

*From Huckleberries: Stories from the American Indian Experience for research, writing, pedagogy and our humanity.* Manuscript 11/22/2012

*Symbols and Spiritual Efficacy.* So we continue our journey into the Tin Shed, having conducted some insightful interviews and participated in some intriguing events, all in consort with our hosts. We now hold vivid the remembrances of those encounters, as well as their transcribed texts on the hard drive of our computers and perhaps printed on the pages of our notebooks. But yet these remembrances and texts are likely so seemingly random and chaotic, disjointed all, without reference points, without meaning. Consider the vignettes peppered throughout this essay, texts from interviews, oral narratives, and participant engagements. As I've asked myself at this re-occurring juncture in my own research, how do I begin to make sense of these rich and varied experiences? What bones lay embedded in these texts? How are the bones to be discovered? How do we begin to interpret these texts? And I ask: where should I start? Of course, the interviewing and participations are likely to continue, as the question just posed is often asked just as one first steps into the Tin Shed. Making sense of it all is not a neat sequential, step-by-step methodical process; there is no designated starting point per se.

As we engage and seek to understand the various transitory intersections of those participating, let's consider the nature of the critical and elemental unit which encapsulates and conveys the voices of those participating. These are the essential units that are embedded in and make up the transcripts resulting from our interviews and participant engagements. And if we've observed, listened and engaged with any degree of competence, these are the essential units that should access and make known the bones of the stories and the *mi'yep* of the Animal Peoples and of the elders. These are the critical units facilitating the various communications and transformations reflected in each of the nine vignettes. Strung together with others, these are the units with which we will seek to weave into a fine garment and construct a "special kind of text." It is this special kind of text that will be eventually scrutinized and evaluated by our elder hosts before we dare disseminate our research to the public. The fundamental unit I am speaking of is the "symbol." Let me propose a way of making sense of the "seemingly random

and chaotic,” a “starting point” (albeit an ever shifting point), revolving around a focus on symbols. It is a method of ethnographic coding of the assembled and varied interviews, participations, oral traditions, and even archival materials, which begins the interpretation.

While much more nuanced than suggested here, a rather generic definition of “symbol” will be offered (Frey 1994:14-18). A symbol can be defined as a specific *unit of reference* that refers to a particular *referent*. The unit of reference can be an object, a behavior or a sign. The referent can consist of a concept, process, behavior or certainly an object itself. At its basic level, a symbol is simply something that stands for something else. In our story of the Rainbow, the unit of reference is the printed word on a page, “rainbow,” while the referent is that arc of vibrant color, a phenomenon, suspended in the not so distant sky. Five critical elements of a symbol are identified and briefly elaborated here.

Symbols presuppose *displacement*. The unit of reference refers to something that is beyond and not confined to the temporal and spatial immediacy of the person who is symbolizing. The word “rainbow” can refer to something separate from the direct experience of seeing a rainbow. While you may have an image of that something in your mind, that image is not dependent on you directly experiencing it in the phenomenal world as you refer to it. The implications are far reaching. As a consequence of displacement, the human is forever free from the constraints of what is experienced and defined in the immediate and can contemplate distant places and times to create an endless inventory of images, meanings and participations.

Symbols entail *meaning*. Anchored to any symbol is significance. The meaning associated with “rainbow” might be the anticipation of good fortune or the possibility of finding “a pot of gold” or simply the understanding of the colors of the spectrum formed by the refraction of the sun's rays on raindrops. While displacement allows the human to expand beyond the immediate, the meaning attached to symbols gives significance to that expanded world. Theoretically, you may never have personally experienced a rainbow for yourself, but you may have an understanding of its meaning as the result of the meaning embedded in a story's symbols of it. The meaningful world is thus limited only by what the human can imagine. As ethnographers, it will be our challenge to discover the meaning embedded in the various experiences and texts presented through our research. It is within these many symbols

of our interviews and participatory engagements that the bones and the *mi'yep* we seek are to be discovered, in the perennial archetypes established by the First Peoples.

Symbols can be transmitted in time and through space, i.e., they can be *learned* and *shared*. You may never have experienced rainbow, but you can now learn something about it through the meaning-endowed symbols of a story. The rainbow may have occurred long ago, but you can know it in the present. The individual human is not limited to the sum total of his or her direct, personal and idiosyncratic experiences, but is potentially able to be inclusive of the collective experiences of an entire human society and its experiences. With great skills, we can gain access to much of the meaning of experiences quite distinct from our own, we can, in fact, know something of what's inside the Tin Shed; all because symbols can be shared and learned.

The meaning attached to the symbol is autonomous of and not bound by the actual unit of reference, i.e., any given symbol can refer to virtually anything. The meaning of a symbol is quite *arbitrary*. The phonetic spoken word "rainbow" can refer to the anticipation of good luck or it can refer to evil and the devil or, for some, the word may have absolutely no meaning at all. There is nothing innate within the unit of reference that would necessitate and bind the word "rainbow" to a certain meaning. It is this quality of arbitrariness that distinguishes a symbol from a sign. The meaning associated with a sign is tightly bound to its unit of reference. For instance, to cup one's hands and draw them to one's mouth is a unit of reference indicative of drinking or thirst. But, as a symbol, the word "cup" can refer to a container or possibly to the act of drinking or to a virtually endless assortment of meanings.

As a function of this arbitrariness, any given symbol can have an assortment of differing meanings and multiple significances, differing referents, and that assortment can occur simultaneously. Conversely, any given experiential referent can have multiple and differing units of reference, differing symbols for the same thing. And the processes of creativity and imagination are made possible. New, never before conceived of meanings can be brought forth. With the spontaneity of creativity and imagination, language is rendered "open-ended." But also because of this arbitrariness, the ethnographic coding of the symbols of a story text is made all that more difficult. The meanings of symbols, especially symbols originating out of the

experiences different from our own, are never overt or explicit, and are always susceptible to misinterpretation.

Symbols define the parameters of and assign the meaning to the phenomenal world of objects and of images, i.e., that which symbols refer to is *brought forth* and *created*. The meaning of an object or image does not rest in that object or image alone, but is the result of a complex interaction involving the object or image, human sensory perception, and human mental conception. Conceptualization, in turn, is influenced by the particular cultural and historical paradigms of the specific human who is conceptualizing. We are reminded of the question: what constitutes the phenomenon, “rainbow”? Certainly the mist of the rain and the light of the sun, physical particles, but also a human perceiving of that particular interaction of light and mist, a physical perception, and a human conceiving of that particular interaction, a cognitive category.

And as we engage the particular symbols emanating out of the Tin Shed, added to this complex interaction of referents, perceptions and conceptions are spiritual meaning and animation – are the *mi’yep* and *súumesh*. Tin Shed referents have the potential to be infused with and an extension of all that which is spiritually animated and significant, all that which is most real. In being linked to the *mi’yep* and *súumesh*, to what can be called “the sacred,” what is normally veiled and hidden, spiritual symbols have an ability to reveal what is most real and access what is most powerful. Hence in the Apsáalooke assemblage of verbal symbols, of *dasshússua*, when a name is spoken, a vow stated, a story told, the world is brought forth and made. It is, of course, in this quality that Head and Heart symbols are fundamentally distinguished. As I suggested, the shift is from viewing the oral narratives, the *meymiym q’esp schint* as explanations about the world, to experiencing the *meymiym q’esp schint* as the world, continually unfolding as the words are spoken.

I am reminded of the vividly poignant story shared by N. Scott Momaday (1970). He relates how he was working on the closing passages in what would become his Pulitzer Prize winning *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969). Late one night, he was dwelling on an old Kiowa tale and on a time far removed from his own. It was 1833, under a night sky of meteor showers, and he imagined and wrote, so completely, about a “living memory” of an old woman,

Ko-sahn. Absorbed in the words, Momaday spoke her name aloud, and there, stepping right out of the language, standing right before him, was the “ancient one-eyed woman.” And they commenced in a most astonishing conversation!

By extension, the spoken *dasshússua* symbols of the Apsáalooke are not unlike those engraved in and form the character of a painted wooden mask, as donned by an Iroquois *Face* dancer or a Kwakiutl *Hamatsa* dancer. And while dancing the story of these Spirit People, the dancer is transformed into the Spirit People, the Schitsu’umsh Jump Dancer into a Blue Jay. The spoken *dasshússua* symbols are not unlike the distinct patterns of sand and color applied by a Diné (Navajo) healer as he lays out a “dry painting” in the floor of a ritual hogan, in it embodying the *Yei*, the Holy Ones of the Creation Time, imbued with *Hózhó*, “beauty and harmony.” In the ritual act of sitting upon the *Hózhó* symbols, on the dry painting, the *Yei* swirling about and a patient’s illness is purged, a healing order restored. The Apsáalooke Medicine Bundle and its sacred objects are laid out so precisely on the floor, channeling the *baaxpée* from the Creator and Medicine Fathers, through the Eagle-feather fan into the patient, pulling out the affliction, tossing it to the east with a flick of the feathers.

At this point of our inquiry, I would like to pause a moment and reflect on any insights that the nature of Tin Shed symbols might have on a better appreciation of their own meaning and efficacy. As you might continue to be asking, among other questions, “Really Frey, how is it that a special cluster of symbols – the words of prayer and the ritual movement of Eagle-feathers – can draw water from a Tree?” While having participated in the Tin Shed for almost four decades, having personally witnessed so many mysteries, so many remarkable transformations and healings, and having sat with so many great teachers, I claim no certainty, no firm understanding of the dynamics of this process. I have described for you some of the ontological foundations upon which this world is distinguished from others, and we will soon consider some of the defining qualities of orality, which will hopefully render the Tin Shed landscape a little more accessible. While I know it is true and I have experienced it as real, there remains an uncertainty regarding just how it all works. Perhaps the desire to resolve this ambiguity is a function of my Head Knowledge mind at work. Nevertheless and worth reflecting upon are the insights offered by Mircea Eliade (1907-1986). He was the renowned interpreter

of religious experiences, from the Indigenous Australian, to the Asian Hindu, from the Ancient Egyptian, to the Abrahamic Muslim. Perhaps he can guide us a little farther into the Tin Shed.

While a prolific writer and mentor to numerous scholars, let me offer but a glimpse of Eliade's eloquent enunciations. For Eliade, reality and the religious experience start with the sacred (1954; 1958; 1959). The sacred is understood as having *being*, has existence, as having *power*, the animating force to create the world, and as having *reality*, what is most meaningful, providing a "celestial archetype" emanating from "supraterrestrial planes." The sacred oscillates in, around and through two interrelated ubiquitous transcendent spheres of existence: the cosmic center, the *axis mundi*, and the primordial time of the Gods and Heroes, *in illo tempore, ab origine*. The "religious symbols" used in ceremonies and pilgrimages, in the oral narratives and songs, in the dances, regalia and masks, in the temples and atop mountains are the languages of the sacred, of the Gods and Spirits. These revered symbols are derived from the sacred, their source and inspiration, while also a revelation of it, revealing what is normally veiled and hidden in everyday existence. When humans participate in and use these religious symbols, in their rituals and storytellings, communication is re-established with the *axis mundis* and *in illo tempore*, and the sacred shines through, its meaning and power, its existence flows forth into the world, materialized, in what Eliade calls a "hierophany." Reality is manifested, derived from the transcendent, reminiscent of Plato's allegory of the cave.

But the use and application of the religious symbols must be deliberate; as Eliade insists, they must be aligned with and parallel to the sacred archetype. The rites of initiation, the world renewal ceremonies, the re-tellings of the creation accounts must repeat the perennial sacred if that sacred is to spew forth and into the lives of the participants. Are not the Sundance Lodge and the behavior of its dances, the *Ashkísshe*, in replication of the cosmic Center, as the water flows from the Tree? Are not all the bones of the primordial Creation included in the re-telling, as the First People swirl about and the blue in the lake perpetuated, as the world is renewed? At a Jump Dance aligned with the *axis mundis* and *in illo tempore*, is not Cliff's "welcome home" as much a pronouncement of family inclusion awaiting my graduate students, as anticipatory of a hierophany about to shine through? A hierophany shining

through when aligned with the bones? In response to our uncertainties, is not Eliade worth reflecting upon?

To conclude our cursory consideration of symbols, we would thus acknowledge that symbols ultimately liberate the human from any temporal and spatial constraints, and allow us to live in an expanded world fabricated by the participation of its many Peoples. From the minute and seemingly insignificant to the most grandiose and pervasive, all of human thought, activity, and expression are invariably symbolic. A glance of the eye or the spatial proximity with another person, the particular clothing worn, the numbers of a mathematician, the images of an artist, the design of a building, the spoken word, the written word, the oral narratives, the songs and feathers, the special kind of symbols found in the Tin Shed – all are clusterings of symbols woven into fine tapestries of lived experiences.

*Coding and Interpretation.* As we travel within the Tin Shed, ethnographic coding is understood the process of attempting to identify the characteristic and essential symbols of that landscape. These are the key symbols embedded within the vast assemblage of larger symbolic clusterings, derived from our interviews and participations, as well as previously printed texts, from the archival record (Frey 1994:33-42). Coding entails a process of triangulating amongst and between these varied assemblages and clusterings the quintessential and recurrent symbols, of a deep listening and being attentive, of rendering an interpretation, of discovering the bones. These are the symbols embedded with the perennial Head Knowledge *mi'yep* and ontological principles, the destination in our Tin Shed journey.

As we do so we are reminded that our goal throughout remains to “see it from the *inside* looking out,” and avoid the indiscriminate and unwitting imposition of your own perspective into the mix, avoid being ethnocentric. As we’ve considered with the examples of Robert Redfield and Oscar Lewis in Tepoztlan and with Evans-Pritchard’s work with the Nuer, as you begin engaging in the experiences of others, we must know something of our own experiences. We must acknowledge our “name.” To properly interpret another's stories we need to be aware of our own; otherwise their stories simply become extensions of our own as we inadvertently cloud our descriptions with our own stories and perspectives. As we engage in someone else’s landscape, engage in our own, engage in reflexivity.

Borrowing from the folklorist Alan Dundes, he points the way that can assist in our coding of the symbols (Dundes 1966). Dundes distinguishes three key components in this process: the text, the context and the texture of a symbolic cluster. The *text* refers to the identification of the symbolic meanings engrained within a symbolic clustering, e.g., what is actually being said and referred to by the key symbols. The *context* refers to the when and where a text is being presented, e.g., in what social setting and for what purpose is a story told. The context requires an appreciation of the entire experiential configuration within which the story is set, through time and among spatial social relations. The *texture* refers to how the text is being presented, e.g., what is the style of the writing or the techniques of the telling, what are the interactions with the readers or the listeners, what are the linguistic components and structures. As we've suggested, *how* something is stated unequivocally affects *what* something means. The coding techniques which follow are predicated on the distinctions between the text, texture and context of a symbolic clustering.

The texts of symbolic clusterings are as varied as there are points of intersection in the human experiential interrelational dynamic. They certainly include oral and written narratives, such as the stories re-told aloud or transcribed on the pages of a book by a Nimíipuu elder. Clusterings include song traditions, as well as visual arts, clothing styles, and even architectural structures, such as a Schitsu'umsh tule-mat lodge, Apsáalooke tipi or Hopi ceremonial kiva. Behavioral and ceremonial expressions, from rites of passage and pilgrimages to the etiquette exhibited while eating a meal, are certainly symbolic expressions. Witness the rich meaning as exemplified in the actions of Apsáalooke Sundancers or pilgrims to a Medicine Wheel. Along with your own re-remembered experiences in the field, consult your written research notes, your verbatim transcriptions of interviews, and detailed descriptions of participant engagements; all are texts. Don't ignore past archival records, from personal letters and journals, to governmental and church records, to ethnographic monographs written by our Boasian grandparents. These are texts, albeit written accounts, of symbolic clusterings, embedded with meaning and significance, available to be "read" and coded as texts.

As you approach any given text, first engage it for "pleasure," from a non-analytical perspective. If a narrative text is being considered, attempt to imagine yourself within the



story, as one of the characters. Listen for the voice of the “storyteller” within the story. Familiarize yourself with the landscape of the story. Who are the central characters of the text? How would you characterize their actions? What is the storyline? Are there any overt or subtle lessons to be learned from their actions?

Then re-engage the text, this time more thoroughly and carefully, paying attention to both the intricate details and specific references, as well as to the “big picture;” paying attention to context. It's easier to identify the particular trees if you know which forest you're traveling. Attempt to see the gestalt of the text, not just the individual units of reference. What may be the larger implications of what is being referred to in the text? To successfully code a text, we must have an appreciation of its larger context. In considering the context of a given text pay attention to how that text is rooted within a larger aesthetic, economic, geographic, historical, religious, philosophical, political, psychological, and/or social association of influences and interconnections. Attempt to identify what type or types of contexts the text might be framed within. When and where is the text likely to be found?

Observe and view, and listen and hear the texture of a text. Engage not only *what* is being conveyed, but *how* it is conveyed. As you *read* a written text, *listen* to an oral narrative, or *view* an artistic image, each has its own set of expressive techniques and considerations. How does each form of expression affect the meaning of the text? Certainly *how* something is stated is inextricably related to *what* something means. For those texts which emanated out of an oral-based tradition, they should be accessed by first listening to them. Have another person read those particular sections aloud to you, paying attention to the pauses and word phrasing within those texts. An oral performance will help enunciate implicit meanings and significances not dedicated in a reading of the same text. In the next section we will consider more fully the nature and implications of orality and literacy in the symbolic clusterings in and outside the Tin Shed.

Throughout the entire coding process, apply our definition of “symbol.” Attempt to identify and isolate the key symbols. Ask yourself what meanings and images are being referred to in each individual phrase and passage. Ask yourself how the referent meaning of a specific passage relates to the other images and meanings throughout the entire text. Within

any given text, you may find a variety of seemingly disparate units of reference that, in fact, refer to a singular, affiliated meaning or image. Often a related image or symbol will be reiterated throughout a text but in a variety of ways in order to convey a specific common meaning. Look for the repetitions, in words and phrases that are repeated and reiterated; they can point to an underlying *mi'yep*. In addition, key units of reference are often presented as contrasting pairs or opposites. Symbolic meaning is frequently brought forth and conveyed as juxtaposed components of binaries. For example, the unit of reference, "left," is made meaningful by contrasting it with "right," or in the examples "female" with "male," and "evil" with "good," and so on. Look for these paired contrasts.

As you re-engage, comparing and triangulating multiple and differing texts – varied interviews, observations, participations, archival, etc. – you will begin to see re-occurring patterns of key symbols. They may begin to "jump out" of the texts. They will help point the way to the underlying bones and *mi'yep*. As you identify these key terms or symbols from initial story texts, begin to build a list of "code" words or labels that mark the varied ways any given symbol might be linked with and expressed in other groupings of symbols. Keep in mind that your initial coding labels are potentially temporary, subject to modification and change as you engage additional texts. Continue to apply your coding system to additional texts associated with the domain of research you are investigating. Are the coding labels applicable and assist you in revealing the patterns of underlying bones? Do some of your coding labels need to be modified, even discarded, and new ones brought forth? Re-access, re-apply.

Most important of all to the coding process is to re-engage the text a second and third time. Leave the text for another activity. Return to the text with fresh eyes. Try listening to a text as you read the printed text aloud. Dwell in the text. Gain some perspective. Coding is accomplished only after a great effort. And most telling, to code is to allow the words of the stories to be lifted from the pages of the text and for you to swirl and dance with them. Listen for the words of the storyteller within the story. Listen for Coyote's voice. "Take a walk in the hills, to the mountain, amongst the trees of the forest, and be attentive," as Cliff SiJohn so often has said to me, "listen to the wind rustling among the leaves." Coding necessitates an intimacy with the characters within the story text, traveling with them through their territory.

While working among the Nimíipuu and Sch̓itsu'umsh one of the key coded symbolic clusters, an interpreted *mi'yep*, was encapsulated in the Nimíipuu term, *té·k'e*, "to give and share with others," and, while not identified in a specific Indigenous term, widely expressed in the Sch̓itsu'umsh behavior, "an ethic of sharing." This shared symbolic cluster was consistently and pivotally engrained in the narrative oral traditions of both communities, exemplified wonderfully in the Sch̓itsu'umsh stories of Crane, Rabbit and Jack Rabbit and, the tribal creation account of, Chief Child of the Yellow Root. It's the pattern that dominates how the Animal Peoples, such as the Deer and Salmon, interact with their human hunter and fisherman. In turn, this essential cluster is manifested throughout a myriad of interrelational behaviors, from the actions of root gatherers and deer hunters and how they distributed the camas or deer meat, to the policies of the Benewah Medical Center welcoming all in the community to their services, be they Indian or non-Indian, to how gaming profits are distributed, with large lump sums given to needy local schools, "without strings attached." And among the Apsáalooke, as we've witnessed, such revealing and pervasively engrained symbolic clusters, among the key codes were *dasshússua* – "breaking with the mouth," *baaxpée* – spiritual power, *ashammaléaxia* – "as driftwood lodges." They have all jumped off the pages of my field notes and experiences, unlocking the varied doors within the Tin Shed.