoples. The world was brought forth and prepared by the Creator and the Animal/First Peoples, such as Coyote, Crane and Salmon, and Karora and other *jilganggaja*, for “the coming of the human peoples.” This is the *Alcheringa* or *Manguny*, the Dreamtime of the Australian Aborigines. These Animal/First Peoples rid the world of most of its “monsters” and embedded within it the “gifts” the human peoples would need to prosper. The “**gifts**” include the water of the rivers and foods of the earth that nourish bodies, such as camas, huckleberries, salmon, deer, buffalo; the “teachings” that properly guide behavior, the *mi’yep*; and the transformative power to ensure vitality and life itself, the *suumesh*. As a result the landscape is given its contours and form. From the Creator and Animal Peoples are thus established the ontological principles, the structures and processes upon which the world and its landscape are made real, as well as the teachings to guide one over that landscape successfully. From the Dreamtime, the “Law,” is laid down, as the Aborigines say.

And it was Coyote who created the **human peoples**, either from the soil of the earth (as with the Crow), or the body and blood of one of the “monsters” (as with the Coeur d’Alene and Nez Perce). Along with the other created beings, such as deer and salmon, as well as camas and trees, human peoples are thus considered a part of the landscape, and not separate from it. Nevertheless, human peoples are distinguished from the other beings by their incompleteness and vulnerability; they are in need of guidance and spiritual vitality.

While the *Amotqn* is omnipotent and omnipresent, it is nevertheless illusive and mysterious. It is through the specific actions of the Animal Peoples that the will of the Creator and the creation itself were brought forth. The Creator may not be encountered directly, but its intentions continue to be manifested today through the Animal Peoples.

The world created is not a world without “**monsters**”; not all were slain at the time of creation by the First Peoples. Among the “monsters” that continue to roam the landscape and challenge the human peoples are certain malevolent beings and spirits, as well as such antagonists as “illness” and “suffering,” and “ignorance,” “greed,” “anger,” “jealously” and “laziness.” It is with the “gifts,” when properly applied, that these “monsters” can be abated.

The accounts of the creation, and the deeds and misdeeds of the First Peoples continue to be conveyed in the **oral traditions**, made up of oral narratives, songs, dances and their regalia, and language itself. In the act of re-telling, re-singing, re-dancing the sacred stories, that the “teachings” conveyed within them are disseminated and taught, and the world itself and all its entities and beings are revitalized and perpetuated. In turn, the oral traditions are linked with the features and forms of

the landscape, e.g., a rock outcropping, a river's bend, a hill, etc., the landscape becoming a "textbook" of the **oral traditions**. It is a landscape rich with "tracks." As you travel the landscape you engage the oral traditions. Take the case of the [Nimípuu Landscape](#).

Though the creation is acknowledged as derived from and credited to the Creator and the actions of the Animal/First Peoples, "the creation" can never be fully comprehensible, nor knowable, by humans. There is always an element of "mystery" to the creation, and humans approach the creation, the Creator, and the Animals Peoples with great humility, deference, and respect.

Theme: acknowledge the supremacy of the Creator, and the power and role of Animal/First Peoples, though humble and self-deferent toward them. They created the world, preparing it for the human peoples, embedding it with "gifts," yet a landscape upon which "monsters" roam. [Frey 2001:9, 184, 262; akin to Hindu Brahman and multiple expressions of Divinity]

Contrast: acknowledge only a secular world of no god, or a polytheistic world of many gods; full knowledge of the origin and workings of the universe is obtainable by humans

Snq-hepi-wes - "where the spirit lives, from horizon to horizon" (Schitsu'umsh - Coeur d'Alene). What was brought forth by the Creator and Animal/First Peoples is a spiritual world, which pervades and unifies all entities and beings, in their souls as well as their bodies, in their transcendent as well as material essences. It is out of the transcendent that the spiritual meanings and guidance (the *mi'yep* or "teachings"), as well as spiritual vitality and power (the *summesh* or "medicine") emerge and manifest themselves in the overt, material landscape. The spiritual world of significance and vitality is thus a part of and not separate from the entire creation, though not readily apparent and revealed to the human peoples.

The primacy of the spiritual world is exemplified in the Diné (Navajo) prayer phrase, *Saah Naghai Bikeh Hoozhoo*, "continual re-occurring long-life in an environment of beauty and harmony," and its associated notion of first "thinking" (*Saah Naghai*) and then "speaking" (*Bikeh Hoozhoo*) the world into existence. It is from the internal, spiritual world (*Saah Naghai*) of archetypal meanings and spiritual force that all behavioral actions and material forms (*Bikeh Hoozhoo*) are derived and manifested, and that is thus ultimately more "real" than the overt, material world. Nevertheless, this understanding is not a denial of the importance of the material world, and of the pragmatic need to work within its circumstances to obtain access to what is needed for life and to the higher, transcendent meanings in life.

Theme: seek to access and travel the spiritual world [Frey 2001:9, 183, 262. Corresponds to the notions of "a single Ultimate of which the many gods are instantiations or expressions" and seeing "the things of the world as transparent to their divine sources." The world of Indigenous peoples is a Platonic world, as represented in the "allegory of the Cave," and akin to Hindu world of *Brahman - Trimurti* and *Jivas - Atman*, as well as *maya* and Buddhist notion of *anicca* -

“impermanent, transitory reality” and notion of *shandhas* – reality made up of “thought-coverings, aggregate bundles of thought forms, and to the Taoist world of the *Tao*]
 Contrast: acknowledge and travel only the material, secular world, akin to only traveling the Hindu world of *maya* or the Buddhist world of *anicca*

Chnisteemilqwes – “I am part of all” (Coeur d’Alene), **Ashammaléaxia** - “as driftwood lodges” (Crow), and primacy of the “**family.**” The world, its landscape and all its inhabitants, are characterized by an inherent spatial and temporal connectivity, an integration and kinship of all entities and beings – human, Animal, fish, Plant, Water, Rock and Landscape, as well as Spiritual “Peoples,” such as the Ancestors, and Spirit Guardians, as well as Animal Peoples and Creator itself. All “Peoples” are unequivocal “participants” in the world, living as a part of and not apart from the world. This notion of “kinship” is expressed in the idea of the “**family,**” which is defined in terms and **inclusive** of not only its human “relatives,” but also its animal, fish and plant, and spirit “relatives.” This is the notion of “totemism” among the Mardu Aborigines. (Story Text: [Sedna, Inua and Seals](#) (PDF))

As the kinship is spatially inclusive of the Animal Peoples and Landscape, so too is it temporarily inclusive of the First Peoples of the Creation. Time itself is not lineally defined in terms of a past, present and future, i.e., a past separated from the present and “dead,” but time is cyclical, with a “past” within which you can participate. You can continue to travel with the First Peoples at the moment of Creation.

Theme: acknowledge the kinship and interrelationship with all beings, and seek to participate in the world of the “family” [Frey 1995:40, 43 and 2001:10, 183, 264.]. Akin to Taoist notion of the *Tao*, and the Buddhist notion of *paticcasamuppada* – “dependent origination” that reality is a transitory (*anicca*) event made up of vast field of mutually influencing interplay of relationships.

Contrast: the human is an autonomous agent, and the world is based upon the Cartesian Duality of a “mind-body and “I-it” separation and objectification

Unshat-qn - “eye to eye” (Coeur d’Alene). **Equality** characterizes the structural relations among all the members of the “family,” be they human, Animal, Plant or Spirit. For the Coeur d’Alene the “deer is a brother,” as Animals have souls, volition and intelligence. In the example of a hunter, he or she does not “take” a deer, as if conquering and dominating it. But in the hunter offering respect to the deer as a “brother” and in demonstrating the need of others for its nourishment, the deer voluntarily offers its body, its meat, to its “relative.” In so doing, the soul of the deer is not violated and desecrated, but continues, to be refurbished by a new material body. The notion of equality is often expressed in the term **pute-nts** (Coeur d’Alene), “**respect**” for all things and beings. (Story Text: Elk and the Young Man and The Muskrat Man)

Theme: respect all the members of the “family” as equals [Frey 1995: 41-42 and 2001:12, 264, 265; akin to Taoist notions of “moderation” and “humility,” two of the Three Jewels].

Contrast: the human has supremacy over all other life forms, with an hierarchical ranking of dominant-subordinate relationships with other entities

The Gifts and Teachings

In addition to the “gifts” of food and water, of shelter and material culture, the Animal people embedded in the landscape the following gifts:

Suumesh (Coeur d’Alene) - **Wéyekin** (Nez Perce) - “medicine” - spiritual power and vitality, another critical set of “gifts” embedded in the landscape. The landscape, and all its forms, entities and beings are endowed with spiritual power and a life force. From the Wolf and Eagle, to the Tree and Root, to the River and Water, to the Mountain and Rock, each are endowed with *suumesh*. It was with *wéyekin* that the Animal/First Peoples were able to bring forth and transform an entire world at the time of creation. And it is *suumesh* that continues to bring life to a salmon, a bird, a human being, even a rock. But as *wéyekin* can nurture life, it can also withhold it.

The Source: The Creator - **Amotqn** (“The One Who Sits at the Head of the Mountain” - Coeur d’Alene). Medicine is ultimately derived from the **Creator**; the Creator is the recipient of one's prayers and vows; the Creator is the ultimate source of vision and cure, of transformative power of life. As in the instance of the Crow, there are varied images of the Creator: *Akbaatatdia* "The One Who Makes Everything," *lichihkbaaleeish* "First Doer," *Baakukule* "One Above," *Isaahka* "Old Man," *Isaahkawuattee* "Old Man Coyote." The Creator is not an anthropomorphic nor monotheistic per se, and does not project a morality, does not seek supremacy over nor retribution for transgression. It is diffused and pervasive throughout all the landscape, omnipresent, within all phenomena – land forms, animal, bird, plant, human, and rock.

The Link and Character: The Animal People - **lilapxe** (Medicine Father, Crow), **Titwa-tityá-ya** (Animal Peoples, Nez Perce). While derived from the Creator, medicine is mediated through a “Medicine Father,” the **Animal People**. They are not so much distinct from the Creator, as extensions of it – the arms, legs, ears, voice and eyes – the linkage and channel to the Creator. One prays to and through Medicine Fathers. The Medicine Fathers can be expressed as an Eagle, Elk, Buffalo, Snake, Meadowlark, Otter, Mole, etc. The quality associated with the natural phenomena is expressed in parallel fashion with the particular character/abilities of the medicine. Medicine Fathers can also be the *Awakkulé*, "Little People." It will be the Medicine Fathers that instruct a one in the proper care of and for medicine, and sets "taboos of respect." One is always cautioned never to use *aannutche*, "to take by the arm," "bad medicine," "to curse someone." "It will come back to you." (NOTE: consider

the parallelism between the creation time and the present time regarding the roles of the Creator and the Animal People.)

The Nature: *Súumesh* - *Wéyekin* (spiritual power, Coeur d'Alene and Nez Perce). While medicine can involve a physical agent or property, it always entails a transcendent, **spiritual power**, the life force. The efficacy of medicine resides in its spiritual power, and not its physical attributes.

The Effect: *Baalía* (to doctor). Medicine alters peoples' lives, **bringing health and well-being**. It is understood as a very real and true power, and not imaginary, nor psychologically based, and not based in belief.

Theme: acknowledge the spiritual forces embedded within the landscape. Akin to Taoist notion of *ch'i* and *wu wei*, and Hindu and Buddhist notion of *siddhi*.

Contrast: the world is devoid of spiritual power and forces

Mi'yep - "teachings from all things" (Coeur d'Alene), in addition to spiritual power, a critical set of "gifts" embedded in the landscape. These teachings (equivalent to "perennial archetypes," moral and ethical codes, and significant meanings) permeate all entities and beings, such as rock formations, rivers, mountains, animals, endowed within them by the Animal/First Peoples at the time of creation. The "teachings" were already in the landscape prior to the arrival of the human peoples. If one "listens attentively," the "teachings" are accessible. The landscape is not void and meaningless. As well as being embedded in the contours of the landscape, the *mi'yep* are also transmitted and conveyed through the oral traditions, and the *suumesh* songs and dances of the Sun Dance (Crow) and Jump Dance (Coeur d'Alene), all of which are understood as "textbooks." As the world is not human-created, neither are the "teachings" that guide human behavior socially constructed and derived.

Theme: acknowledge the teachings and meanings embedded in the landscape, [Frey 2001:9, 264. Corresponds to the notion that "primal religion is . . . embedded in place." akin to Taoist notion of *wu wei*]

Contrast: the world is devoid of spiritual and archetypal meanings

Ammaakée - "give away" (Crow), ***Té·k'e*** - "to give and share [food with others]" (Nez Perce), one of the essential *mi'yep*. Compassion for all others in need of assistance, an **ethic of sharing**, characterizes the dynamics of all "family" relationships. It is the "glue" that holds the kinship together. One gives unselfishly, without anticipation of reciprocity, to help others in need. This notion is exemplified in the act of the Creator and Animal Peoples preparing the world for the coming of human peoples, in the animal, fish and plant peoples offering themselves to the human hunters, fishermen and gatherers, in the humans in whatever capacity they can giving to others in need of help, and in the

deceased preparing a camp for those yet to come. A “wealthy” person maybe “poor” in “possessions,” having given them to those in need, but “rich” in the number of “relatives. (Story Texts: Couple Befriended by the Moon, Rabbit and Jack Rabbit, Crane, at Graduation, the Deer and the Hunter)

Theme: seek to give to and help the others within the “family” who are in need [Frey 2001:10, 184, 264-65, akin to Hindu “renounce the fruits of one’s actions” and Taoist notion of “compassion,” the third of the Three Jewels].

Contrast: is selfish and greedy, expressing the self-serving trickster Coyote, and seeks to accumulate material possessions

Other *mi’yep* include **tuk’ukí** - “honesty” (Nez Perce) and integrity toward others, **díakaashik** “doing it with determination” (Crow) and sincerity in all interactions with others, and **ciká-w** “bravery” (Nez Perce) and courageous in the defense of others and in the face of adversity. (Story Text: Four Smokes)

Theme: adhere to honesty and courage in support of the “family”

Contrast: deception, dishonesty, cowardliness

Smiyaw - “coyote” (Coeur d’Alene) - **Iceyéeye** “coyote” (Nez Perce) - the way of the “Coyote,” also one of the *mi’yep*. Nevertheless, there are those considered outside the “family,” and who may in turn seek to harm its members, such as an adversarial grizzly bear, a Blackfoot warrior, a U S military general, or a corrupt government agent. One must be aware of and prepared for encounters with competitive and adversarial individuals outside the “family.”

In relations with defined “**adversaries**,” members of the “family” apply the example and skills of the trickster Coyote, including intelligence and strategic foresight, physical prowess and agility, deception, wit and cunning, an **ethic of competition**. Coyote’s schemes typically fail when his intentions are directed at self gain and at members of the family, while he often succeeds when his desires are to help others in the face of an adversary. Hence Coyote’s trickster and deceptive behavior becomes inappropriate when applied to members of the “family,” by extension, to spiritual kinsmen, but the very same behavior can be appropriate when applied outside the “family” against an opponent. Being “coyote” is thus appropriate when it is self-effacing and serves the needs of other family members, and is not self-serving. As a result, we see a clear demarcation of that is “family” and “spiritual,” all associated with an ethic of sharing defining these relationships, distinguished from “adversary” and non-spiritual which are associated with an ethic of competition defining these relationships. (Story Texts: Coyote and the Rock Monster, Coyote and the Green Spot, and re-visit Salmon Always Goes Up River)

Theme: act as “Coyote” only toward one’s “adversary”

Contrast: act as “Coyote” toward one’s “family” members, as well as toward strangers

The ontological principles, e.g., *ashammaléaxia* and *unshat-qn*, the teachings - *mi’yep*, and spiritual power - *súmmesh*, together make up the “bones” of the landscape, the perennial archetypal structures and process first instilled in the landscape by the Creator and other Animal and First Peoples. It is the “bones” that continue the Dreamtime and reality itself.

Primary Spiritual Goal

So that the **primary goal** in one’s life is that of protecting and preserving the health and well-being of the “family,” of maintaining the harmony and vitality of the whole, inclusive of all its human, Animal, Plant and Spirit People members. It is a goal extended to all “family” members. The health and harmony of the human individual, of the human family, and of the ecological landscape of the Animal and Plant Peoples, of the entire “family,” are all in correspondence and synonymous with each other. When one “relative” is threatened or ill all others in the “family” are potentially threatened or ill.

Theme: the primary goal in life is that of enhancing the well-being of the “family,” comparable to *Bodhisattvas* in Mahayana Buddhism

Contrast: the primary goal in life is self-reliance, autonomy, or ego enhancement; or the primary goal is personal redemption and salvation (as in Judaism, Christianity or Islam), or Oneness, Self-realization, moksha, or nirvana (as in Hinduism or Theravada Buddhism)

The Means to the Goal

The **means** to the goal of preserving the “family” is to, 1. fully adhere to the “teachings,” the *mi’yep*, and especially that of the ethic of sharing (to unselfishly help others in need), and 2. obtain and apply spiritual power (*suumesh*, *wéyekin*, “medicine”) for the well-being of others. The responsibility of the entire “family’s” health is on the shoulders of those who have the ability to give.

In this sense, Indigenous “religion” is not so much concerned about prescribing the nature of the “sacred” (as there are no “priests” interpreting the sacred for others, nor “doctrinal edicts” followers must adhere to), as it is a vehicle facilitating the movement of individuals to the threshold of the sacred. Upon traveling this spiritual territory, each individual is then offered a rather personal, idiosyncratic relationship with the divine, all within the spiritual worldview framework just outlined.

Theme: seek to espouse the *mi’yep* teachings, and acquire and apply the *súumesh* life forces all for the benefit of others in the “family”

Contrast: espousing “Coyote” toward “family” members, or use “medicine” for selfish, self-serving purposes, to make “bad medicine”

Your Responsibility. The task of protecting and preserving the health of the “family” is attempted only during **the course of one’s lifetime**. Each human gets only one shot, during his or her own lifetime in this world, at fully adhering to the *mi’yep* teachings, and seeking and acquiring “medicine,” and thus of helping maintain the health of the “family.”

Correspondingly, the “**after world**” is understood as simply “a camp across the waters,” where all the deceased, the ancestors, go to prepare the way to those yet to come (reiterating an ethic of sharing), a camp surrounded by green pastures for the horses, great berry patches and camas fields, and good hunting and fishing areas.

Adherence to the *mi’yep* is **socially invoked** through a number of mechanisms, including the advice and guidance rendered from an elder, the application of public joking and ridicule, and ultimately, through the enforcement of social ostracism and banishment. Hence the motivation for embracing the *mi’yep* and for seeking to preserve the health of the “family” is not the result of personal spiritual reward, nor the threat of spiritual punishment. Hence there is little meaning and relevance within Indigenous religions for a “black and white view” of the world, dichotomizing it into either “good” or “evil,” and “saved” or “sinful.”

Theme: in pursuit of preserving the health of the “family,” you have only during the course of your lifetime in this world to adhere to the *mi’yep*, and seek and apply the power of *suumesh*; the teachings are enforced through social persuasion.

Contrast: you get many opportunities to get it right, via accumulated “karma” and “reincarnation” into a higher or lower state of being (as in Hinduism and Buddhism); there is “sin” and “evil” in the world; given the condition of “original sin,” either eternal salvation in “heaven,” or damnation in “hell” await you on “judgment day” (as in Christianity); you are a member of a “chosen people,” adhering to God’s will, with “sin” an issue of committing “mistakes” (as in Judaism); you seek submission to God’s will, with “sin” an issue of “forgetting,” awaiting a “judgment day” (as in Islam); “proselytizing,” enforce adherence to one’s religious orientation via “witnessing,” education, or even threat of actual corporal punishment, imprisonment, or killing. (All these orientations are alien to Indigenous peoples)

Many Paths to the Creator. Yet it is a **very personal quest** into the spiritual world of *suumesh*, a path individualized to each person’s needs and disposition. As suggested previously, Indigenous religion is less concerned about prescribing the nature of the sacred, as it is in facilitating the movement of individuals to the threshold of the spiritual. There are thus multiple paths to the Creator and Animal Peoples, all equally valid and potentially effective. Consider the metaphor of Tom Yellowtail’s **Wagon Wheel**, and the example of Tom and Susie Yellowtail (Baptist and Sundancer; Nurse and Healer). The “wagon wheel” metaphor is representative of the ancient rock medicine wheels which dot the northern

plains and the structure of the Sun Dance lodge. As applied to an Indigenous experience, the "**spokes**" are analogous of any number of ways of representing collective diversity and individual uniqueness, that which is differentiated and distinguished. The "**hub**" is analogous of any number of ways of representing what is shared in common, the universal, the ubiquitous, such as a "language" that transcends differences, and can be comprehended and spoken with some degree of universality. The **interplay** of spokes and hub can accommodate traveling over the many distinct paths, addressing the mutually exclusive in our lives, both personally as well as publically and professionally. The rock formations along the Clearwater River can be understood as having come about by the actions of both geology and science, and Coyote and the Indigenous way. We can travel both scientific and Indigenous landscapes without conflict. As there are many separate spokes in the wheel, there are many "religions" in the world, each distinct, with its own unique path. Yet as all spokes are of the same length, all religions are equal. If some spokes were shortened and others lengthened, or if some spokes were eliminated all together, the wheel would no longer turn, but fall flat. Nevertheless, as all spokes are anchored to the hub of the wheel, so too are all religions linked to the common Creator, each religion simply calling it by a different name. **(Story Text: The Wagon Wheel and Sundance Lodge)**

Theme: acknowledge multiple paths to the spiritual world (akin to Hinduism) [Smith addressing issues of unity and diversity 1994:241]

Contrast: there is but a singular, exclusive path to the spiritual, denying the validity of all others spiritual paths to the Creator (as is typically the case in the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity)

Way of Life. The quest for spiritual guidance and power, and all its associated rituals and ceremonies, the "religion" of the Indigenous peoples, is thus understood as a "path" or "**way of life,**" **comprehensive** of all one's actions and thoughts, and not a compartmentalized segment of one's life. As an **experiential** "way of life," it is not predicated on a testament of faith to a specific doctrine, creed, or set of theological beliefs. The spiritual is directly **encountered** and engaged, not philosophically discussed and talked about. "We don't talk about God, we talk to Him." Such ceremonies as the Sweat House, Sun Dance and Jump Dance, medicine bundle opening, naming ceremony, wake and funeral ritual, first fruits ceremonies associated with the roots, fish and game animals, healing ritual, pipe ceremony, and vision quest and fasting address the needs and concerns of virtually every aspect of life, from birth to death. And it is a "path" that necessitates accessing and knowing the world through one's heart, one's intuition, one's spirit, though "**heart knowledge.**" While "heart knowledge" is primary, "head knowledge," accessing and knowing the world through the intellect and mind, through science, is not to be neglected and is supplemental to "heart knowing."

Theme: the spiritual quest is an experiential "way of life," and dependent on "heart knowledge"

Contrast: religion is based upon a doctrinal set of beliefs and articles of faith; it is compartmentalized to certain activities; approach the world relying only on “head knowledge”

Medicine: Acquired. Along with espousing the lessons of the *mi'yep*, the transformative power of *suumesh* is sought and applied to welfare of the “family.” When successfully traveling the spiritual world, and through the help and agency of the Animal Peoples, an individual will seek to acquire and apply its life-giving power and guidance, “**Indian medicine.**”

Unlike other beings (such as Animal Peoples), humans must **quest** for spiritual guidance and power. Humans must demonstrate their willingness, as well as worthiness to give of themselves in order to receive “medicine.” In the quest, a faster may journey to a sacred mountain and **offers** his or her “sincerity,” as well as gives up food and water, what is necessary for life. If judged worthy by the Creator and an Animal Person, such as a Buffalo or Eagle, he or she may **receive** a vision and *suumesh* song. The quester has been “adopted” by an Animal Person, and has received a guardian spirit. It is important to be noted that the First Peoples of the creation time are one and the same as the Animal Peoples that adopt and guide a quester of today. Hence the process and structure of **rites of passage** are essential to the quest. (**Story Texts:** Sundance and Quester examples) [Frey1995:66-71]

Any rite of passage entails four distinct components, each necessary for the others and for a successful rite of passage. They are 1. Orphan Status (literal or metaphoric); 2. Separation, Journey and Sacrifice, thus entailing two active agents and some form of symbolic of death. To “die” is to validate the process, to “die” is to be brought to the threshold of the scared, to “die” is to sacrifice and give up something of extreme value, to “die” is to be rendered a neophyte, emptied and thus receptive, and to “die” is to get down to your “bones”; 3. Acquisition of Power and Knowledge, the void is filled and oneness achieved (the two active agents dissolved into a single entity, if only momentarily); and Affirmation and Rebirth

See “[Rites of Passage](#)” (PDF). Story Texts: Crow Sundance and Fasting examples

It is during the vision experience that what is the unique and distinctive in the human individual is dissolved, merged and rendered a part of the spiritual world, a transitory state of **Oneness** with the sacred, of what can be called Self-realization, Enlightenment, and Awakening. But the human does not remain in this state of bliss, returning to the world of his or her family in order to apply any insights, guidance and “medicine” gained for the benefit of the those in need.

Theme: the seeking and acquisition (a state of Oneness) of “medicine” is a means to the higher goal of helping preserve the health of others

Contrast: the seeking and becoming a state of Oneness or Self-realization is the goal of life (as in Hinduism or Theravada Buddhism)

Medicine Applied. Once acquired, “medicine” is directed at benefitting and instilling health in other Peoples, be they human (healing sickness and providing defense) or animal, fish or plant (helping insure prosperity, health and well-being). Medicine can bring forth life and confer health, as well as can relinquish it, bringing illness and death.

Medicine is applied **pervasively throughout** the Indian way of life. Among the **applications** of *suumesh* are the good blessing that comes from the confirming of an “Indian name,” the protection in the face of an enemy the comes from “medicine pouch” worn about the neck, the cure from an illness that comes from a healing ceremony, or the bountiful harvest of camas or huckleberries that comes from the prayers of those in the Jump Dancers. Medicine is used to safeguard and promote the health of all Human/Plant/Animal members of the “family. Medicine is also used to help control of the weather, in locating lost articles as well as lost people, i.e., clairvoyance, in love medicine, in various contests and gambling, but most importantly, for healing ceremonies. (**Story Texts:** The Lost Girl, The Stick Game, Basketball and Love Medicine, Navajo Chantways, Crow Bundle Opening)

But in this world animated with medicine, with *suumesh*, this does not suggest a fatalistic, deterministic world. Humans have **agency and choice**; they can elect to seek and travel the spiritual world or not. (**Story Text:** John, the Little People and the Two Caves)

Efficacy. How does it all work?

Baaechichiwaau - “re-telling one’s own” (Crow, referring to the act of telling a story). The continuation of the Indigenous way of life and of heart knowledge for the future generations is through the sharing of the oral traditions, “re-telling one’s own.” As the place to begin is with the Creator and the Animal Peoples, so too is the place of continuance. The oral traditions are inclusive of the stories of the Animal Peoples, along with their songs, dances, regalia, and other aesthetic and spiritual expressions, all understood and engaged as **ceremony**. In giving voice to the First Peoples and running with the Coyote, consider the example of the following processes in the act of speaking, in orality, emanating out of the Indigenous oral traditions – the power of spoken words. Let’s approach the efficacy of medicine first through an understanding of the power of orality in Indigenous society.

Power of Spoken Words. The summer of 1974 when I interviewed Alan Old Horn, I was participating in an ethnographic project designed to “improve” understanding and relations between the Indian Health Service physicians and their Crow patients. Tensions had been growing for some time, in part predicated on the physicians’ unawareness of their patients’ cultural understandings relating to health and healing. I was to gather information on the Crow perspective of health and healing, and, in turn, write up a paper so physicians could gain an introduction to the health perspectives of their patients. While everyone I worked with was excited about the project and most cooperative, there was one slight problem. For many of the most traditional families, when it got down to discussing actual afflictions a member of the family once had, few would verbally talk about them. And then I was introduced to the Crow word, *dasshússua*, literally meaning, “breaking with the mouth.” That which comes through the mouth, words, has the power to affect the world. People were reluctant to discuss an illness for fear of bringing forth that affliction.

And then I began appreciating *dasshússua*. One does not say "good bye" upon departing from a good evening's visit, but rather "I'll see you later," *diiawákaawik*. "Good bye is too final--you may not see them again!" One should always fulfill that which he has publicly stated he intends to do, or "accidents seem to happen!" When you need to convey something publicly before the tribal council, at a giveaway or during a ceremony such as a Sun Dance, it is best to convey it through "an announcer," someone older, more "experienced in the use of words" and who would not inadvertently abuse them, someone like Alan Old Horn. An announcer may even have a medicine bundle pertaining to the "proper use of words."

When it is time for a child to receive its "Indian name," a clan uncle or aunt will be consulted. Having "dreamt" the name, and in a ceremony involving an opened medicine bundle and prayer, the name will be bestowed upon the child. And you might hear a voiced concern--"I hope the name agrees with the child!" If the words of the name agree with the disposition of the child, the child grows to become the words of his name. But should the name disagree, the child will become sickly and a new name must be sought. The "Indian name" is that name used in prayer and at sacred ceremonies. It is not one's public name. It is most cherished and revered. One's name will guide and protect. More than one veteran of a foreign war has come back "unscratched," "protected because of my name!"

The spoken word has a power, *baaxpée*, a creative force to affect the world. In the context of storytelling, this has particular significance. As the fibers of the words are woven into the exquisite tapestry of a story and the deeds of a hero are portrayed in those words, the words bring forth those portrayed deeds. The animation of a story literally occurs in voicing the words of that story. The words of the narrative do not just describe the events referred to in the story; they help bring them about. The stories are to be entered with great respect and responsibility. They should never be taken lightly. For the **words** of the stories **make the world**.

This understanding is consistently expressed in the oral literature. In the Sanpoil story of the "Sweat Lodge" that follows, *naming* the various animals and birds is an integral part of creating and bringing forth those beings. In a Nez Perce story, when Coyote *said* he wanted to look like his son and then like a Flathead man shooting grouse, Coyote became them. In the Wasco story of Coyote freeing the fish, Coyote *said* to the two Sisters that they would become swallows, and they did. When Coyote *spoke* the words, "Shush ta-ways-s ta-lee-e," the logs he was on went apart. In a Kootenai narrative, when a man named "Wolf" *said* and sang his name, he became a wolf. As reflected in the Kootenai story of the "Star Husband," when a girl *said*, "That is a nice little star there. I'll marry him," the next morning she found herself married. When a story comes to an end or an entire cycle is completed for the season, Clackamas storytellers would tell the myth people spoken of in the narratives to go to the mountains, to the rivers, into the air, becoming the animals of the forests, the fishes of the waters and the birds of the sky (Jacobs 1959:73). That which had been *spoken* and witnessed in the storytelling was indeed alive and now free to return to a world mythically endowed.

Perpetuating the World. In the oral traditions of storytelling, song, and dance, when the story told, song sung, dance danced, sandpainting made, when these overt symbolic expressions **align and correspond** with the perennial archetypal "bones" of the Dreamtime, of the Creation time, all coalesce to transform the listener into a participant in the Creation Time and Place - **"to run and swirl with the**

Coyote,” as Cliff SiJohn would say, to travel the world of the First Peoples/Animal Peoples in the “**canoe**” of the unfolding story. As Eliade reminds us, a **hierophany** has occurred, a shining through of the sacred power and meaning. Remember the story of the “rainbow”?

The oral traditions are thus at once **didactic**, passing on pragmatic skills, teaching lessons, and disseminating identities, as well as **entertaining**, bringing a smile or a tear and rendering the difficult times less so, as Vic Charlo said, “helping lighten the load and make things more accessible.” But in addition, the oral traditions also **perpetuate the world**. **Run with the Coyote, renewing the creation of the world.**

As all phenomena is spatially and temporarily interconnected (in kinship – *ashammaléaxia*) and potentially endowed with “medicine” (*suumesh/wéyekin*), when the expressions (symbols/words in a story or a ceremony) of the Creator and Animal Peoples are properly brought forth, **aligned** with the “**bones,**” so too is their inherent transformative power. Hence, in the act of telling Coyote’s story, as in donning dance regalia or singing a *suumesh* song, the oral traditions also perpetuate the world, reinvigorating life and meaning into the landscape and all of its varied beings. The Creation time is traveled, a camas field nurtured, and an illness healed. Reality and the oral traditions are one and the same. “Stories make the world.”

The oral traditions, however, are **not fundamentally explanatory** in nature. Because Coyote did such and such, that is why ! 1. Such would presuppose that the stories were inventions of human curiosity, created by man to explain what he could not understand, and thus not be creations of the First Peoples, i.e., accounts of their actions. 2. Such would presuppose that the stories are earnest but feeble attempts by pre-scientific minds to understand the world, but are inevitably fantasies and false, and certainly not what is most real and true. And 3. such would presuppose a separate world out there (Cartesian dualism) that needed explaining, and certainly not an interconnected phenomenal world within which one is a part.

Theme: what is most meaningful and real exists in the act of participating in the oral traditions

Contrast: stories are fantasy, suspending disbelief in what is real

Conclusion

Run with the Coyote and Crane, and Sharing the Gifts. In the act of re-telling an oral tradition of the Coyote or Crane, in the act of singing the *suumesh* song, in the act of dancing in a Jump Dance, or even a powwow, in the act of gathering camas roots or huckleberries and sharing them with those in need, in the act of hunting the deer or fishing the salmon and sharing the meat with those in need, the world is re-created, re-newed and perpetuated, and all its “family” members are nourished and healed. “You run with the Coyote and Crane” (and the other Animal/First Peoples), and in so doing their Gifts of *mi’yep* and *suumesh* are re-invested and re-distributed back into the landscape, for the benefit of all the Peoples, all the “relatives.” The Gifts continue to be shared. The world traveled in the act of storytelling, in act of singing, in act of dancing is the very world traveled by the Creator, Coyote and

Crane, and of the archetypical teachings (*mi'yep*) and transformative power (*suumesh*) of the creation time. It is the world traveled by the vision quester under the guidance of the Elk or Eagle. It is the world traveled by the ancestors as they prepare the camp for those yet to come. All are indistinguishable, one and the same.

Hence, the implicit, **perennial desire** is to “**run with the Coyote and Crane.**” In so doing, the health, harmony and well-being of the “family” are preserved.

[Frey 2001:183, 260-62, 265-66. The worldview of the Indigenous peoples of North America corresponds to the Australian Aboriginal idea of the “Dreamtime” and to the notions of “each (human) *becomes* the First Hunter,” and of the “participation in, and the acting out, of archetypal paradigms,” along with the idea of “eternal time”]

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