

## **The Ethnographic Focus, the target of our research**

(from Frey *Eye Juggling: Seeing the World Through a Looking Glass and a Glass Pane* (University Press of America 1994 pp. 5-7, 19-24)

### **Story**

My premise is rather straightforward. As a humanity, *we are the stories we tell*. "Story" is composed of the fundamental symbols and values of a people, the distinguishing cultural character pervading the entirety of a society, its various institutions, from the macro "mage-stories" to the micro stories of individual identities and life histories. Story can be inclusive of both "mythic" and "historic" meaning, as well as "scientific" and "spiritual" significances. Stories range from an Inuit (Eskimo) creation story to the stories of Pythagoras, Newton, Descartes and Maslow to the stories of quantum physics and cybernetic epistemology; from the story of the walls of Jericho to a story painted on the walls of an Upper Paleolithic cave to the story of Plato's cave. Many of our stories will be framed as "mythic" narratives, e.g., the Colville story of *Smtich* (Salmon), a powerful mythic being of the Animal First Peoples. While others are presented as "biographical" or "historical" accounts, e.g., Galileo's life and accomplishments or the theory of human evolution. The term "myth" refers to that which is considered as a "true story" and which offers exemplary meaning and value to life. Myth is not to be considered as "fable," "fiction," or "illusion." The "truth" of a myth is to be appreciated and is expressed metaphorically and anagogically as opposed to empirically. Hence myth is not bound by a history, as part of chronological time, but is considered "timeless," *in illo tempore*, and is imbued with aesthetic and often sacred significance. The term "history" refers to those factual-based events that have occurred in chronological time. An historical event is necessarily a past event. The "factuality" of history is to be appreciated and is expressed empirically as opposed to metaphorically and anagogically. Nevertheless, like myth, history can offer exemplary meaning; lessons are to be learned. Some of our stories are to be seen in an artistic sketch, e.g., a drawing by an Inuit shaman, or in an architectural structure, e.g., the Greek Parthenon or a rock "medicine wheel." And still other stories are expressed in the words of a "poem" or "song," or even in the diagram of a mathematical theorem. There be a speech by an

environmentalist and one by a “wise use” advocate. Our stories come in many forms, pervading all aspects of our lives.

While some of the stories may seem culturally distant and temporally ancient, I would suggest that they are in fact stories reflective of the *foundations* upon which our contemporary world views are based. The motifs and themes within an Inuit creation story or the story of Pythagoras speak as much to their respective historic and cultural contexts as they speak to the context, shared among all peoples, of our common humanity. The stories attempt to shed light on many of the assumptions upon which you and I base our lives and give meaning to our worlds.

And embedded within our stories is the single most important influence on the behaviors we exhibit and the worlds we create, our “values.” In the stories we share with one another, we define the primary qualities of how we came to be, our origins, and what we can become, our destiny. In the stories, we define who we are, what the world is and how we are to relate to that world. Our ways of knowing and our ways of motivating are found in our stories. Through the stories, we learn and re-affirm our basic cultural values of time and space, causation and being, and give meaning to all aspects of our lives. In the stories, *we are*.

### **Values**

I define values as *learned, relatively enduring, emotionally charged, epistemologically grounded and represented moral conceptualizations that assist us in making judgements and in preparing us to act*. In other words, the priorities we set and the choices we make are significantly based upon the values we hold. My usage of the concept is inclusive of the personal values of an individual as well as the collective values of a community.

All values are *learned* values. Not unlike the acquisition of a particular language, values are transmitted and inculcated through an intricate web of societal agents and interactions. Primary to this web are family members and social peers, formal schooling, leisure, work and religious activities, and such rites of passage as baptism, confirmation and marriage. And interwoven throughout this web is the oral and/or written word, the stories of a people. The influence of this web is particularly important during childhood when the basic value

parameters are established. In turn, these parameters help orient the subsequent acquisition and the reaffirmation of values throughout a person's life-span.

Because values are learned, they can be forgotten, and they can be learned anew, though usually only with great effort. But values can be changed. Humanity is neither innately predisposed to certain values; nor is the content of values genetically determined. My concern here is not to suggest how individual forms his or her particular values. Furthermore, these comments are not meant to preclude the insights of such theorists as Noam Chomsky, Erik Erikson or Jean Piaget. The possibility that humans have certain biologically-based maturation levels and predispositions influencing the acquisition of language and personality must be considered in any discussion of the acquisition of values. Suffice it to say, the formation of an individual's value configuration is an extremely complex process.

Values are relatively *enduring*. Values are grounded in the cultural heritage of a society and pervasively housed within the institutions of the society, the web. And values are well established from childhood. An individual may decide to forego a particular value, only to be confronted by it at each juncture within the web of society and to be grounded by its parameters formed early in life. The values of a society or of an individual are not easily altered.

Values are *not* necessarily *consciously* known by either the individual or the society. Not unlike our everyday linguistic grammar, values are seldom overtly articulated, even though we depend upon both in comprehending another's action and in generating our own. Your search for your own values and the values of others is accomplished only with great effort.

Values tend toward *consistency*, i.e., like values attract like values. The assemblage of an individual's or of a community's values strives for affiliation, compatibility and integration among those values. If a particular value is not consistent with the assemblage of values already held, it is not easily integrated and is often ignored and excluded.

This is not to suggest that we will always find consistency among the values held by any given individual or expressed in a given community. Values *strive* for consistency. The particular assemblage of values of an individual or community is typically inclusive of disparate and often mutually contradictory values. It may even be the case that a particular configuration

of values not only accommodates but espouses seemingly contradictory values. At issue is not the inconsistent disposition of the individual values in question, but the overall structure of the relationships and the character of that integration among all those values. To understand any given value, one must also consider the larger gestalt in which it is embedded. Such a contradiction will be observed when we discuss the Crow Indian values of oneness and unity, and differentiation and uniqueness. The apparent inconsistency is dissolved when the specific contextual integration, in this instance, the imagery of the "circle" and "wagon wheel," is taken into consideration.

Values enshrine and impart a society's concepts of the *morally desirable*. Values set forth the social criteria for and the cultural assumptions upon which good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral, noble and vile are established. Values provide a code and form the basis for all moral judgments, whether directed at others, nature or the self. Values guide human conduct, providing a "road map" for action. Of course, what one may value as proper, another may value as immoral and improper. As a consequence, values are often at the focal point of conflict.

Values are inundated with *emotional* feelings and are held with strong conviction. There can be no passively neutral values. Fear, sympathy, hate, love, anger, passion, contempt: all are expressions of this subjective dimension of values. Values are most assuredly felt.

Because of this affective component, values are thus more than a code of conduct. By infusing judgements with passion, values establish the desirable. Good and bad are not simply laid out; "good" is passionately desired and "bad" is ardently avoided. Values are the great *motivators* within a society and the individual; the drive directed toward all sorts of ends. From how a "rich man" is defined to what is most "feared" in life: all are grounded in values. But it is also this passion that certainly can inhibit an appreciation of values different from one's own. Emotions can cloud a clear vision.

Values establish a *disposition to act*. Values influence our behaviors by preparing us to act in certain morally-oriented ways. When a certain behavioral response is called for in a given context of social interaction, what that behavior may be is based in part upon the values held. I suggest "in part" because values, while primary among those influences, are not the sole

influence on our behaviors. Other influences include the level of individual self-esteem, social role definitions, societal laws, spontaneous collective behavior and the persuasiveness of others, for instance. Consequently, identified values alone are not necessarily accurate predictors of behavior. While they closely parallel one another, the values we hold and the behaviors we exhibit are not the reverse sides of the same coin, each synonymous with the other.

Any given value is based upon and expressed in terms of certain *epistemological criteria*. Upon what standard of knowing is a particular value acknowledged and represented? How is a particular value validated by the holder of that value? In what terms is a value framed and publicly presented? To assert, for example, that "wilderness is a vast, as yet untapped natural resource to be harvested" implies a value based upon and expressed in terms of epistemological criteria that is "economic" in nature. "Wilderness" is *known* in terms of a "commodity" that has "production value," and that can be distributed and consumed.

While there is a range of possible epistemological criteria on which values can be grounded, for our interpretative purposes, only three will be isolated: literal-denotative, metaphoric-connotative, and anagogic-implicative. This typology owes much to the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy's *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (Harvard University Press 1934). These categories are not mutually exclusive. Any given value can be based on more than one of these criteria simultaneously, e.g., literal-denotative and anagogic-implicative. Furthermore, each category has validity, equally contributing to the human condition, although in differing ways. No one criteria, in and of itself, is more appropriate or morally superior than another. This is not a developmental sequence through which individuals progress from one stage to the next.

*Literal-denotative* values are those which are promulgated on the *physical senses* and have *explicit*, literal meanings. The types of senses on which these values are based are those overtly acknowledged as viable and generally shared among a given group, e.g., sight and sound. These values are understood to be grounded on and have legitimacy because of something that has a reality in the experiential world.

Let me offer two examples of literal-denotative value statements that focus on "wilderness." "Wilderness is made up of a given number and type of trees, animals, plants, in a specified physical terrain." As referred to in the Old Testament, wilderness is a "desert" and "waste," a "cursed" land, full of "thorns and thistles." In both instances, the value statements are based on literal meanings, accessible through the senses. You can touch the trees and feel the thorns. The words descriptive of "wilderness" attempt to elicit precise, literal representations. The word "tree" has a more or less precise physical counterpart in the "wilderness." Empiricism and religious fundamentalism, for example, are associated with literal-denotative values.

*Metaphoric-connotative* values are those based on mental *conceptualization* and have *implicit*, metaphoric meanings. These values can range from the logically oriented, i.e., based on a consensus of shared rules for thinking, to the irrationally focused, i.e., formed without a consensus of shared rules for thinking and based upon fallacious assumptions. They are often predicated on and are legitimized because of a deduction from or a comparison to other values. They are not dependent upon being grounded in the experiential world. Metaphoric-connotative value statements offer more figurative and abstract images, often images of qualities, and are much less literal in their representations.

Let me illustrate this type of value with three different examples. "Wilderness is the antithesis of civilization." "Wilderness is a land of no use." "Wilderness is where the birds fly free and the beauty of the flowers glows with the colors of the rainbow." These particular wilderness value statements are deduced from and implicitly compared with other already held values, i.e., values of societal civilization, economic use and aesthetic beauty. They have little direct and no literal counterpart in an experiential "wilderness," but refer to images of abstract qualities. Rationalism, literary criticism and racial prejudice, for example, are all founded on metaphoric-connotative values.

*Anagogic-implicative* values are those which are derived from *intuitive* or *mystical* experiences and have *implicit*, metaphoric meanings. It is often the meaning of the "essence" within something overt and material, the "inner forms." While emanating out of and legitimized by an experience, unlike literal-denotative values, that experience is much more

private and contemplative in nature, e.g., divine revelation, and not contingent upon certain senses that are generally shared by all in the community. Although this is not to suggest that in any given community all members could not have access to such an experience. Similar to metaphoric-connotative values, anagogic-implicative value statements offer figurative, abstract images, and meanings. But these are images that are normally hidden from humanity and often esoteric in nature, e.g., the image of an animal's soul.

An example of an anagogic-implicative value statement would be, "Wilderness is where God and all true wisdom are to be found." Another example would be, "The image in the stone is that of the seal, revealed through the stone by the seal to the stone carver as he sat in the great solitudes." Both statements offer figurative meanings, i.e., images of God and of a seal-spirit, and are derived from a mystical or intuitive ways of knowing. Anagogic-implicative values are not dependent upon empirical or logical processes. Artistic and religious inspiration, for example, are associated with anagogic-implicative values.

The ingrained values expressed throughout our stories form much of the basis for who and what we are. They help us to interpret and comprehend the behaviors of others as well as to guide our own behaviors through the maze of human existence.

### **Carrying Forth Our Stories**

We carry forth our stories and with them create our social institutions, our ways of behaving toward each other. Family, church, school, recreation, art, government, economy, science, technology, work are all animated, structured and given meaning through our stories. We celebrate our stories at every opportunity: in Sunday worship at church or at a football stadium, in a graduation commencement or each Friday after work at the local bar, in a class or family reunion, in a hard-earned job promotion or vacation cruise to the Caribbean. We tell our stories at each juncture in our lives: at birth, at each birthday, at marriage, at divorce, at our death. Our lives are inundated with our stories.

We carry forth our stories and with them create our view of the world about us and our ways of behaving toward it. How we define a landscape, the rush of water in a river, a sunset, a thunderstorm, the howl of a coyote, the flight of an eagle, the ant that walks across the kitchen table: all are predicated on the stories we tell. Our aesthetic, our religious, our economic and

our scientific images of plant, animal, earth, star, and of their origin, dynamics and destiny are framed in our stories. The lives of others are inundated with our stories.

Simply put, our humanity and our world are defined in the stories we tell each other. Without stories, there can be no human being, and there is no world.

It follows then that to understand how humanity sees itself and the world, we must learn something about the stories humanity tells. Through an appreciation of the stories, we have access to what is most essential to humanity.