

## Soul Food<sup>1</sup>

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,

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

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.  
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,...

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<sup>2</sup>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. The source of the original story text is identified in a corresponding footnote and the Bibliography.

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!

\* \* \* \* \*

You've just entered one of the caves, leaving behind the sun's light and today's date.<sup>3</sup> It's a long passage, with many side passages leading off in other directions. You descend deep into the earth, among the damp and the stalactites. The only sound is of water dripping from the ceilings and of your breathing. The only light is that which you carry. At places you must creep along low on all fours. You lose your sense of time and place, no longer sure how long you've been in the cave or in what direction you're moving. These are caverns which have never served as places of human shelter, habitat, or home. But then, as now, these are places visited only on special occasions, for special purposes; though those who came before, undoubtedly came for very different purposes.

You've emerged into the great gallery. Before you are the images of hundreds of animal drawings, many overlapping each other, animals such as wild horses, bison, ibex and reindeer. They are images rich in earthen colors: yellows, reds, browns, and black. Many are life-sized, and all are rather realistically portrayed. Some of the images are painted over natural bulges in the rock, giving the animals a further sense of relief and life. There are, however, few representations of human images, and those you find are simple, stick-like images.

You've journeyed to Europe and are now viewing the cave paintings of the Upper Paleolithic period, dating to 18,000 years ago. Three of the over seventy cave sites of northern Spain and France are visited: Altamira, Lascaux and Les Trois Freres. As you gaze among the varied images, four catch your eyes.

The first image is from Altamira, in northern Spain. The bison is painted in vivid reds and black.

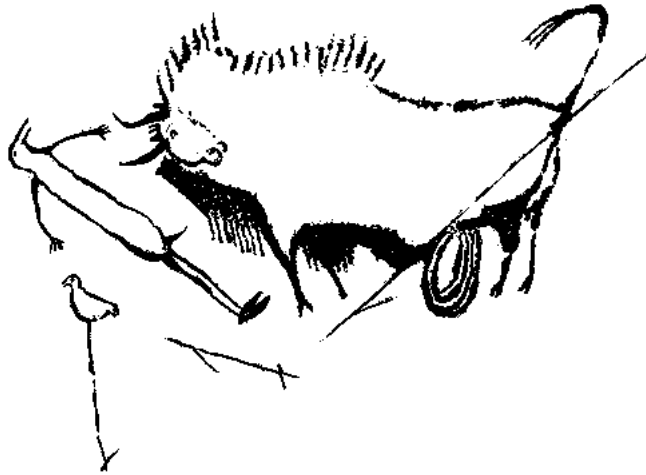
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<sup>3</sup>For additional ethnographic background, see Campbell 1959 and Fagan 1989.

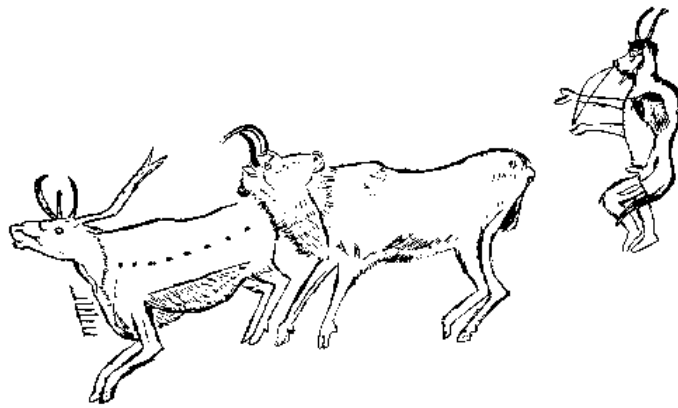




Your second image comes from Lascaux cave in central France. A great bison was speared, apparently by the crudely drawn human figure. As mentioned, human images are few. This particular one is interesting because of its bird-like features, i.e., bird's head and bird's hands, and staff with perched bird attached atop. Images of birds are even rarer than those few of humans. Also notice what appears to be a phallus on the human figure.



The third image comes from the walls of the Les Trois Freres cave in the French Pyrenees. Amongst a vast assemblage of overlapping animal images (not presented here) we see a human-like figure with a bow in hand (apparently a hunting or musical bow) and in pursuit of two unidentified animals.



In the innermost region of the Les Trois Freres cave we come across a most astonishing image. It is painted in black and stands two-and-a-half feet tall. The figure has the body of a human, the horns and ears of a reindeer, the tail and location of the penis of a horse, the hands that resemble the paws of a feline, and the face of a lion or perhaps an owl?



## Extensions

### Sedna

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>4</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 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

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<sup>4</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.

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.  
(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)



### Ask the Cattle

Go and ask the cattle, ask the birds of the air to inform you, or tell the creatures that crawl to teach you, and the fishes of the sea to give you instruction. Who cannot learn from all these that the Lord's own hand has done this? In God's hand are the souls of all that live, the spirits of all human kind. (Job 12:7-10)

### Canticle of Brother Sun, Sister Moon

"Most high, omnipotent, good Lord,  
Thine are all praise, glory, honor and all benedictions.  
To Thee alone, Most High, do they belong  
And no man is worthy to name Thee.  
Praise be to Thee, My Lord, with all Thy creatures,  
Especially Brother Sun,  
Who is our day and lightens us therewith.  
Beautiful is he and radiant with great splendor;  
Of Thee, Most High, he bears expression.  
Praise be to Thee, my Lord, for Sister Moon,  
and for the stars  
In the heavens which Thou has formed bright, precious and  
fair.  
Praise be to Thee, my Lord, for Brother Wind,  
And for the air and the cloud of fair and all weather  
Through which Thou givest sustenance to Thy creatures.  
Praise be, my Lord, for Sister Water.  
Who is most useful, humble, precious and chaste.  
Praise be, my Lord, for Brother Fire,  
By whom Thou lightest up the night:  
He is beautiful, merry, robust and strong.  
Praise be, my Lord, for our sister Mother Earth,  
Who sustains and governs us  
And brings forth diverse fruits with many-hued flowers and  
grass."  
From Frances of Assisi (1181-1226) in his *Canticle of Brother  
Sun, Sister Moon*.

Helping Spirit, *Issitoq*, Giant Eye  
(drawing by shaman)





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....

### The Original Affluent Society

What is the physical health and well-being of those who carve for Sedna and dance to Karora, those who painted images in Les Trois Freres and tell of Burnt Face? What is the quality of life in gatherer-hunter society, for those living in ancient times as well as the more recent? The social philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651) had characterized it as a life with "no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Archaeological and ethnographic studies over the last thirty years have re-written our images of the gatherer-hunter Dream Animal of the past and the contemporary, and have helped dispel many commonly held stereotypes. Certainly variations occur and exceptions abound, but a coherent imagery is emerging. What, indeed, is the quality of life in gatherer-hunter society?

Let me offer a brief comparison of the differing levels of resources needed to sustain gatherer-hunter and Euro-American societies.<sup>5</sup> The comparison will focus on the daily consumption of energy per capita in each of six types of societies and will be measured in terms of equivalent kilocalories.

In paleolithic society, the primary source of energy is derived from the food stuffs that are individually consumed and is the equivalent to approximately **2,000** kilocalories needed per day per capita.

In historic and contemporary gatherer-hunter society, energy is derived from food consumed and from firewood used for heating and cooking. The equivalent of **5,000** kilocalories are needed daily per capita (2,000 kilo. food energy and 3,000 kilo. firewood energy).

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<sup>5</sup>See Cook 1971.

In horticultural society, domesticated plants harvested by hand from gardens supplanted the gathering of wild plants. Domesticated animals also contribute to the energy source. The equivalent of **12,000** kilocalories are required (4,000 kilo. food, 4,000 kilo. firewood and 4,000 kilo. domesticated animals).

In agricultural society, the plow, draft animal and field replace the garden. Coal is often used as a fuel source along with wind and/or water. Transportation is aided by animals. The equivalent of **26,000** kilocalories are needed daily (7,000 kilo. food, 6,000 kilo. firewood, 12,000 kilo. domesticated animal and 1,000 kilo. coal).

In industrial society, the steam and gas engine are the backbone of energy production and consumption. The equivalent of **77,000** kilocalories are required per capita per day (24,000 kilo. food, 7,000 kilo. firewood, 32,000 kilo. domesticated animals, and 14,000 kilo. coal).

In technological society, electricity via coal, water and nuclear energy resources is the cornerstone of energy production and consumption. The equivalent of from **230,000** to **273,000** kilocalories are needed per individual each day (91,000 kilo. food, 10,000 kilo. firewood, 33,000 kilo. domesticated animals, 63,000 kilo. coal and 33,000 kilo. electricity).

Our Euro-American society is comprised of elements of both the industrial and technological societal orientations. The comparison of a contemporary gatherer-hunter **5,000** kilocalorie consumption level with an industrial-technological **77,000-273,000** kilocalorie consumption level offers a most remarkable contrast.

It is often perceived that with the advent of technological society there has been a significant reduction in the number of hours of human labor needed for production and an increase in leisure time. This perception is not the case. The amount of work output directed at food gathering, preparation and related subsistence activities in gatherer-hunter society is typically the equivalent of **20-25** hours per week. Much more time is engaged in ritual, social and recreational activities. There is, in fact, far greater leisure time in gatherer-hunter societies than there is in our own industrial society. In technological society, a 40-hour work week has become necessary for minimal

subsistence. Three weeks of vacation plus holidays is a norm. With all the labor-saving appliances, the urban American homemaker puts in an average of 55 hours per week in household-related activities. In the 1920s, without the benefits of these devices, an average of 52 hours of housework was expended. Even the medieval serf of Europe had 115 days off for festivals.

The quality of gatherer-hunter diet is also most revealing.<sup>6</sup> With societal exceptions such as the Eskimo, wild plant foods typically account for 60-70% of the diet. Because of the gender role dichotomy of "man the hunter" and "woman the gatherer," women actually contributed more food stuffs to the family than did their counterparts, though often without receiving the glory and recognition. This ratio of a 30-40% meat contribution thus existed throughout a million-year history of humanity. The ratio was only altered with the domestication of plants and reliance on various crop foods. Meat consumption was thereafter significantly reduced. Then came the modern American diet, with the introduction of a newly constituted meat form, rich in fats.

For the historic and contemporary gatherer-hunter, typically **2,150** calories are consumed daily. In the paleolithic diet, an estimated **3,000** calories were consumed on a daily basis. These levels of calorie consumption are comparable with the United States Department of Agriculture recommended minimum of 1,975 calories.

In gatherer-hunter society protein amounts around **90** grams per day are achieved while the paleolithic diet was at **250** grams. These levels are comparable or exceed the actual U.S. average consumption which ranges from 50-125 grams. Of interest, early *Homo sapiens* and *Neanderthals* of 75,000 years ago averaged 6 inches taller than agricultural peoples of 8,000 years ago, and remained so up to a 100 years ago. Today, we are now as tall as we once were.

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<sup>6</sup>See Eaton and Konner 1985 for a discussion on paleolithic diet, and Lee 1968 and Sahlins 1972 for a discussion of historic and contemporary gatherer-hunter diet.

Paleolithic fat consumption was at **71** grams per day (30 g. animal and 41 g. plant), representing 21% of the total daily dietary energy source. The U.S. average consumption represents 42% of the diet, with 30% a U.S.D.A. recommended. A significant portion of the U.S. fat consumption is of saturated fats.

Sodium levels in the paleolithic diet were at **690** milligrams, compared with the U.S. average consumption of 2,300-6,900 mg. per day.

Calcium intake levels in the paleolithic were at **1,580** milligrams, compared with an average 740 mg. per day in the U.S. Of note, this calcium level was reached without dairy products, e.g., cheese or milk, but was a result of the way animal foods are prepared and consumed, i.e., inclusion of animal bone.

Remarkably, ascorbic acid was at **392** milligrams per day, compared with an average U.S. consumption of 88 mg.

Paleolithic fiber intake was at **46** grams per day, compared with an average U.S. of 20 grams.

As with the quality of the diet, the quality of historic and contemporary gatherer-hunter health is rather revealing. Typically, there are fewer diseases compared with industrial society. Prior to European contact, there was no diabetes, no stroke or heart disease, most varieties of cancer were absent, no hypertension or senility. There was also an absence of many of the infectious diseases characteristic of industrial society. There were higher infant mortality rates, however. But if infancy was survived, over 10% of the population lived over 60 years, which is comparable to many industrial societies.

Given the social equality and the kinship sharing characteristic of gatherer-hunter society, hunger is not "institutionalized." Gatherer-hunter society is typically an equalitarian society. No group and seldom an individual goes without, unless a local disaster causes all to go without. Poverty, a creation of class distinction and an unequal distribution of resources, is to be found in agricultural and industrial societies.

Keep in mind that the gatherer-hunter orientation has represented over ninety-nine percent of all of Dream Animal history. Plant and animal domestication and our technologically-oriented

society is a relatively new experiment in the human experience. Also keep in mind that the quality of diet and health found among gatherer-hunter peoples is achieved with relatively minimal resource demands and a "simple" technology. It is a technology that provides an efficient means of utilizing the available resources.

An argument can be made, as Marshal Sahlins has made, that there is affluence in gatherer-hunter society, the "original affluent society."<sup>7</sup> I would suggest that the affluence is, in fact, greater than that found in industrial society. Such is the case if affluence is a measure of the ratio of the means and products available, i.e., the technological knowledge and goods produced, relative to the desired wants, i.e., the expectations. We are, of course, speaking of the material affluence relating to food, health and physical comfort. In gatherer-hunter society, we find that the material expectations of the people closely match their means to obtain those expectations. What people desire is obtained. It is acknowledged that what is desired in gatherer-hunter society may not be even remotely similar to that desired in industrial society. Nevertheless, in gatherer-hunter society, the desires of food, health and physical comfort are fundamentally secured. What is not as easily obtainable are desires relating to social, aesthetic and spiritual fulfillments. Here the quests continue. In contrast, the quest for material affluence has become a driving force in industrial society; while the quests for social, aesthetic and spiritual fulfillments continue but are apparently less overtly emphasized. All things considered, given the quality of diet and of health, and the relative affluence, life in gatherer-hunter society is anything but "nasty, brutish and short."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>See Sahlins 1972.

<sup>8</sup>These comments are not presented to suggest a call for a "return to the primitive." We must avoid romanticizing the gatherer-hunter as our "noble savage." After all, the gatherer-hunter seldom has had an opportunity to "tax" the "carrying capacity" of their lands. Their "simple" technology more than met their physical needs and expectations. By comparison, the vastly expanded population of our contemporary world necessitates a resource base and technological infrastructure of a magnitude incomprehensible to the

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gatherer-hunter.