

# Deep Island

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From Chuck Masterson's Actual Blog, [www.chuckmasterson.com](http://www.chuckmasterson.com).

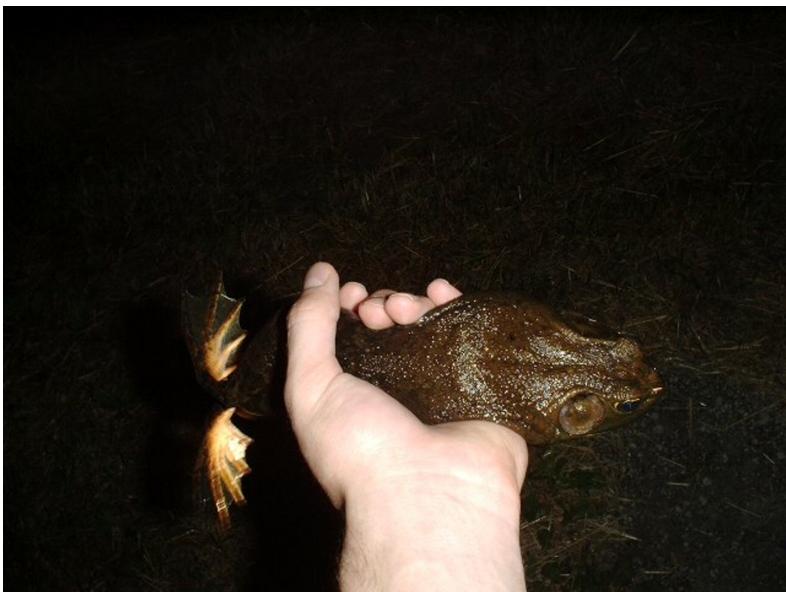
## Viewers of Views<sup>1</sup>

When I was a kid my parents took my brother and me on a road trip to see the great American West. I may have been twelve; I remember that when one of them bought me a cool cowboy hat and I found a turkey feather to put in it, I thought I was the coolest kid around. We slept at drive-in campgrounds and listened to classic country and we went to see oh so many views. They were the grandest views in the country, some of the grandest in the world. We looked down from the heights of Yosemite, watched Old Faithful erupt in Yellowstone, goggled at Meteor Crater, and peered down into the incomprehensible vastness of the Grand Canyon. And as I followed the family from one view to the next, I thought: What's the fucking point?

I didn't think it in those words. (For one thing, I was a Good Kid, and kept myself to a strict rule of not swearing.) In fact I never got particularly close to consciously forming a thought like that. But I do remember that after seeing each sight, though I thought they were quite awesome and all, we all seemed satisfied for the moment but anxious to get to the next one, and we moved on basically unmoved. Nature was for us on this trip a trick elephant, and we watched her most spectacular stunts—come on, blow that geyser!—because that was what Nature

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this phrase to Wendell Berry, in *The Art of the Commonplace*, p. 96 (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002).



was good for. We knew because the conservation movement had said so. It had put aside the National Parks because here were the finest views Nature had to offer, the most pristine landscapes unsullied by the hand of Man, a showcase of that beautifully alien realm where an anarchy of bears and wolves and trees and moss is still allowed to flourish. You could tell it was special because there were signs along the trails warning you to keep off the pristineness. But I couldn't help but notice that I felt closer to nature on the squishy banks of tiny Burck's Pond up the street from my house, next to a deteriorating asphalt path for dog-walking neighbors. My brother and I would come up at night, sneaking in through back yards, and catch bullfrogs with our bare hands, grinning with that specially childlike exhilaration, then lob them back into the water. And on that grubby shoreline, strewn with ruined old orange plastic fencing and occasional bits of old paper, I felt as alive as I did overlooking the greatest views of the continent, if not more so. Well, perhaps my nature appreciation faculties were deficient.

On Sundays, back at home, if my mom was persistent enough to drag me out of bed where I'd otherwise be sleeping till noon, we went to church, and it was the same deal. Everyone in the congregation made quite a show of very clearly Being Religious. You could tell from how many times they stood up and then sat back down again, how serious their voices were when they recited the Apostles' Creed, and how they used words like *hallowed* and *kingdom* and *thine*. The songs were very pretty, but I spent most of my time picking the little communion registration cards out of the holders on the backs of the pews and filling them out with funny names and addresses. I remember the little picture of wine and grapes next to the blanks on that card better than I remember a single word Pastor Curry said. It was okay, though; he was doing all the religion up there at the pulpit, and all I had to do was follow along in the hymnal and sing approximations of the right notes, and I'd be fine. Religion was a spectator activity, and what was important was being there and expressing the appropriate marvelment. Once you did that you could go next door to Wendy's and get a Frosty.

I am led to believe that Christianity can be a force for great spiritual and emotional good in people's lives. Perhaps some people can even derive that benefit from a suburban church that's hemmed in by a huge parking lot and the intersection of two major arterial streets. But its emotional impact on me mostly consisted of introducing me to new depths of emotions like impatience. And discomfort. And I don't think there's a single word to describe the emotion of being at a church summer camp with an Australian *Survivor* theme (I don't remember if I was sorted into Bonzer or Fair Dinkum tribe) and being expected to sing along to all the stupid songs and getting shepherded through a series of demeaning and not-remotely-fun games with heavyhanded moral lessons by a group of vapidly smiling young adults whose heads you suspect would sound like empty coconuts if they banged together, and fantasizing about burning the whole accursed place down—*indignation* doesn't quite say it somehow—but I learned that emotion too from my childhood experiences with Christianity. What I never experienced, never even suspected I could be brought to experience by religion, was awe, wonder, *encounter* with some entity grander and more ancient and intelligent than I could hope to comprehend.

It wasn't as though I had never felt that. In fact the pursuit of it was one of the main objects of my summer, evening, and weekend free time all through my teen years. But I pursued it by creekwalking. A creekwalk allowed me (and usually

my little brother) to escape the rectilinear world. With the air of smooth criminals, we would stroll down the street past the little boxes made of ticky-tacky until we found that magic spot, the flaw in the weave—a gap between the bushes edging someone's backyard, usually—where we could slip into the wild fringe where no one goes and no one looks: the creek, and the scrubby margin on either side of it, land topographically worthless to developers, and thus allowed its freedom. We could walk up and down this squiggly, alterdimensional world for hours and hours and never see another human. Evidence they'd been there, sure, like excavations and drainage structures and little dams, but no presence of them except occasional moving cars or machinery far away up on the surface, sighted in passing from odd low angles. Everything we found had an element of mystery to it, in that world. It was uninterpreted. It had grown woolly and feral since its last human contact: old stone bridges had collapsed, carefully bulldozed slopes had turned into tangly thickets of honeysuckle, discarded chunks of metal had rusted into unrecognizable shapes, old bottles poked up out of the dirt and seemed to have been lost from a Spanish galleon (even if on closer inspection they said 7-UP). Up above in the world we'd stepped out of, every place was planned out by some human mind to have one interpretation, more or less: House. Store. Gas station. But here, often not fifty yards from that world, everything we looked at was an infinite matryoshka of interpretations, bug on grass blade on dirt in forest, each with their universe of meanings, and the minds that devised the signposted and house-numbered boxes up on the surface seemed impossibly small, because here was a place with its own intelligence, one that genially declined to be subsumed by mine.

The trouble was, having had these encounters that were, I now believe, of fundamentally the same nature as the experiences of a devout Christian in church, I had no idea they could be understood—might even best be understood—in any way you could call religious. My father taught biology and chemistry for eleven years. His father was a career high school science teacher. My mom's father was a tenured professor of general science for his whole career. Within my milieu it was conceded that religions exist, and they probably (maybe) have some kind of validity to deal with some nebulously defined sphere of human experience. But anything not clearly labeled *religion* was felt to be quite obviously in science's exclusive domain. I took a high school bio class and learned a few more things to

appreciate while on a creekwalk, but I never learned a thing about *why* I appreciated them or, worse still, what that appreciation might *mean*.

I did catch occasional glimpses of another way of seeing things. I was an all-devouring reader and somewhere found a copy of John (Fire) Lame Deer's *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*. Lame Deer's description of a spirit quest made a strong enough impression on me that even though I haven't reread the book since I was probably eleven years old, I still remember his four hot days, with no food in the dry red dirt, with the quality of a legend or a bedtime story. But like when I pushed through a book on string theory as a teenager, I read Lame Deer's book when I was too young to really digest it. His story became just a story, something with a tenuous connection to "the real world" perhaps, but certainly not to *my* real life. In my real life religion was what we did at church. And since what I did at church was basically to wait for church to be over, the word *religion* came to have no useful meaning at all for me.

Nonetheless, whatever it was, it seemed important to a lot of people, so I tried to come up with a definition that felt right. While I didn't have much luck with that, I did burn through a whole stack of bad ones. First I redefined it during catechism class as a thing that stresses me out because I have to make up some stuff about how Jesus makes me feel, even though I've never met the guy, and then tell it to a hundred people and try to make everyone believe it, even myself. In high school, as I learned about the world, I redefined it again, without being aware of it at the time, as a bundle of just-so stories that had all been conclusively disproven, but that I still had to tell people I believed in—in a metaphorical sense, whatever that might mean—or I would go to hell one day. When I left home for college, it took very little time for me to come into contact with atheists, enough of them (for the first time in my life) that I had to take them seriously, and very quickly the fragile wall I'd built around that house-of-cards definition came cascading down<sup>2</sup> under the weight of clear rationality; I redefined *religion* again as a mass delusion that people buy into because their parents told them to and they're too afraid of Hell to give the matter a second thought. And at that point I shed Christianity and just dropped the matter entirely. Poor religion. It never stood a chance.

It certainly didn't help that Christianity, as I learned it from every source I encountered, was all about escape. Its overriding goal, the direction all its theol-

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<sup>2</sup> See, if you care to, my lamentable post "I Broke It", Dec. 29, 2007.

ogy pointed, was to get you off this vale of tears, this wretched space rock, and into heaven where you belonged. Sure there was a little more to it, but that stuff was minor details; the important thing was the Earth is a shitty place and you should be focusing on making sure you go to Heaven once you're done here, instead of an even shittier place. Now, I had no problem with going to Heaven, although it sounded a little quiet and I might get tired of all the lyre music. But getting there wasn't really a goal that motivated me. As I understood it, all I had to do was say out loud that I believed in Jesus, and I was set, so it really didn't seem like that big a deal to focus on when there were plenty of interesting things happening down on Earth. And all this trash-talking of the Earth really put me off. I happened to really like the Earth. It was a great home, very comfortable. Summer evenings by a Canadian lake, particularly, were about as good as anything I figured Heaven could provide, as were snow days when instead of going to school I could walk through an ice-coated world to the Graeter's up the street and get an ice cream cone. Why was everyone in such a hurry to get to Heaven? It seemed frankly suicidal and unhealthy to me. And anyhow I noticed that even the most faithful Christians I knew hadn't carried out the logic of their creed to its inevitable conclusion and jumped off a cliff. That was all the proof I needed that people didn't *really* believe that strongly in Heaven, or at least figured it probably wasn't *quite* all it was cracked up to be.

I'm no expert on Christian sects. I imagine there are some out there whose understanding of the relation between Earthly life and the Hereafter is more coherent and healthy. But the Christianity that was presented to me amounted to an offer of escape from the place I loved the most, and it was singularly uninspiring to me. The process of casting it off was traumatic, but mostly because I had to make sure I was *really* sure I didn't believe Hell existed before I made a decision that would otherwise get me sent there, and also because of all the other people who cared about me and still thought there *was* a Hell and I was now headed there. But I cleared those hurdles, along an utterly typical just-got-to-college trajectory, and when I found myself free of the constant cognitive dissonance and fear of divine eternal retribution, I found also that I didn't miss a single amen of it, and I never looked back.

## You Can't Get There from Here

When you grow up, you can't just spend all your time creekwalking and catching frogs. You have to do serious things. Which was why I was at college in the first place, two and a half Midwestern states away from where I grew up.

I was never entirely clear what I was doing there. Ostensibly I was there to get a liberal arts degree of some sort, preparatory to getting a relevant job where I could parlay that degree into a higher salary. But I was a sufficiently iconoclastic teenager that I didn't really see things panning out that way for me. I already disbelieved to some extent in the idea that pursuit of money, and the comfort thereby attained, should be a primary pursuit of my life. Barring a brief obsession with cool watches, expensive gizmos never held any appeal for me; I was the kid who had never once played a console video game, and I believe I even lobbied my mom *against* us getting cable when I was fourteen. There were a lot of things I knew I didn't want: and college seemed like the most effective way for me to get them anyhow. But it also seemed like it held promise as a way for me to get what I really did want. The problem was, I didn't know what it *was* that I really wanted. The only thing I think I could've told you positively, back in those days, that I wanted, was to go out exploring—a goal I'd held at least since eighth grade, when I went on a class trip to a military museum where they had a make-your-own-dog-tags machine and I made mine say

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"WANDERER"

(Yes, I was already using that pseudonym back then.)

By the time I was accepted to college the strength of that goal had waxed enough that I mooted the idea of taking a year's deferment to travel the country and figure out what *else* I wanted out of life. But mine was always a timid and permission-seeking iconoclasm, and when an uncle of mine told me, with the authority of having been that young once, that I'd probably just dink around all year, maybe never even get out of Ohio, and end up a year older and no wiser about my true motivations, I assumed he was right and dropped the matter. One of my weaknesses has always been to fear making mistakes so much that I let others have all the fun making them. Maybe he was right, but I still regret not pressing the

point, because years down the line when I did finally put my thumb out beside that first highway in Russia, I started learning a slew of lessons that college never taught me—and if I'd *started* with those lessons, I might have realized sooner that what I wanted besides wandering, wanted way down deep, had always been, in so doing, to find a way home.

By that, of course, I don't mean that my subconscious wanted me to set aside all my adolescent rebelliousness and see the merits of living in a nice picket-fence house and holding down a career with benefits. My subconscious and conscious mind, as far as I can tell, are equally revolted by that prospect. But I also don't mean just a homestead somewhere on a forty-acre farm with a woodstove cozily burning away all winter. For a long time I did believe that was all I wanted. But on closer examination, it's almost the same exact dream, with the "modern" color palette swapped out for "rustic". It only speaks to the material details of life. The change I wanted, I came to realize, was on a more fundamental level. I wanted to find my way back into a healthy, living relationship with the Earth. There were only two troubles with that pretty phrase: I had no idea what it meant in real-life terms, and I had no idea how to achieve it.

And so, inevitably, I found my way to the anthropology department. If I didn't know how to define "healthy relationship with the Earth", I was pretty sure I could at least recognize it when I saw it. And I saw it in indigenous cultures all over the world. Wherever people lived directly from the land, where their food didn't get to them by way of a global logistics chain but came straight from the Earth, respecting its limits—from what I read in my introductory class, their cultures were the kind of healthy I knew had to exist somewhere. I pitched myself into studying their lifeways. If I learned enough about them, I should be able to work my way backward until I could find a path there from my own fallen world, with its disjointed and dysfunctional relationship to the cycles and capacities of nature.

Anthropologists—or to be more specific, that moiety of anthropologists known as ethnologists—are a strange tribe. One and all, they come to the study of human cultures because they have some fascination with the way people live. Imagine this: on the Indonesian island of Bali, in small villages on the full and new moons, a witch comes into town. More precisely it is one of the village's inhabitants, wearing a costume—a hideous mask with a tongue lolling out to the knees, between a pair of black-and-white-striped breasts that hang down just as far,

and disgusting five-inch fingernails. Her name is Rangda. She shrieks her way into the village and challenges all the men to defend it against her. This, it would seem, shouldn't take much trouble, because the men come out in force bearing their wavy-bladed *kris* daggers, but Rangda's witchery is equal to the challenge, and she psychically repels them as they approach her. In time she is able even to force the men to turn their own daggers back on themselves. Only the protector of the village is finally able to turn the tide: Barong, a great lion, a figure carried by two men, who revives defenders who have fallen over and gives them strength until they can force Rangda out of the village. That, at least, is how it usually goes, though the outcome is never certain and sometimes Rangda wins, bringing disaster to the town. In all cases the men are spent at the end and must take a whole day to recover.<sup>3</sup> To many people, this is just a curious and exotic tale, and after hearing it they can go on with their lives. To some, it has an electrifying effect, and sets them wondering: What kind of lives do these people live, so different from my own, in which a drama like this makes sense? What do they believe? What are their minds like? How can humans be so alike in some ways, and yet in others so different that we can only say that they live in different worlds? The people who find they must seek out answers to these questions are the ones who become anthropologists.

Yet despite that driving curiosity, many or most anthropologists will always find that no matter how close they get to answering their questions, they must always stop short. Because anthropology is, after all, a science: and not only that, but a science with an inferiority complex, long on observations and short on hypotheses, derided by practitioners of physics and biology as a lowly humanities field in an indecorous masquerade. Thus an ethnologist who does fieldwork in some far-off land will come home spilling with stories of awe and wonder, but when it comes time to write about them, must channelize these observations into detached, scientific writing. The ideal here is that the other culture is approached as an academic matter, and the researcher acts as a neutral eye. People who wonder how Rangda can ward off a whole crowd of fit young men must at some level hunger to inhabit a radically different mind. They are novelists and actors at heart, so fascinated with other people that they must on some level become those people. They have selves that are expansive and will happily encompass other lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Wolff, Robert. *Original Wisdom*, pp. 25–29. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2001.

Such people, with such protean creativity, we need in this world. These people are then trained to observe other cultures with none but the least involvement from their starving souls, and they come back after a year of fieldwork on some far distant island trying to convince themselves and their faculty that they are entirely unchanged by the experience. Jung wrote that “[t]he analyst and his patient may set out by agreeing to deal with a chosen problem in an impersonal and objective manner; but once they are engaged, their whole personalities are involved in their discussion.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise an understanding of another culture can only be reached when approached as a whole person. But this is something that ethnology is loath to permit. It must earn that *-ology*.

Or to put it more simply, it's fine to learn about other cultures, as long as you don't start believing what they say. And because many ethnologists won't permit themselves the luxury of giving any credit to the magic behind the scenes, they begin, on some level, to suspect that the people they're studying don't either. The natives may say they believe in magic, indeed that “the performance of magical rites and the utterance of magical words are indispensable for the success of the enterprise in all its phases,”<sup>5</sup> but don't they really, deep down, have the same Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD) mind as me? John Michael Greer relates a bizarre and symptomatic anecdote from his college days, corroborated by my own experiences, in which a T.A. spends the whole lecture relating various theories about why religions exist among all the peoples of the world, but leaves out what Greer felt to be the most obvious possibility—that people have what they understand as spiritual experiences sometimes, as polls consistently report they do, even in industrial countries.<sup>6</sup> In my classes, the theory with the most currency seemed to be that religions serve to reinforce social cohesion by demanding sacrifice from everyone to prove loyalty to the group, a viewpoint alive and well in the first master's thesis on Barong and Rangda that I found, which introduces that transcendent ritual with the surpassingly bloodless words, “Rituals are structured and framed within a ceremony. Groups use

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<sup>4</sup> Jung, Carl. *Man and His Symbols*, p. 45. New York, N.Y.: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1964.

<sup>5</sup> Frazer, Sir James G. Preface, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, p. 4. By Bronisław Malinowski. Web: Wolne Lektury,

[wolnelektury.pl/media/book/pdf/argonauts-of-the-western-pacific.pdf](http://wolnelektury.pl/media/book/pdf/argonauts-of-the-western-pacific.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Greer, John Michael. “The Changing of the Gods”. *The Well of Galabes* (blog), Feb. 22, 2015, [www.ecosophia.net/blogs-and-essays/the-well-of-galabes/changing-of-the-gods/](http://www.ecosophia.net/blogs-and-essays/the-well-of-galabes/changing-of-the-gods/).

these sequenced actions to reinforce or regain social cohesion among members.”<sup>7</sup> Absent the possibility that people genuinely believe in nonhuman, intelligent entities, in spirits, Greer’s professor and some of mine reduce animistic (and even polytheistic and monotheistic) people worldwide to a shifty group of characters constantly keeping an eye out for disloyalty through disingenuous thought-policing.

Anthropology at its best, though, avoids this trap, and dispenses with the fantasy that the ethnologist should be, or even can, act as a dispassionate observer. Just as we don’t pretend we’ll get any literary value out of reading the Cliff’s Notes version of *Jane Eyre* instead of Brontë’s emotionally rich original, some anthropologists embrace the *anthropos* over the *logos* and let their humanities all hang out. What value I derived from my anthropology degree can in large part be put down to authors like these. In Anne Fadiman’s *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* I learned with the author that traditional Hmong really don’t harbor a suspicion deep down that epilepsy is a matter of a disarranged brain, and quite genuinely believe that seizures are incursions from the spirit world into someone who has the potential to be a medium. From Keith Basso’s *Wisdom Sits in Places*, I learned that in the minds of the Western Apache, their homeland’s landscape is woven with stories in practically every valley and cornfield, and that when they get too far from those stories, they start to “forget how to live right, forget how to be strong.”<sup>8</sup> Basso admitted to learning a few things himself from his ethnographic subjects, and was friends with them.

It was from writings like these that I learned one of the most important lessons I think I’ve managed to learn: that people who live in close relation to the Earth *don’t* think like a university professor. Their world is full of spirits and magic, more or less invariably. They understand the Earth on a physical, practical level—but that’s a surface over their more essential understanding of the world as a place inhabited by spirits, even primarily *made* of spirits. The Sng’oi of Malaysia

<sup>7</sup> Tafoya, Xóchitl Ysabela. “Ritualizing Barong and Rangda: Repercussions of Collaborative Field Experience in Karambitan, Bali.” Master’s thesis, Univ. of Maryland, 2009.  
[drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/9455/Tafoya\\_umd\\_0117N\\_10411.pdf](http://drum.lib.umd.edu/bitstream/handle/1903/9455/Tafoya_umd_0117N_10411.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Basso, Keith. *Wisdom Sits in Places*, p. 39, quoting Wilson Lavender. Albuquerque: Univ. of N.M. Press, 1996.

describe the world that Americans would call “real” as the “shadow world”, as opposed to the “real world”, which is visited each night in dreams.<sup>9</sup>

It didn’t surprise me, actually, that people living close to the land generally believed in the existence of supernatural entities. After all, basically all of my ancestors until no earlier than 1900 believed, to some degree, in a supernatural entity called God. It made sense that people whose relation to the land hasn’t been “improved” by tractors and modern agronomy also haven’t gotten the other half of the news that science brings, that “God is dead”. What did jangle me in my quest for the good life, though, was when I learned, another year or two in, that there might be a *causative* relation: believing in some kind of religion might be a *prerequisite* in order to live harmoniously with the Earth.

In my class on intentional communities, we read about dozens of utopian back-to-the-land movements, from small groups that are only remembered for having already-famous founders, through groups that met such success that they became entire standalone cultures, like the Amish and the Hutterites. And in looking for what makes a movement like that fold or endure, one of the only consistent predictive factors is whether the community is religiously based. The religious ones cohere. The secular ones, almost every time, gradually putter out as their members lose interest or get into arguments, or especially when the charismatic leader dies.

Up until I learned that, I figured more or less that religion was finally on its well-deserved downslope, ahead of an inevitable, more mature, secular age. I took the information of animism and other such superstition among hunter-gatherers in stride; naturally they would believe that, having never learned enough meteorology to figure out that rain dances are pointless, but if someone set up a high school for them, they’d soon be able to stop wasting their time. Yet if these American back-to-the-landers, raised in a post-Darwin, scientific-revolution world, couldn’t make a self-sufficient commune work without involving religion, it might not be quite so easy to get rid of it.

To learn that humans might, on some level, *require* religion was troubling. It meant one of two things: either humanity had a deep flaw way down in the main-frame code that condemned us to choose between harmonious stupidity and om-

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<sup>9</sup> Wolff, *op. cit.*, pp. 88–89.

nidestructive intelligence, or I was wrong and religions could be useful, even true, and I would do well to try to believe in one.

Unsurprisingly, I proceeded to live my everyday life as though the first possibility was the right one. But at the same time I decided, quietly, barely even telling myself, that I'd at least keep an eye out for some kind of religion—perhaps of a genus I'd never encountered, perhaps so different from religions I'd encountered that I wouldn't even recognize it by that name—that I might be able to believe in.

My experience with Christianity had already ensured it wasn't a possibility I was interested in further considering. To be sure, some of the back-to-the-land utopians I'd read about invoked Christian faith as their driving motive, suggesting there was a less world-despising strain available in its philosophy. But such approaches seemed to me like what you do if you have only a single coat, a light jacket inherited from your Spanish great-grandfather, and you now live in Minnesota and don't realize you can go find a more suitable one. Why use Christianity to get back to the Earth when there were other spiritual systems much better suited?

Yet some kind of indigenous nature spirituality was, if anything, intellectually even worse. The high school science classes that had done so much to dissolve Christianity for me had had the same effect on that kind of superstition, except more so. Mixing classic monotheism with science is one thing. That pursuit has a long history and many devoted proponents. There may be a lot of hardcore scientists and followers of scientism who will maintain that professing to believe in both science and God bespeaks a poor understanding of science or an irrational compartmentalization of the mind, but there are also a lot of scientists out there who do believe, from one angle or another, in the big-G God of Abraham, and a good number of them have gotten lucrative book deals from outfits like Zondervan to tell you just how it's possible to reconcile the two ideas. That is to say, if you're into zero or one divine entity, science and Western culture have got your back.

On the topic of any higher number, though, agreement, it would seem, is unanimous: the idea that there could be that many gods, or spirits, or whatever, is not only wrong but so wrong that no thinking person has seriously believed it for over a thousand years—*axiomatically* wrong, so that it's only a matter of time before any given atheist writer writes something like, “We all disbelieve in Santa

Claus, the tooth fairy, Zeus, and Odin. I simply go one god further and disbelieve in the Christian god.” To the most scientifically minded, monotheistic religion is still as annoying and persistent as the common cold, but *polytheism*, and even worse, *pantheism*—thank goodness those are plagues we’ve eradicated! (Except in backward, tribal parts of the world. Like, uh, most of India.)

Monotheism uninteresting and other-theism impossible, I was left, then, with no clear path to a spiritual relationship with the land, if indeed such a relationship was possible or even a coherent thing to want. And so I defaulted to trying to relate to the land in the same way as the only viable predecessors I figured I had: the hippies.

Taking the hippies as your role model in anything is a choice that should at the very least give you pause. The hippies undoubtedly accomplished some great, world-shaping things. Without them America might have stayed in Vietnam as long as it now has in Iraq, and we’d almost certainly have crappier music to look back on. Yet when you look at the back-to-the-land commune wing of their movement, it doesn’t take much digging to realize that rarely have so many people pursued a goal with so much enthusiasm and so completely failed to attain it. Of the innumerable communes founded in the ’60s and ’70s, a fraction of a percent remain. The inhabitants of the rest of them sold out back in the Reagan administration; even now they comprise the senior echelons of the corporate power they decried fifty years ago (and that lucky class of retirees who receive both Social Security and investment dividends—two checks a month signed by The Man).

What I learned in my intentional communities class seems to make it clear why those back-to-the-landers are all back from the land. I once argued<sup>10</sup> that it was because they were allergic to hard work, but I now realize I confused proximate and ultimate causes there. Those who believe their hard work is for a good cause will happily do a whole lifetime of hard work. But the hippies, for all their Indian gurus and Aquarian evolution-of-consciousness hype, by and large never really believed, deep down and indelibly, that living in harmony with the Earth was where it was at. Getting back to the land, rather, was mostly a way to get away from the mainstream culture—America in the ’60s: straitlaced to the degree of self-parody, racist, and warlike, all under a *Leave It to Beaver* gee-whiz innocent face: just read the sign.

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<sup>10</sup> In my post “Hard Work”, Jun. 4, 2017.



"And the sign said, 'Long-haired freaky people need not apply...' "<sup>11</sup>

And getting away from that is, really, a fine goal: it's just not the goal they had convinced themselves they were pursuing, preferring to imagine themselves less as escapists and more as Thoreauvian romantic ascetics. In time, maybe they even would have become those. The plot twist came when, a few years later, all the hippies who stayed in the cities instead, singing their songs and putting flowers in gun barrels, managed to actually take the helm of the behemoth ship of American culture and steer it onto their own heading. Once that happened, the prairie dogs out in the country began poking their heads up and deciding it was safe to come out now. And thus the vast Völkerwanderung that had poured across the countryside receded back to where it had come from.

Nevertheless, some few of them stayed—probably a testament to their sheer stubbornness (though even then, I've heard that the flagship of those communities, The Farm out in Tennessee, is showing signs of strain). More importantly, it

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<sup>11</sup> Via Wikimedia Commons:

[commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hippies\\_use\\_backdoor\\_\(4525843860\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hippies_use_backdoor_(4525843860).jpg)

seemed to me that the trail they had blazed was the only one available for me to follow if no spiritual route was available to me. And what the hippies left behind to mark their trail were books: *The Foxfire Book*, *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* (if Euell Gibbons wasn't a hippie, hippies certainly made him a bestseller), *The Good Life*, Ina May Gaskin's midwifery books, and shelves' worth of tinkering into the now-lost art of "appropriate technology". I tended to find not these old books but new ones on the same topics, like Sam Thayer's nonpareil books on wild edible plants, and one or two of the books on deer hide tanning that pop up reliably every couple years. These I would make serve as my Bible. The hippies had gone back to the land not through spiritual means but with good old-fashioned R&D, and I would tread the same path but figure out how not to make the same mistakes.

And so I went out hunting deer with my dad in West Virginia, and searching for wild leeks in the spring. One fall at home in Ohio I processed a huge batch of acorn flour. And I loved it. Shelling and grinding and leaching acorns, I was in my element, and that's still one of the most vivid autumns in my memory. And yet—my forays into wild edibles somehow never seemed to last long. I loved the land. I dreamed of eventually knowing it like a friend. But I couldn't manage to convince myself that it was actually okay to see it that way. Instead I kept lapsing back to seeing it as a warehouse to be harvested from, if admittedly a very pretty one. But this relationship felt dead, utilitarian, and soon, repelled by something in it that I couldn't yet describe, I would be back at the books or the computer, instead of out on a creekwalk or anything like one. I never felt like I was getting perceptibly closer to my real destiny; I was always off in the weeds on some unimportant side path.

That's a feeling I've known for much of my life. Living that way long enough, it'll dishearten a guy. I never took to drink or other drugs, but I've frittered away plenty enough life to consider myself addicted to a more modern vice, the hounding down of little scraps of disconnected information and stupid punch lines on the internet. (The title of a recent McSweeney's book comes forcibly to mind: *Keep Scrolling Till You Feel Something*.) Scientifically based malady, scientifically based drug: it's at least a neatly symmetrical bind.

## Indian Trails

If I was going to follow the hippie path of researching my way to harmony with the Earth, it was clear that I would need to learn a bioregionally appropriate way of life from the indisputable masters of bioregionalism: the native peoples of the land.

I took it as foundational from the very beginning that I should learn to grow my own food. My teenage and college-age reading into what's wrong with the Earth, from writers as disparate as Derrick Jensen and Wendell Berry, all seemed to agree on at least one main factor behind it all: growing food far from where it's eaten. So, like countless others before me, I started projecting my dreams onto the backdrop of a plot of land somewhere in the country, where my garden would grow. But how, specifically, would I grow it once I got there?

I may have flirted briefly with the possibility of organic agriculture, but it never got much purchase in my mind. In fact I really didn't want to get very close to *agriculture* of any kind, organic or not. My first countercultural readings, as a teenager who would believe almost anything as long as it was printed in a serif font and sounded a little like what I wanted to hear, had been in primitivism: the idea that humanity took a terrible wrong turn about ten thousand years ago, and it would be for the best if we tried to go back and live more like we did before then. The inciting incident is supposed to have been the creation of *agriculture*—from the Latin for 'field growing'. It's a nifty trick to cut down an entire field of random forbs and sedges to replace it with a sweeping vista all planted in some crop whose seeds you can eat. You can store up a lot of food that way. But you also reap a whole interesting crop of whirlwinds.

First you get unhealthy, because you're only eating grains, and that's not a way to be healthy. The archaeological record shows that after agriculture first appeared in the Fertile Crescent, people in the cultures that developed atop it began reaching adulthood six inches shorter, with weaker bones and more malnutrition.<sup>12</sup> Then you also get oppression, since storing of food allows controlling that food, which in turn leads to a culture getting stratified into the farmers and

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<sup>12</sup> Diamond, Jared. "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race". *Discover*, May 1, 1999. [www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/  
the-worst-mistake-in-the-history-of-the-human-race](http://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/the-worst-mistake-in-the-history-of-the-human-race)

the farmed-for.<sup>13</sup> Also you get environmental degradation: slowly but surely, the irrigation-heavy agriculture between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers salted the earth that it sprang from, and now the fertility of the crescent is measured in lonely palm trees.<sup>14</sup> Salinization isn't the only way to ruin cropland. Repeatedly tilling the land makes your topsoil wash away; soil in Iowa is in some places whole feet lower than before agriculture got a hold of it.<sup>15</sup> All told, agriculture came with enough bad sides that I wasn't interested in dirtying my hands in it.

This is an oversimplification. One of the classics of organic farming literature is *Farmers of Forty Centuries*, the 1911 book by agronomist F. H. King<sup>16</sup> that explained how Chinese and Japanese rice paddies had managed to stay fertile for over four thousand years and counting. Likewise the primitivist writings that led me to find condemnations of agriculture were oversimplified. They gave me a nice, clean answer to all the problems I saw facing the world—agriculture did it!—and a nice, clean path to travel, back to the Stone Age. The real world is much more complicated than single factors with single solutions, which is why this essay is forty-two thousand words long. But many of the broad strokes of the critique of agriculturally based civilizations still stood: tilling is still bad for topsoil and man still can't live very healthily on bread alone. So I was on the lookout for something to do on that imaginary plot of land besides grow row crops.

I didn't have to go far down the research path before I discovered a much more appealing way to work with the land: permaculture. Where American organic farming seems mostly to settle for doing less harm to the land, permaculture makes a goal of actively improving the fertility of the land. Permaculturists (“permies”) are always talking about building topsoil, adding natural fertility, sequestering carbon. The classic permaculture farm is a “food forest”, where the land is planted to mimic the ecosystem that would grow there without human intervention, except that many of the plants—from groundcover up to forest canopy—bear a crop that humans can eat, and other plants are there to support those plants, and others are there for distracting crop-eating animals or attracting game. Each farm has a different riotous, fractal complexity, springing from the

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<sup>13</sup> Quinn, Daniel. *Ishmael*. New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Diamond, Jared. *Collapse*, pp. 47–48. New York, N.Y.: Penguin, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> I read a vivid description once of the difference in height between an Iowa prairie remnant patch and the farms near it, but can't find it anywhere. If I do, I'll add it here.

<sup>16</sup> Now available for free through Project Gutenberg at [www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5350](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5350).

ideas of the permie running it and that person's understanding of tiny minutiae of microclimate, soil conformation, water drainage, and a galaxy of other things to pay attention to. To grow a farm that didn't need to be tilled and replanted every year, one where wild animals could not only live but thrive, one that did most of its own work—this was a kind of food-growing I could imagine getting into.

It seemed like a revolution and a revelation, but of course it wasn't really. Even the affable Australians who coined the word *permaculture*, Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, admit that very little of what permaculture proposes is new. It's just old wisdom that's been forgotten for a little while, and the word *permaculture* is useful for grouping it all together where people can find it and use it again. People styled "hunter-gatherers" and "nomads" have been using permaculture practices for thousands of years. The various native nations of what's now California, before the first Europeans came, had been "tending the wild" since time immemorial: walking through the forest, pruning low branches as they walked to improve the shade structure, intentionally planting useful trees in useful places, culling trees they couldn't use, and basically treating the entire rolling extent of California's forest lands as though it were an enormous garden that only needs replanting once a generation or so.<sup>17</sup> A permaculture farmer I know in northern Wisconsin has a garden plot that appears to float on top of the water, made of little artificial islands with food growing on them. He calls it the *chinampa* garden, and the technique is a direct reproduction of the Aztec way of growing food on lakes in what's now Mexico. He says *chinampas* are the most productive kind of food-growing arrangement ever invented. Outside of settlements and former settlements on the Amazon River you'll find mysterious patches of *terra preta*, 'dark soil', nearly black and extraordinarily fertile. It was created over millennia of supplementing the poor local soil with charcoal, ground-up broken pottery, and other ingredients not yet discovered. It makes beneficial microorganisms reproduce like crazy and has the incredible ability to generate more *terra preta* if you leave a good amount of it when you take some away to use as potting soil. Scientists do not fully understand its mysteries. It was invented by horticultural Ama-

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<sup>17</sup> Anderson, M. Kat. *Tending the Wild*, throughout. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of Calif. Press, 2005.

zonian rainforest dwellers, who would have been called the lowest and meanest of the human race by early Spanish missionaries.<sup>18</sup>

Maybe it's my anthropology training, but it seemed to me that if I wanted to learn about indigenous farming practices, the way to do it would be to actually learn from indigenous people. The trouble there was, I lived in Ohio, one of the first parts of this country that settlers pushed Natives out of. There are certainly some Shawnee and Miami people left, but most of them live in Oklahoma, and the ones who are still in Ohio aren't exactly all over the place. Having spent eighteen years growing up there, I had never knowingly met one. Even if I did find a local Miami who cared to talk to a random Cincinnatian city-boy such as me, and even if he knew a lot about traditional subsistence practices, the landscape of Ohio is so transformed since 1800 that anything he could teach me would likely be nigh unusable anyway.

Luckily, I had a simple solution: I didn't want to live in Ohio anyhow. Something about that transformed landscape<sup>19</sup>. I couldn't abide all the quadrilaterals. Not to mention the pathetic winters: maybe one or two decent snowfalls all season; two in every three Christmases entirely green. No, I was meant to be somewhere more northerly. My degree secured, I spent a year teaching English in Korea to make just enough money to settle my student debts. Then I finally lived my childhood dream: I spent a year and a half living from my backpack, hitchhiking from one city to another, first in Europe and then more broadly in America, eating like a gourmet or a starved raccoon from other people's trash, blowing from one city to the next searching for somewhere else to be from.

Once I got back to the U.S. I formed my master plan. Maybe it was because over the last sixteen months I'd spoken or tried to speak Korean, Thai, Lao, Khmer, Mongolian, Russian, German, Portuguese, Spanish, Catalan, French, Italian, and Welsh. I decided, now, that whenever I did find someplace where I wanted to put down roots, I would solidify that commitment by learning whatever language was spoken there before settlers came. In so doing I would achieve several things at once. For one thing I'd be consciously and specifically acting as a stick in the mud against the constant and harmful current in American culture that says the best place to be is somewhere else just down the road. If I wanted to live

<sup>18</sup> Mann, Charles. "1491". In *The Atlantic*, March 2002.

[www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/03/1491/302445/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/03/1491/302445/)

<sup>19</sup> See my post "Play Catch-Up", specifically the section Diagonal Walks, May 16, 2018.

well with the Earth, I had to start by living *with* the Earth, and that meant staying in one place, reaching my toes down into the soil, and letting them root out around me. By doing something as unfashionable and unmodern as sitting down and learning one of North America's famously knotty and thorny autochthonous languages in all its complexity, I'd convince myself that I could stay somewhere long enough to make it home, and show people around me that even the bits of the past that we imagine to be quite well buried are in fact still right there when you look, and have a lot to teach us.

Then, too, I wanted to learn about the history of the place I was in, the real, deep history, not just the last two hundred years or so since the first white people showed up and started cutting down all the trees and building military forts. Perhaps I wouldn't pick up history just from studying grammar patterns, but it seemed like I couldn't fail to pick up a good amount of it in whatever I would read while learning, not to mention from the people I would learn with.

And I wanted to make a gesture of reverse-colonialism: my ancestors' countrymen made yours learn English, and to take a small step toward making things right, I'll learn your language. It was interesting to me that when I mentioned my plan of learning Ojibwemowin to white people, many of them assumed that this was my main or sole reason for doing it. As if it were a form of penance. *Forgive me, father, for my ancestors have sinned.* — Memorize one hundred conjugations and you shall be absolved.

But I don't really find white guilt a useful motivator. Above and beyond all those other factors, I was moved by the sheer delight of learning the language itself. People who "aren't language people" ("Yeah, I took four years of Spanish in high school... all I remember is, 'Dawndeh estuh el banjo?'"') seem to imagine that learning another language is good for nothing but toil, all *amo, amas, amat, amamus* until you might as well be in a medieval scriptorium. But I've spent a fair deal of time with languages and I can say with confidence that they are utterly fascinating and any effort you put in is rewarded if you keep a curious and wondering mindset.

I was looking for spirits, perhaps—but only the kind you find peopling any language. The ghosts of speakers long departed. Take a close look at English. Whose original stroke of genius was it to take the word *spring*—which started out meaning just 'jump'—and apply it to a *spring*, where the water jumps up out of the ground, or to the *springtime*, when plants jump right up from seed? Who



decided to name a bright red bird after Catholic *cardinals* with their bright red vestments? Linguists are at a loss to explain why exactly English has so many words for how light plays off a reflective surface—*gleam*, *glare*, *glimmer*, *shimmer*, *sparkle*, *shine*—when most languages get by with one or two. It's not as if there's something specifically about the British Isles that should've made people unusually sensitive to reflectivity. So they'll say that it's just down to happenstance. To which I might say: why just happenstance? Some people in our linguistic lineage decided to maintain a lot of different words for scattering light, and who knows why, but the rest of us seem to have liked those words enough to have kept them alive for several hundred years, so why not own that act of creation and maintenance as one more peculiar thread in the peculiar tapestry of English?

Even when we know why some odd word arose—like how you can *eighty-six* something while cleaning your garage because short-order cooks in the '50s had a cryptic numerical code to communicate with waitstaff, in which 86 meant ‘we’re all out’<sup>20</sup>—it somehow only adds depth to what feels, if you pay attention to it, almost like what Jung and Lévy-Brühl called “mystical participation”<sup>21</sup>—the sense that you’re not the only one thinking your thoughts, but only, as it were,

<sup>20</sup> Adams, Cecil. *The Straight Dope*. New York, N.Y.: Ballantine, 1998. I have no page number for you because I gave away the book, but it has an index.

<sup>21</sup> Jung *op. cit.*, p. 7.

thinking them on behalf of a much larger consciousness. So even if Sapir and Whorf were wrong (as many of the more respected linguists now say)<sup>22</sup> and the words we use don't dictate the thoughts we're able to think—even if we can use any language equally well to formulate any thought—it seems beyond question, at least to me, that the language we use will at the very least give those thoughts a background of *flavor*, which can be disregarded by the most workmanlike communicators but is always there to taste if the poet in you cares to use your tongue for more than just talking.

And so, what might be there to discover in an indigenous language of North America, whose generations in bygone centuries led lives so different from the lives of the Anglo-Saxons who were, in the same centuries, busy using and passing on the words I'm currently writing? Those were the kind of spirits I was hoping to discover whenever I finally finished breezing from one place to another and found the one I wanted to call home.

## Spirit Peeks In

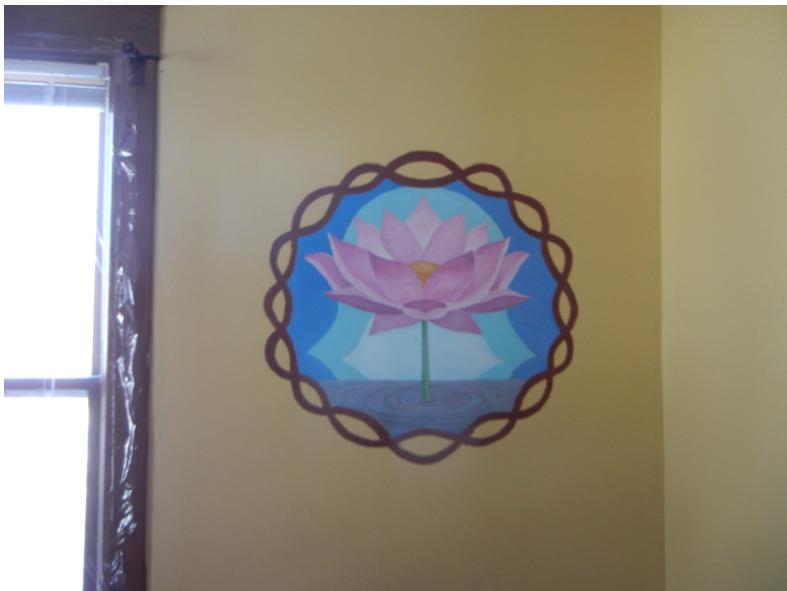
*"Now who you jivin' with that cosmil debris?"*

—Frank Zappa<sup>23</sup>

My first sight of Minneapolis was from the car of a jovial Ojibwe woman who had picked me up outside the city and brought me to the Phillips neighborhood, and my first experience of the Native community there was when she dropped me off outside the Hi-Lake liquor store, pointed to a guy, and said, "Look, there's an Ojibwe now! You can tell because he's got no butt!" I had heard good things about the city, and over the next few days it grabbed the heart of this gnarly vagabond. On the basis of little more than a nice bike ride around the city with an old college crush, an evening in one of the many fine South Minneapolis community houses, and a bookstore where the prominently displayed books were about how to forage wild edible plants, I moved there. I had seen enough to know the

<sup>22</sup> McWhorter, John. "4 Reasons to Learn a New Language" (TED talk), at 3:39. [www.ted.com/talks/john\\_mcwhorter\\_4\\_reasons\\_to\\_learn\\_a\\_new\\_language](http://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_4_reasons_to_learn_a_new_language). Also, yes, Sapir and Whorf didn't really hold this hypothesis themselves, but their names are well known in connection to it and serve as a peg to hang this particular hat on.

<sup>23</sup> Zappa, Frank. *Apostrophe ('')*, track "Cosmik Debris". Los Angeles: Warner Music Group (Ryko), 1995.



place felt right. I was as free of personal connections in town as a Swedish immigrant freshly arrived from Ellis Island. But like that Swede, I found I did know some people who could help me get situated after all. A college friend of mine recommended I call Erica, a college friend of hers who I'd never known. Erica was living in a community house, and one of the few firm convictions I held at the time was that, for however long I was going to live in a city, I wanted to live in community. I had barely been in Minneapolis three weeks and already it seemed things might be coming together.

The first time I visited Sprout House was during their weekly open-to-the-community morning meditation. I skipped the meditation that day because meditation smelled too much like woo-woo; I came to the breakfast afterwards instead. There was a painting of a lotus blossom on the wall, and one attendee was a guy sitting on the living room floor wearing a wire-frame pyramid on his head. He said it helped concentrate energy into him. I immediately began developing

misgivings. I've always been severely allergic to woo-woo. But the Sprouts clarified that going to meditation was entirely optional. Also, the pyramid-head guy didn't actually live there. (I only ever saw him one more time, in passing.) And I had to admit everyone there seemed like great people. So I moved in.

Before focusing on learning indigenous language and land practices, it was time for me to just get the hang of living in a community house. Sprout House had a fluctuating membership of eight to ten people spread among the four floors of a huge duplex, with similarly fluctuating food-share systems and chore rotations. Part of a natural lifeway was the extended family unit. This was a pretty good facsimile of that arrangement, and also a decent approximation of some of the hippie communes, in case I wanted to learn experientially where they went wrong. Mostly, though, it was a nice place to live, where I had good friends just in the next room and the rent was cheap.

During the time I'd spent hitchhiking around the continent, I'd comfortably put the question of spiritual matters on the back burner, and besides the odd frisson of otherworldliness I got when entering, say, Notre Dame Cathedral, it seemed those questions were content not to raise themselves. But after a short while at Sprout House, I noticed that everyone but me, in some way or another, seemed to be seeking some kind of spiritual understanding of the world. Much of the house was Buddhists, and they had close ties to a local meditation center that people from the neighborhood attended on Sunday mornings just like church. One housemate, Sucharit, practiced a spinoff of Hinduism that he'd picked up back home in India called *Ānanda Mārga*, and would fill the house with the sound of his harmonium as he chanted *Bābā nām kevalam*.

And what's more, none of them seemed actively crazy or ignorant. Sucharit had a doctorate in something like neurology, and was so unafraid of letting science get a hold of his religion that he was doing a research project involving brain scans of meditating people. Nobody tried to tell me that the Buddha created the Earth in seven days, or that if I didn't meditate regularly I would go to Buddhist Hell. They just told me that meditating was a good way to get in touch with deeper parts of your being and different ways of understanding the world. They all had different ways of explaining what these deeper parts were—Emily might say they were mostly the subconscious; Makai might call the same thing the spirit; Sucharit called it all different aspects of *Bābā*, the one spirit or principle that underlies and pervades the universe. But all the different words they used seemed

congruent, and none of them asked me to believe things that were provably false. And thus, with a mix of thrill and alarm, I realized there might be something out there called a religion that I could actually take seriously.

So I took some tentative steps into the water. I started meditating—very irregularly—and I even got something out of the experiment, though I would've been hard pressed to tell you what. Somewhere I found a copy of the *Tao Te Ching*, and found that it was not a bundle of dubious just-so stories, but a collection of levelheaded and deeply observant meditations on why the world is the way it is, and what we can do about that. Ideas like the *Tao*'s “Obedience to law is the dry husk of loyalty and good faith”<sup>24</sup> and the Buddha's “Attachment is the root of suffering”,<sup>25</sup> once I understood them, explained a lot of life's joys and pains—in a way I'd never seen science attempt. It was almost, I thought, as if religions didn't set out to be scientifically accurate geobiological histories. Perhaps, I thought, they had entirely different goals from the very beginning. *And a million imaginary theologians shouted, “Duh!”* I revised my definition of *religion* to allow that some of them were in fact solid moral frameworks for navigating life.

This, in a way, solved two problems at once for me. On the one hand, it made believing in a religion at least admissible for me to consider, now that I'd found some things called religions that had helpful lessons and that I couldn't dismiss out of hand. On the other, it put me within sight of a bridge, between taking nature as a guide on one hand, and on the other our puny human understanding of what nature is actually like.

I'd always gotten my morality from nature, or at least fancied that I had. To my mind, it was the only possible legitimate source for moral guidance. Even as a nominally Christian child, I discounted the Ten Commandments from the beginning. Honor thy mother and father. What if thy father be a wife-beating heroin junkie? But in nature all morality is decided on a case-by-case basis. Any decision or action is, at its most natural, like a patch of moss that happened to grow a certain way, from a tree that happened to grow on a nurse log, which happened to fall a certain amount of time ago, in a forest that happened to grow on a rainy coast, which happened to form by tectonic motion a certain number of eons in the

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<sup>24</sup> Le Guin, Ursula K. (trans.). *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, ch. 38. Boulder, Colo.: Shambhala, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Bodhipaksa. ““The root of suffering is attachment.”” *Fake Buddha Quotes*, March 11, 2013, [fakebuddhaquotes.com/the-root-of-suffering-is-attachment/](http://fakebuddhaquotes.com/the-root-of-suffering-is-attachment/). (N.B.: despite the blog's name, the quote is genuine; the post serves to authenticate its provenance.)

past. Nothing is not contingent; no decision can be made without context, and the context for any decision is the entire universe. Yet without benefit of hard-and-fast rules, the moss is doing just what it should be doing. (As Lao Tzu would say, “Not one of the ten thousand things / fails to hold the Way sacred / or to obey its power.”)<sup>26</sup>

The trouble is that once you bring human consciousness into the picture, suddenly instead of just doing what nature would have you do, like any woodpecker does without thinking, your human brain starts going, and you get to wondering what exactly it is that nature would have you do—and by the time you wonder that, it’s too late to just *know*. Consciousness is neat and I’m quite happy to have it, but sometimes knowing a lot of things really gets in the way of knowing *one* thing. And so, a religion: a collection of the best wisdom from hundreds of years of people, from their most vivid moments of watching the ten thousand things, often with the acuity of Hafiz or Buddha, and it’s all there for you to fall back on at those times when you haven’t had your morning coffee yet and teasing out the correct decision from a whole universe of causes and effects just feels a little beyond you. It seemed, I had to admit, like something I could get into.

At the same time, it didn’t escape me that the religions I’d taken a shine to so far were exactly the ones that many people would insist are in fact only philosophies. On the topic of spirits, the supernatural—in the incarnations I’d met, these religions were silent. Or to the extent that they really *were* religions rather than philosophies, it was because their adherents took their wisdom to have bearing on dealings from another plane of existence besides the old physical world: if not a plane inhabited by legions of spirits, then at least one where there dwelt an emergent human “soul”, not definable or predictable just in terms of brain firings, its own thing that possibly even had priority over the physical body and mind.

And, I noted, those supernatural trappings were absent almost exclusively in the Euro-American sphere’s secularized, watered-down versions of these religions. In their native homes, Buddhism and Taoism can be found with pantheons of spirits just as surely as Hinduism and Shinto can. The Dalai Lama talks matter-of-factly about the possibility that he’ll choose to reincarnate in India instead of Tibet next lifetime around. So though every religion has its body of moral lore, it always seems to come accompanied by its strange bedfellows: spirits, souls,

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<sup>26</sup> Le Guin *op cit.*, ch. 51.

gods. These are the entities we usually figure are the real core of any religion. And yet they must be some kind of mistake.

But I couldn't seem to find any satisfying morality that didn't bring in at least a little of the supernatural. The devising of such a thing had been attempted, certainly. Social Darwinism, for example, much loved in the Gilded Age by rich sociopaths who liked its justification of both their richness (survival) and their sociopathy (being the fittest). Or today's secular humanism, which pays as little regard to non-humans as the name suggests, in its breakneck quest for a middle-class lifestyle for everyone on Earth—and by so doing manages to eat itself by implicitly sanctioning the environmental destruction necessary to that goal, thus also the destruction of the very humans it professes to help, because they had the inadvisable habit of depending on functioning ecosystems to live. Even the better ones—the Tao's philosophy, secular Buddhism—seemed more helpful the more you started embracing their metaphysical aspects. Buddhism can be just about training your brain, but it becomes much more compelling if you take its views on reincarnation to heart. Mark Nunberg, a Buddhist teacher (on a meditation retreat that I was eventually persuaded to go on), spoke about reincarnation to me and a group of twenty-odd Twin Cities liberals, and closed his thoughts on the matter with the reflection that it doesn't matter so much whether it's *actually* true, so long as you get some benefit out of *behaving* as though it were true. If your belief system encourages people to at least *imagine* they believe a certain thing about the hereafter, I'd say it's begun crossing the line from philosophical to spiritual in nature.

Which is not to say (I hasten to add) that involving one or more divine powers automatically makes any moral system a good one. Far from it. I don't think we have to catalog the ways in which Christianity, for instance, which rather makes a point of being more spiritual than rational-philosophical, has been used as the reason to exile, enslave, or kill not just individuals but entire continents full of people. In this country, Christianity is the religion you'll most often hear talked about in that respect—since it's "our own" religion and we feel more comfortable criticizing it—but elsewhere Islam is plenty well-known to be an excuse for enormities against women in Saudi Arabia and holy wars far and wide, and even Hinduism comes dragging its own baggage of *sati* (widow-burning) and at least countenancing the development of the caste system. Tim Minchin fields Buddhism:

Somewhere in your house, I'd be willing to bet  
There's a picture of that grinning hippie from Tibet—  
The Dalai Lama  
He's a lovely, funny fella, he gives soundbites galore  
But let's not forget that back in Tibet  
Those funky monks used to dick the poor (yeah)<sup>27</sup>

—alluding to the traditional serfdom there before China took over, in which monasteries (and other parties, like aristocrats) could require a family to send them one laborer per day year-round.<sup>28</sup> In fact, finding human societies with what I would call a really commendable set of ethics, at least in the contemporary world, is a tall order, whether their ethical code involves anything supernatural or not.

But I did, I reckoned, have some justification in considering small, close-to-the-land, tribal communities to be at least somewhat better than other human arrangements. Of course when we consider ecology a part of ethics, as we must, these cultures had sterling records; they had in most cases coexisted with their landbases for thousands of years, sometimes tens of thousands (in the case of the southern African Bushmen cultures or the Australian Aborigines), without degrading it, a track record not claimable by Europeans or middle-Easterners, to say nothing of Euro-Americans. Socially, too, they had enough respect for egalitarianism and democratic decisionmaking that the framers of the U.S. constitution took inspiration from the Iroquois Federation's success,<sup>29</sup> and their quality of life was high enough that not only escaped slaves but a large number of chafing white colonists' children escaped early American towns to go live with the Natives. Those escapees, even white ones, had to be tied up to be returned to the settler towns, while Indians brought to live among whites always left at their first opportunity.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Minchin, Tim. "The Fence", *Tim Minchin and the Heritage Orchestra* (DVD). Melbourne, Australia: Laughing Stock Productions, 2011, or let's not kid ourselves, just watch it on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVGErc6Qqdoc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVGErc6Qqdoc).

<sup>28</sup> Goldstein, Melvyn. "When Brothers Share a Wife". *Natural History*, pp. 39–48. Amer. Mus. of Natural Hist., 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Loewen, Rob. *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, p. 103. New York, N.Y.: The New Press, 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Loewen *op. cit.*, pp. 101–104.

And these cultures I looked up to, one and all, had an understanding that the physical world was not all there is—that there were *spirits* everywhere. I had come far enough to accept that very philosophical, materialistic kinds of religion could be useful, and “useful” was as good a definition of “true” as I could use for such systems. If religions both worldwide and tribal all seemed to find value in believing the world was inhabited by “spirits”, might it be worth looking further into this matter of spirits, in case that, too, might have something for me to learn that I hadn’t suspected?

## Stranger in a Strange Enclave

Sprout House was surrounded on all sides by Ojibwe people and history. To the east was Little Earth, a housing project for urban Indians; to the south the Red Lake reservation’s embassy; to the west an Anishinaabe elders’ home;<sup>31</sup> and to the north the Minneapolis American Indian Center (MAIC), the Many Rivers housing development, Powwow Grounds Coffee, All My Relations Gallery, the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe offices, and Ancient Traders Market, all strung along Franklin Avenue, the crucible in which the American Indian Movement coalesced in 1968.

Yet it took me a long time to actually start talking to any Ojibwe people. I read about them, sure; I learned about the central role of wild rice in their food economy, the seasonal rounds they made each year from sugarbush to winter hunting camp. Talking with the same guy who grows his food on a *chinampa*, I learned that long ago, before “the cutover” when the entire Northwoods was logged, you could still see visual proof that the Anishinaabeg had tended the forest like a garden: anomalous clusters of pine clumped amid the mixed hardwood forest, marking former village sites that got taken over by pines once the people were forced out of them, contrasting against the rest of the forest where stone pines, oaks, and maples, among others, showed how carefully they cultivated their favorite trees. All fascinating facts. But I wanted to learn this stuff straight from the people themselves, not secondhand from white people and white peo-

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<sup>31</sup> I use the terms *Ojibwe* and *Anishinaabe* more or less interchangeably, as do Ojibwe people I know. Likewise, in referring to the language, *Ojibwemowin* and *Anishinaabemowin* are equivalent.

ple's books. I wanted to start learning the language, like I'd decided I would before I came. And I wasn't doing any of that yet.

The problem was simple: I didn't know any Ojibwe people. Our neighborhoods occupied nearly the same geographical area. But I was part of the very recent wave of middle-class young people returning to the inner city for the cheap rent prices—let's put it bluntly: gentrifiers—and they were part of a totally different neighborhood. In *The City & the City*, China Miéville invents two cities, Beszel and Ul Qoma, that are geographically shuffled together, but distinguished by language, style of dress, even gait; showing any conscious awareness whatsoever of the city you're not currently in is punishable by mysterious, peremptorily absolute measures.<sup>32</sup> When I read that book after living in South Minneapolis, it felt awfully familiar. I didn't risk getting disappeared if I tried to start a conversation with someone from Little Earth, but what could I possibly ask them? "So, you're Indian, huh?" I kept to myself on the sidewalks.

But once I'd lived in Minneapolis nearly two years, I finally decided it was time to get over that. So I looked around, and eventually through a housemate I found a flyer for an Ojibwe language table at MAIC. I grabbed a binder and a notebook and one afternoon I walked through MAIC's big wooden doors into a different place, Minneapolis yet not Minneapolis, not quite the city I'd been living in for the last couple years.

It might be just as well that before I moved to Minneapolis, I spent a year and a half being a stranger in a series of strange places. I had spent several days at an anarchist squat in Barcelona<sup>33</sup>, on the recommendation of some guy on the street in Munich (I got in by simply knocking on the front door). I had stayed overnight<sup>34</sup> with a family a few hours west of Moscow when the father gave me a ride and then invited me to stay over and have borscht so I wouldn't have to camp out. I had stayed a week in a small town near the Gulf Coast of Mexico because I got dropped off there while hitching elsewhere, and a guy shouted to me in English before I made it back to the highway from the internet cafe. So it wasn't an unfamiliar feeling when I walked into MAIC's lobby, redolent with the vibrations of dozens or hundreds of powwows gone by, and found my way into a room where I was the only non-Ojibwe person.

<sup>32</sup> Miéville, China. *The City & the City*. New York, N.Y.: Del Rey, 2010.

<sup>33</sup> My post "Let Me Tell You a Story: Barcelona", Jan. 24, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> And my post "You Were Wrong", Sep. 21, 2012.

A funny thing happened then: nothing in particular. I nervously introduced myself, making sure to mention I'm not Ojibwe. Someone asked, out of curiosity, how I came to be there, and I told a little of my story, and I sat down. And then the teacher passed around some handouts about animate-intransitive verbs, and we all buckled in to learn some Ojibwemowin: a rich, rambling tongue full of mellifluous polysyllables, heritage of a people who had kept it alive through four centuries of dealing with Euro-American culture and were doing their damnedest to keep it alive for another four and more besides. There were five or ten of us, and we talked a little during breaks or when we practiced verbs on each other, and after an hour or so we all went home.

I didn't really make any friends that day because I was far too busy being anxious; I just listened and learned. If nothing else, I could certainly pay attention to grammar patterns. I had done a little preliminary studying—actually I had scoured Louise Erdrich's bookstore for language textbooks, and devoured all I could from them—and finally hearing these words come off the page and into the air was something like magic for this hopeless language geek. I usually found myself a little ahead of the class as far as actual knowledge of grammar (being probably the only person in the classroom with a college linguistics concentration), but much of the value in coming wasn't in learning new patterns but in actually using them, face to face, with other human beings. None of us were fluent, usually including even the teacher. But we were all there and earnestly trying, and we all kept coming back all on our own accord, because we loved it.

Pretty soon I started recognizing faces and making friends. I also heard about other events—ceremonies, powwows—and went to them to learn more. Here and there I picked up bits of traditions. I learned that it's standard to offer tobacco before asking for something, whether spiritual teachings from a human or a basketful of raspberries from the Earth. I learned that tobacco is one of the four sacred medicines, with cedar, sweetgrass, and sage. I heard about people holding sweat lodges and other ceremonies I'd never heard of. It all hinted at a deep well of very lived-in practices, at first alien to me with its strange wood-and-stone rituals, yet soon somehow very homely. People talked now and then about spirits. One evening we paused learning the language for a moment to talk about possible experiences people had had with the Memegwesiwag, little hairy-faced creatures that live in the banks of rivers and lakes and come out to make friends with children and occasionally move your things around while you're not look-

ing. Some of what I learned puzzled me. Some of it seemed instantly obvious. All of it gave me a strange feeling of living inside of myths. On the one hand, I was in a ground-floor room in the American Indian Center with plate-glass doors and a whiteboard up front. On the other hand, people were talking matter-of-factly about spirits like Bagwaji-inini, the ‘wild man’, sometimes translated as Bigfoot, as though they were simply talking about old friends they sometimes visited when they went out to the forest. If a mainstream American had told me the same things, I would have suspected schizophrenia. But these day-to-day stories tied in with a far-reaching body of myth, and something made me figure that they weren’t to be understood in quite the same way as when my childhood neighbor tried to convince my dad that the C.I.A. had sent fighter jets over the neighborhood park to shoot down his kite because it had a design that looked a little like the Japanese flag. This seemed, possibly, to be something subtler and deeper. Despite myself, I wanted to learn more.

In fact I wanted to learn more about all of it. I wanted to go take part in all the rituals, learn from all the elders, hunt with all the hunters and go gather herbs with all the medicine keepers. And so I had to confront something that I had known, at some level, since I came up with the idea to learn any native language. I wasn’t just doing this because I wanted to learn land practices, or even because I wanted to find out what philosophical lessons I might be able to glean from acquaintance with a very different and very land-centered culture. Actually, I was there because I suspected I might be on the track of a way to fill the vast sucking hole I felt where my own culture was supposed to be.

I’ve quoted Wendell Berry before to explain this, and I’ll quote him again:

One of the peculiarities of the white race’s presence in America is how little intention has been applied to it. As a people, wherever we have been, we have never really intended to be. The continent is said to have been discovered by an Italian who was on his way to India. The earliest explorers were looking for gold, which was, after an early streak of luck in Mexico, always somewhere farther on.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America*, p. 5. Berkeley, Calif.: Counterpoint, 1996 (1977).

Which is to say, very few new arrivals to America have actually learned to be American, in any sense that matters. We have never felt comfortable where we are, always itching to move on to the next place. Those who buck this trend and dare to envision that the land they're on may be used by generations of their descendants are looked on with suspicion; they are "rednecks" or "hillbillies" or "hayseeds". All the more ironic, because those ignorant hicks were responsible for some of the only truly American flowerings of culture to emerge among the descendants of newcomers to this continent. Think of Huck Finn; think of black Baptist gospel choirs. But of course, Americans have seldom realized that even though we fancy our country something new under the sun, where we have refined, high-octane freedom and anything goes, what we actually consider culturally acceptable is a pretty narrow range of possible human experience defined by what European culture considered acceptable back in the days it was emitting its overflow population onto our shores. Even art so benignly outside those norms as Twain and gospel still has an aura of the transgressive about it.

On one side of my family I am in fact descended from a line of West Virginia hillbillies, dating back not just to when it was still Virginia but to before the Revolutionary War, even to the *Mayflower*. Some of them probably even felt unselfconsciously at home in their hollers in the mountains, their hides crusted with Appalachian clay just the way they wanted. But though I spent my summers in the hills and waters of Doddridge County as a kid, I didn't grow up there, and my kin there are mostly strangers to me: the chain has been broken. Just as it has been for increasing numbers of the children of the few backwaters in the U.S. where people actually had been taking root, relating to their land, and so beginning to cultivate a culture.

A place is, after all, the soil from which a culture grows. We often take cultures as givens: there are a certain number of world cultures that have existed since time immemorial, and the important thing is to preserve them from the homogenizing force of globalization. But cultures have beginnings, of course, just as they have ends; much like species, they evolve into being from something previous, they flourish, and they die or evolve into something else. And their beginnings happen wherever a group of people comes together to live in a place they've never lived before. Word gets out that war has made a great deal of Iowa prairie available to those hardy enough to homestead it and resist the returns of the Meskwaki it was taken from; a number of people tired of living on the East-

ern seaboard come to seek their fortune in farming; they gather in little towns and at farmhouse potlucks to help each other learn how to live together in this weird new place; a culture takes its first toddling steps. Without the place—without sharing the totality of life, including what moderns are tempted to think of as the unimportant challenges of geography and subsistence—you don’t get a culture. You just get what we have in today’s rootless America: anomie, aimlessness, anxiety, self-destruction. Even the most famous geographically diffuse cultures have places in their own ways. The Romani are unified by wagon life and wagon camps. Jews are tied back to Israel even at a distance of three thousand years by their texts, still written in the language of that time and evoking the life in that place. Depression-era hoboes gathered in insistently communal “jungles” next to switchyards to make mulligan stew and swap tales of their other shared home, the rails.

In this sense, American colonialism has had no winners. The original inhabitants of the land have of course been decimated militarily, had their land taken, and suffered initiatives of the conquerors explicitly intended to destroy their cultures. The Great Plains are empty of bison in large part because the U.S. Army spent the decades after the Civil War killing all of them in order to deprive Plains nations of their most important food and cultural symbol.<sup>36</sup> But the rank and file of the colonizing culture are, despite living in the richest country in the world<sup>37</sup> and consuming several times as much energy as people in most other countries,<sup>38</sup> still one of the most unhappy and antidepressant-consuming<sup>39</sup> citizenries in the world. This holds equally, if not doubly, for America’s rich, who on the whole have proven themselves more interested in becoming yet richer, and in exotic drugs and other escapist pleasures, than in self-actualization, let alone in making the world a better place with their wealth.

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<sup>36</sup> Smits, David D. “The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865–1883”. *Western Historical Qlty.*, Vol. 25 No. 3. Logan, Utah: The Western History Assn., 1994.

<sup>37</sup> World Bank. “GDP (constant 2010 US\$)”. World Bank (website), 2020. [data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD)

<sup>38</sup> ——. “Energy use (kg of oil equivalent per capita)”. World Bank (website), 2020. [data.worldbank.org/indicator/E6.USE.PCAP.KG.0E](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/E6.USE.PCAP.KG.0E)

<sup>39</sup> Gould, Skye, and Lauren F. Friedman. “Something startling is going on with antidepressant use around the world”. *Business Insider*, Feb. 4, 2016. [www.businessinsider.com/countries-largest-antidepressant-drug-users-2016-2](http://www.businessinsider.com/countries-largest-antidepressant-drug-users-2016-2).



The future awaits.

It's a culture's job to keep this kind of tragedy from happening. A culture is nothing more or less than a body of knowledge that helps people who adhere to it deal with all the problems and joys of life, from "What do I do if my spouse is unfaithful?" on up to "What is the meaning of life?" Not all cultures rise to these problems equally effectively, and accordingly people are happy and unhappy to different degrees in different parts of the world. But today in the U.S. what we see is what results when nascent cultures have been plowed under repeatedly as seedlings.

And then had McDonald's built on top of them. Once companies found that they could profitably supply for money what culture always used to supply for free, our culture *became* commercialism. Nowadays farmers' markets are far outnumbered by supermarkets; fraternal orders' emergency funds for members have been replaced by insurance companies; traveling circuses and Chautauquas have

been replaced by TV; even just walking next door and visiting has been replaced by Facebook. Commercial culture has even found that it doesn't have to stop at fulfilling all our needs, but can create brand new needs and lead people to pursue them at the cost of utter personal ruin. In *Hillbilly Elegy* J.D. Vance reports that poor people where he comes from in Kentucky now destroy their families by buying cars and TVs they can't afford under the delusion that these prove they're successful.<sup>40</sup> Of course the solution to the depression that results is also for sale, in the form of Budweiser and prescription opioids.

But as real and disastrous as it is that this country lacks anything worth calling a culture, that all just made it harder for me to admit to myself that I went to Ojibwe table looking for a way to remedy that problem. Because for as long as there have been colonizer-Americans who knew they were missing something, some of them have been turning to Native Americans in the hopes of finding that something. "The land!" wrote William Carlos Williams in 1925, "don't you feel it? Doesn't it make you want to lift dead Indians tenderly from their graves, to find—as if it must be clinging to their corpses—some authenticity?"<sup>41</sup> And what's more presumptuous than going to the descendants of a people from whom *your* people have taken virtually everything, and asking, "Hey, you know those last few scraps of culture you managed to save? Can I have that too?"

Here I was, not only a stranger, but a white-American stranger, descended matrilineally from a twelve-child family that lived on farms hewn from South Dakota prairie, right next to two different reservations, almost as soon as the Dakota were penned onto them; and patrilineally from a family who probably formed an unbroken bloc of Trump votes in 2016. I grew up in the heartland of white culture, Ohio, a land whose white people speak with an accent that's considered the most standard, boring, normal accent in the country. I ate Thanksgiving dinners and made yearly lists of Christmas loot I wanted. The most Native American part of my childhood was the day my mom rented *Smoke Signals* on VHS.

And to boot, I was an anthropology major, and let's say anthropologists have some history of not being the most understanding and helpful observers. Once of the more famous pieces of ethnographic literature is Napoleon Chagnon's study

<sup>40</sup> Vance, J.D. *Hillbilly Elegy*, e.g. p. 146. New York, N.Y.: Harper, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, William Carlos. *In the American Grain*. New York, N.Y.: New Directions, 2009 (1925).

of the Yanomamö, *The Fierce People*, in which he reports that the Yanomamö participated in more or less constant, pointless war between tribal divisions, a pursuit that took most of their time and energy as well as many lives. This thesis is rather undercut when you find out that he singlehandedly started the wars by motorboating up to his field base and embarking on what Christopher Ryan calls “a surrealist anthropology project”,<sup>42</sup> building a detailed genealogy of a people for whom naming the dead is one of the strongest taboos, and playing one village against another to get his information by hook or by crook, creating and inflaming deadly vendettas between them. His interventions probably led to the deaths of at least ten people. Ryan reports that “the word *anthro* has entered the vocabulary of the Yanomami. It signifies ‘a powerful nonhuman with deeply disturbed tendencies and wild eccentricities.’”<sup>43</sup> It wasn’t that I was afraid people would hear I was an anthropologist and want nothing to do with me. I was afraid I would say something that confirmed for me that my training had spoiled my ability to relate to people as equals; afraid that I might only ever be able to see the people at language table as ethnographical subjects.

I was treading on delicate and fresh scar tissue here. I realized I couldn’t even say with any confidence that it was okay for me to learn any of this. I had walked into the classroom that first day knowing just that I wanted to learn; I hadn’t formulated a full sociological critique of what I was doing. Each step I took felt both rewarding and also risky. Somewhere out there was a whole Kandinsky canvas of lines that I was about to cross.

If I had a giant hole left to me by my ancestors and their countrymen, certainly the Ojibwe people were under no obligation to fill it. No one ruined America but Americans. If I wanted that problem solved, I could look elsewhere. I could reach back through my ancestry to look for a tradition that satisfied me—be it some more palatable form of Christianity, or Appalachian hoodoo-making, or devotion to Wotan. But those chains had all been broken. They didn’t call to me. I knew, somehow, that for me it would be a much more vivid and satisfying life pledging allegiance to the ground I stood on than to the dusty memory of my ancestry distant in time and space. To judge from the history of Americans seeking guidance and authenticity from medicine keepers, many of them have felt

<sup>42</sup> Ryan, Christopher, and Cacilda Jethá. *Sex at Dawn*. New York, N.Y.: Harper Perennial, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Ryan, Christopher. “Dirty Tricks for War (Part I)”. *Psychology Today* (blog), Dec. 21, 2008. [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sex-dawn/200812/dirty-tricks-war-part-i](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sex-dawn/200812/dirty-tricks-war-part-i)

the same way. But though the last four hundred years have presented the Ojibwe with many problems, one of them is not a requirement to make white people feel self-fulfillment in life.

Yet here I was, and they were teaching me anyhow. They were teaching everybody. The Ojibwe language table flyer said the whole community was welcome. If limits needed to be imposed on how far I could go, either I hadn't reached them yet, or it was up to me to figure out where they were. I could learn about Ojibwe traditions, sure. Could I *practice* them? Well, in some classes a container of tobacco and a birchbark basket would be passed around, and each student would hold a little tobacco in their left hand, focus some thought on a little prayer, and then put the tobacco in the basket. I'd been not just invited but more or less expected to take part in that. If I were invited to a sweat, could I ethically go? What I wanted to know was, where do I cross over the line into cultural appropriation?

One reason this is a hard question to answer is that no one seems to quite agree on what cultural appropriation is. I was first introduced to the concept in a sociology class, where I learned that it means something like taking elements from a culture you're not a part of and reusing them for your own good with no regard to their original meaning. Like those dreamcatcher earrings you saw at the thrift store, which started out as a sacred symbol, but in this incarnation originated when a gewgaw company's purchasing manager wrote an order to a factory in China. Depending on who you ask, though, it might not be disregard for something's original meaning that makes it appropriative to use it. Cultural appropriation might mean taking something from another culture and treating it as your own even if you are trying earnestly to understand the traditions behind it; recently I was part of a conversation where someone new to meditating wanted to know if meditation was cultural appropriation if you don't come from Asia. (A guy from India was there and, to his credit, seemed not even to understand what this white person was being anxious about.) To others, cultural appropriation means borrowing anything from a culture with less global power than yours has. Or it might mean borrowing from a culture that yours has a history of oppressing, even if the two are on a more equal footing now.

Whatever it is, white people in America (especially liberal ones) tend to get very sensitive and alarmed if they smell that there's a chance of it happening. Aside from a few pre-approved exceptions such as yoga studios and meditation

centers, these white people are often very careful not to say, do, or make anything that would make it appear they're borrowing from another culture.

And it's probably good to exercise an abundance of caution here, really. The whole reason we talk about cultural appropriation and condemn it as bad is that it has negative effects on real people who live real lives. However we define cultural appropriation, I believe we can all agree that schools with football teams called the Indians, the Braves, the Warriors, the Chiefs, are doing it—to say nothing of the NFL team that many Indians I know will only call “the Washington team”. Psychologists have looked into this particular matter extensively and are quite confident that Native American kids who live with mascots like Chief Wahoo around are more depressed and have less belief in their ability to achieve anything.<sup>44</sup> The research has accumulated to such a depth that the American Psychological Association felt moved to make an official statement recommending the retirement of such mascots.<sup>45</sup>

Looking at it with no historical perspective whatsoever, a naive observer might think the whole matter's a little silly: so what if some sports team names itself after some tribe? No one seems to care about the Fighting Irish. But here I have to say that I think the people who believe the harm in cultural appropriation comes about when there's a power imbalance are at least on to something, even if that's not the whole story. A power imbalance is always there ready to skew every relationship, sicken every interaction. If I'm sitting around talking about spiritual matters with some Ojibwe friends of mine at some family event, and I make some little comment that calls into question some minor point, even if it leads to healthy debate among all of us, it could stick in the mind of a teenager listening from the sidelines, and lead them to chew it over for months, and contribute fatally to a picture they constantly get from the dominant culture, in which their own culture is an irrelevant anachronism. After all, that white guy who seemed smart made my culture sound stupid. It's a little thing in the moment, but if you're from the dominant culture, every action you take and every word you say has the

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<sup>44</sup> Fryberg, Stephanie, Hazel Rose Markus, Daphna Oyserman, and Joseph M. Stone. “Of Warrior Chiefs and Indian Princesses: the Psychological Consequences of American Indian Mascots.” *Basic & Applied Soc. Psych.* 30:208–218, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> American Psychological Association. “Summary of the APA Resolution Recommending Retirement of American Indian Mascots”. [www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/indian-mascots](http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/indian-mascots), n.d. (accessed Feb. 2020).

power to be magnified manifold according to your perceived status in the social hierarchy of the country. It's wise to tread carefully.

But that doesn't mean that there should be a moratorium on white people learning anything from other cultures. A certain kind of P.C. police would, if you're white, have you never, ever do something that wasn't done by someone in your ancestry or invented out of whole cloth by you yourself. And what a lonely fucking world that would be, and how depressing if the only thing white people can ever be is the kind of white we've been in the past or a kind of white we have to painstakingly create. That would mean no jazz or rock, and come to think of it almost no music made since 1955; you're not allowed to make gumbo or pad Thai or anything else that a medieval European peasant wouldn't recognize; all Buddhist practice is immediately limited to East Asians; and you can only French-kiss if you can prove you have some French ancestry. If this makes you sad, remember you're not allowed to assuage the grief with vodka unless you're of Russian descent. It goes without saying that you have three religious choices: Catholic, Protestant, or None.

It sounds absurd, and it is absurd, because cultures have been blending ever since there have been cultures. It's one of the main ways they grow. Buddhism as practiced in much of Asia is full of gods borrowed from Hinduism, and Rome borrowed Greece's pantheon wholesale and just gave them new togas and different names. Germans pronounce the letter *r* like the French apparently just because they thought French sounded nice. The Dakota had no horses until the Spaniards brought some, and look at them now. Italy had never seen a tomato before traders brought the first one from the New World, nor had Thailand ever seen a hot pepper. I'm positive a close enough analysis of European cave paintings would reveal different cultures influencing each other over thousands of years. No one can argue seriously that cultures should never borrow from each other; the exercise would be as pointless as arguing that people of different heritages shouldn't intermarry: it's going to happen anyhow.

All the same, that doesn't give me license to borrow whatever I darn well please from Ojibwe culture and, if I'm questioned on it, smile and say, "Syncretism!" For one thing, if I'm going to borrow anything, I'd better be quite sure I'm not borrowing it without understanding it, because then I haven't borrowed a tradition at all, I've made something up out of my own wishful thinking and started calling it traditional. And I'd better know I have permission, too. It does

no one any favors if I find some shady character on the internet who'll sell me a traditional pipe, and then I start holding rituals with it. Then I've taken a long-standing and very sacred tradition and checked off all the appropriation boxes by misunderstanding it, commodifying it, failing to be real with the people, and on top of all that not waiting to be told that it's time for me to become a pipe carrier.

The bottom line, I think, is that anything I do should never weaken the Ojibwe culture, and wherever possible, should strengthen it too. This may seem simple to stick to, but it's of course impossible to know all the effects your actions will have, and even an innocent stray comment can reverberate years down the line. But it seemed like a good baseline to start from as, I interacted with another culture with much less worldwide clout than the money-banding one I grew up in. I didn't develop it into an explicit list of rules to follow, but took it as a general guide, and came to some rules as I went along. I would go only where invited, or to events open to all. I wouldn't take a spot if spots for something were limited and I might take one away from an Ojibwe person it would be important to. I wouldn't try to steer anything, just listen. I would be humble and acknowledge my lack of knowledge. I would try to give as much as I received.

One day a guy I didn't know showed up at the language table—one of those guys about whom people say, "He has a presence." Maybe it was his cello-quartet voice, or his salt-and-pepper braids. When the teacher, Memegwesi, asked the newcomer how *he* would say such-and-so, I realized this guy was a first-language speaker of Ojibwe: I'd never actually met one before; all of us second-language learners were just doing our best teaching each other. The guy's name was Pe-baamibines, and in fact he was a professor, just retired from twenty-five years of teaching Ojibwe language and culture at the University of Minnesota. And furthermore, he was starting up his own language table. I went to the first one, and he taught with the strength of experience and a textbook he'd written himself, supplemented by a nonstop barrage of corny jokes. I came back every week.

It was in late winter at the beginning of 2017 that he announced to the people at his table that everyone was invited to come that spring to Porky's Sugarbush, a traditional Ojibwe maple syrup camp run by a friend of his. Here my learning about the culture would get out of the classroom and onto the actual land; here stories would be told and ceremonies held. Here I would have the opportunity, if I so chose, to look for spirits—not just the spirits that reside in a language, which are fairly easy to cast into rational terms, but the stranger, wilder spirits supposed



to inhabit worlds well beyond language's frontiers. I'd picked up glancing references, during language tables and my background reading, to some of the spirits reckoned to inhabit the Northwoods: *wiindigoog*, the insatiable giants; *animikiig*, the thunderbirds; *Mishibizhiw*, the water spirit, manifest as a giant, horned lynx. But it's one thing to learn about these spirits in the colorlessness of a classroom or from a book, and agree abstractly that those certainly sound like components of a fully functioning body of myth. It's another to go out into the same woods they supposedly inhabit and hear stories of them there.

## Around the Kettles

I escaped Minneapolis slowly, pedaling down back roads and icy bike paths through a decrescendo of snowy landscapes, from the Warehouse District downtown, on through peaceful suburbs with wide, empty streets; past frozen Lake Minnetonka where the Twin Cities' gentry erect their waterside mansions; and out into exurbs, where incongruous little clusters of commuters' and retirees'

houses huddle amid white stubbly fields. I passed through the gracefully decaying downtown of tiny Maple Plain, and north of town I found Lake Independence, its mostly forested shore studded with occasional two- and three-stories. I rode a ways up the road that encircles it until I found a handmade wooden sign saying PORKY'S SUGAR CAMP. Three tin squirrels were perched on top of the sign, busy tending tiny little kettles full of sap. Behind the sign, the land sloped down into forty acres of forest between the road and the lake, a hushed study in brown and white, accented by bright blue bags hanging off the maples. A muddy trail led to the only other sign of human activity, a fire pit surrounded by low walls of firewood, next to a few tents and a 400-gallon former milk tank full of clear sap that glinted in the sun. Pebaamibines was there already, sitting by the fire with his wife Laura and someone I didn't know, Lois. I found a folding chair leaning against a woodpile, unfolded it, and sat down to join their conversation. After a little while, Pebaam fried up some walleye for everyone and told us stories about working as a fishing guide on the rez as a teenager, while the rest of us kept warm around the fire.

I pitched my little one-person tent behind a woodpile, provisionally, since I didn't yet know if I'd be able to just camp out the whole season—Pebaam wasn't the one in charge, so he couldn't give me a go-ahead. The next day the one in charge, Deb, showed up, and she was a little surprised that I'd *want* to camp out, but said that would be fine, as long as I moved my tent out from under the huge dead basswood next to the camp kitchen, since it could fall over any moment.

Deb has been running this sugarbush for over forty years. The land was a patch her family owned but didn't really use for much. Then she married Porky White, a respected if sometimes ornery Ojibwe teacher from Leech Lake, and he pointed out that they could build a sugar camp there. They first got the camp running in 1976, and as I remember, they've only missed one year since then. As it turned out, Deb and I immediately got along like we'd known each other for years. If we'd been born in the 1910s we could have been an inseparable duo of hobos. She's like me in that she goes out and has adventures not to gain stories of her impressive exploits but just because adventure is a way of life. Over the course of thirteen years she and a few friends canoeed down the entire length of the Mississippi River; once, in a flood, Deb's tent nearly got washed into the river while she was sleeping in it. A few years ago when a hereditary condition finally pushed her over the line into "legally blind"—only one off-center spot of decent



Model of the kind of birchbark tent that was used a few hundred years ago to store equipment during sugarbush. (At Mille Lacs Indian Museum, Onamia, Minn.)

vision in one eye—she had to quit driving, so now she just bikes everywhere, routinely pedaling across entire states all through her sixties. Her well-used fat-bike was leaned against one of the woodpiles.

Porky's Sugarbush is a traditional Ojibwe sugarbush in a couple ways. Most obviously, all the sugarmaking is done the old-fashioned way. Instead of the kind of setup the big boys in New England use these days, a network of plastic tubes spiderwebbing around the forest from the trees to a central vacuum pump, Porky's has plain old spiles with bags hanging on them. All the boiling is done over a huge open fire in a mismatched and well-used collection of 15- and 20-gallon kettles that are hardly different from the ones Ojibwe people would

have bought with pelts in the 1600s in the earliest days of their acquaintance with French Canadian traders.

But more importantly, it's traditional in that it's a community. In the days before property lines and reservations, when Ojibwe people freely followed a yearly semi-nomadic cycle, the beginning of each year was marked by the first sweet taste of maple sap. Through the winter you would live with just your immediate family, in one or a few little wigwams, far from anyone else, so that everyone had enough hunting territory to find game to last the winter. Once the snow started to melt, your family and a few others nearby would all gather at some patch of maples that was your accustomed sugarbush, and spend the beginning of spring all working together to fill birchbark cones with granulated maple sugar (with some clever pre-metal-pot techniques). It was a time to share news of the winter and tell stories. It was a time to welcome the snowmelt and the warmth. When the leaves started to unfurl and the sap would no longer crystallize into good sugar, everyone would move to the big village for the summer.

Most of the people who gather at Porky's sleep in houses in the city rather than right there in camp, but it's still as much a community as it has been for hundreds or thousands of years. People come from all over the Cities and the surrounding areas—most of them Ojibwe, but some from other Native nations, and some not Native at all (like me or Kip the local mailman or Deb herself)—and we do the sacred work of the season. Of course this means hauling a lot of buckets full of sap around. (The best is when a school group comes from one of Minneapolis's Native charter schools, and a bunch of first-graders run around the woods filling up little buckets and begging to ride on the back of the ATV—a privilege for which Deb makes them pay by doing math problems for as long as they're moving.) But it also means—more importantly in this era of cheap sugar at IGA and abundant calories for everyone—thanking and honoring the spirits.

The hauling and boiling I knew I could handle. The spirit aspect, I was less sure on. When the time came for a ceremony, sure, I could stand and listen with the best of them; my childhood church experience had prepared me well. Maybe I could even pick out a few Ojibwe words from the songs and the invocation. But as for thinking any of it actually had any meaning? That wasn't something I was sure I could convince myself of.

I didn't really have to wait for a ceremony to start catching hints that a good time to figure out what I thought about this whole spirit business would be right

now. But I had been meaning to work that out for some time now anyway. Learning about the Ojibwe understanding of the world, I had at first hoped to take the approach that I could learn its guidance on various philosophical matters, and that would give me a good anchor for the ecologically responsible relationship with the Earth that I'd always wanted. The spirits I would dismiss as superfluous cruft: superstitions that, over the generations, had glommed on to a sensible philosophical base. But it didn't take long for me to realize the spirits, the philosophy, and the Earth are all inseparable in this tradition; you can't understand one in isolation from the others, any more than you can hand someone a glass without handing them the space inside the glass. Mille Lacs elder Melvin Eagle once told a story of his uncle, who killed nine deer one year, and then shot at a tenth, only to find him still standing:

“What the heck am I doing,” he says. “Then that deer there disappeared as he was standing there in the shade. This big buck,” he said. He didn’t shoot him again. “Then he took off running,” he says. “And I was considered blessed in that.” He had killed too many of them. Something would have happened to him if he had killed that tenth one. So he was being watched over in a good way, at least that’s what he came to say of it, and he used to put tobacco down every time he went hunting; he would put that tobacco out.<sup>46</sup>

How do you extract the supernatural out of that story and leave anything worth listening to? It’s pointless to try.

Deb made the decisions and herded the cats; meanwhile Pebaamibines (or “Pebaam da Bomb”, as he told everyone to feel free to call him—“I think it’s a reference to my jokes,” he explained, with a deflative thumb-down) was the holy-man-in-residence. In among his hundreds of bad puns, he gave spiritual lessons to anyone who’d listen. That first night, while Lois and Laura were doing the dishes from the walleye fry, he sat looking out at the sunset over the frozen lake, vivid and pink against the dark, scraggly silhouettes of trees in front of it. He told me he’d been sitting in the same place one night last year and thirty or forty Indian names came to him that he could give to people who needed them—one of

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<sup>46</sup> In Treuer, Anton (ed., trans.). *Living Our Language*, p. 107. St. Paul, Minn.: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001.

which, Agawaategaabaw, described the same silhouettes we were seeing. With him around, it was easy to start imagining when I looked out into the forest that there was more to the story than trees, something important below the surface. But what that something might actually be was, as yet, beyond the limits of my imagination.

I was often the only one there at night. It becomes important, when you have a lot of sap, to keep it boiling down late into the night so you don't run out of room in the tank for the next day's harvest, and late into the night I would sit by the kettles, staring into the coals, alone with the forest, listening to the wind hushing through the bare upper branches. One night, after I'd tended the kettles alone through dusk and into the dark, I looked up at the outlines of the maples swaying against a purple, overcast sky, and I tried to figure it all out.

So far, whenever I'd heard of a spirit or ritual that made no rational sense, I'd fallen back on the old "metaphor" explanation. Mishibizhiw, the giant water lynx spirit, unsentimentally fierce and known to kill innocents casually, is simply a metaphor for the behavior of water, which sweeps people away in floods or drowns them, indifferent to human life and yet necessary to it. In such a way, if I took the trouble, I should be able to explain all the Anishinaabe spirits as scientifically sound nature observations. But that strategy was wearing thin. It's all well to remember water is dangerous by personifying (or spiritualizing) it in a story, but Pebaam and indeed most of the people who came to Porky's gave every impression of expecting the "story" to be able to listen to *them*. They talked to them, like you talk to a person who can hear you. "You don't have a chat with a scientific theory, and you don't leave tobacco on the east side of a tree for the benefit of a metaphor," I wrote at the time.<sup>47</sup> People's dealings with these spirits were altogether too lively for relations they'd maintain with metaphors. But if not metaphors, then what?

I didn't find an answer that night. I just sat there thinking down dead ends. All I found was a cold wind whistling through meaningless branches in a dark sky. Scientific materialism, I had to say, really did seem to pretty adequately account for everything I was seeing. Wind responsive to heat differentials and the Coriolis effect. Trees grown the way they had grown because of simple system dynamics. True enough. But it all seemed so lonely, and life so pointless.

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<sup>47</sup> In "The Spirits (Anishinaabewaki Immigrant, pt. 3)", Mar. 16, 2017.

Maybe that was the harsh truth that the age of science demanded we face. But Pebaam made the world seem so alive and inviting with spirits, and when he did, it seemed right, and the meaningless clockwork cosmos seemed like a hollow illusion, true on some level but with no bearing on the universe of feeling and meaning that made life worth living. On my own, though, I couldn't sustain that illusion.

I gave up. But a couple nights later, in the comfort of my house, I was writing my journal and almost accidentally found myself trying again, putting down the beginnings of an understanding of spirits that I might actually be able to accept. The gap between the rationalist and spiritual ways of thinking had always seemed unbridgeable to me: you couldn't get across without repudiating science entirely and committing to life totally unmoored from any facts, like a flat-Earther. But as I began to piece together some of the things I'd learned over the past week, and others from the past few years, I thought I may have spotted a trail, little-used and overgrown, that led from one side to the other. I could only see it if I took it one step at a time, but when I did, each step led promisingly toward reconciliation, and I kept following.

The first step—the trailhead, let's say—was the idea that the Earth has consciousness. That might seem like rather a big first step away from the rationalist pole, but it's actually not far outside the scientific mainstream. The first scientist to moot it successfully as a valid scientific idea was James Lovelock, with his "Gaia theory". The reasoning, as I understand it, runs: if human beings have consciousness—which is debated, but not by anyone I have time for—that consciousness isn't separable from us. You can't remove someone's consciousness from them with a scalpel and hold it up in front of a panel of surgeons like a successful fisherman.<sup>48</sup> So consciousness must be a property of the pieces that make us up, and their arrangement. Now turn and look at the Earth; it has a heck of a lot more components than you do, working together in the same kind of harmony your cells do. That must mean *something*, at least. And look—you're a part of Earth, as surely as a neuron is a part of you, so if you have consciousness, the Earth *necessarily* does!

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<sup>48</sup> And in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and *Book of Dust* series, where something like consciousness is separate from the body as an animal-shaped "dæmon", if your dæmon dies, you immediately do too.

The trick is, we don't normally imagine the Earth is conscious because it doesn't speak to us in a human language. We have a hard time imagining that anything that doesn't experience the world just like we do might yet *experience*. There's a real temptation to define *consciousness* as 'the sense of self-awareness that a human has'. That definition, though, besides being transparently useless if we want to study whether other beings have consciousness, doesn't even (on closer examination) allow you to say that other human beings besides yourself have consciousness—since there's no way to slip your own consciousness inside someone else's and confirm that it really exists!

The octopus is reckoned to be one of the smartest creatures in the ocean. But the only way we know is by watching its success at doing human things, like unscrewing jar lids, or tasks that are at least intelligible to humans. When it's not doing those things, it's presumably just as intelligent, but we don't know what it's directing that intelligence toward. Its mind is utterly unknown to us, and apparently very alien. Its brain has a much less commanding role in its life, and farms out most of the work to the very well-developed nerve networks in the tentacles, which can act independently of each other, and will keep squirming around with all appearances of motive and intelligence even after they're cut off the octopus. What is it like to be an octopus? We can't know, we can only imagine. And by the same token, because its mind is so unimaginable to us, the purpose behind a lot of its bizarre, fluid movements will always remain unknown to us. It could be trying to communicate, for all we know.

Now serious scientists have begun debating whether plants might have consciousness.<sup>49</sup> After all, they react to things, in their chemical ways; they communicate by sharing nutrients with each other underground.<sup>50</sup> Is it all automatic workings? It wasn't so long ago that conventional wisdom held that a dog had no mind or experience of the world—this in spite of thousands of years of close friendships between dogs and humans: a heroic feat of denial of the obvious. In fact, not long before that, many white people denied there was significant consciousness in beings who could tell you, in plain English, that they had an experience of the world: black slaves. We're finally beginning to appreciate that

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<sup>49</sup> Pollan, Michael. "The Intelligent Plant". *The New Yorker*, December 16, 2013. New York, N.Y.: Condé Nast.

<sup>50</sup> Wohlleben, Peter. *The Hidden Life of Trees (passim)*. Vancouver, B.C.: Greystone Books, 2016.

consciousness is much more widespread, and often much stranger, than we long suspected.

Granted, then, that the Earth has consciousness. How does that consciousness manifest in things we can witness? Of course, it's at least theoretically possible for a conscious being to show no detectable sign of having consciousness. But even when a person has total locked-in syndrome, we can still run an EEG and find that they're having sleep-wake cycles: we have evidence that there is consciousness (even if we have no idea what that consciousness is like based on what we can measure). There's no good reason to believe that a being as colorful and multifarious as *the Earth* would be more reluctant to display its consciousness than a paralyzed human in a hospital bed. More likely, it's displayed in ways that we either aren't paying attention to, or aren't recognizing as signs of consciousness.

The first clue for where to look is to remember that consciousness isn't monolithic—it's the product of all its components. So the Earth's consciousness should be witnessed in the individual living beings of the Earth. That is, the actions of any old squirrel show that the Earth is conscious, because that squirrel is part of the Earth. Which also tells us that the squirrel is, in its own way, conscious. Okay, well, let's grant that squirrels have consciousness, and horseshoe crabs too, even oak trees and dandelions.

But wait, why should individual living beings—individual squirrels—be the only conscious entities below the level of the entire Earth? The human body is made of individual cells, but those cells make up organs, which make up organ systems (circulatory, respiratory,...). Some species lead much more communal lives than most animals, and a whole horde of technically separate individuals might function for all practical purposes as one organism—as with coral. Does the consciousness of coral belong to the individual polyp, to the colony, or to the reef? Or perhaps to the species as a whole? How about lichens, which are mutually dependent marriages of a fungus and an alga: surely the consciousness of a patch of lichen belongs to the pair of them together? And while we're granting consciousness to symbiotic assemblages, why not just call entire forests conscious? It almost looks as though everything in the world is conscious, both individually and collectively. This is a strange, disorienting worldview to the Western mind. But it's been put forward, tentatively at least, under the name *panpsychism* by quite serious scientists, apparently including as hard-headed a materialist as Annaka Harris, neuroscience consultant and wife of famous angry athe-

ist Sam Harris.<sup>51</sup> And it's exactly what any traditional Ojibwe will tell you the world is like. Pebaamibines once explained to me that in the Ojibwe language, not only each word but each syllable has a spirit. The language itself of course has a spirit too (as well as a spirit keeper, Aginjibagwesi, the goldfinch). It's no stretch for an Anishinaabe to imagine that a stone used in a sweat lodge has a spirit, and if that stone breaks in half from the heat of the fire, those halves have spirits as well.

All this imagining left me with a new, very animate world, strange to my scientifically trained mind. These consciousnesses, or let's say spirits since the two ideas seem almost coterminous, are a weird lot. What do they "look" like? Well, of course the spirit of poplars looks like a poplar, or perhaps more accurately like all the poplars that ever lived. But how do you *interact* with it?

Fortunately, although we don't act like it these days, humans are a species with a long heritage of figuring out what to do with plants and animals and other life. Obviously plants aren't going to speak to me in English. But imagine: you can look at your friend and, without words, from hints you might not even be able to explain, know that she's sad. In the same way, herbalist Stephen Harrod Buhner says he's trained his intuition to understand cues that plants give us and that most of us don't pick up, so he can understand their health, their disposition, what kind of human sickness they can help with.<sup>52</sup> He's not a lone nutjob saying this, either; this knowledge lines up nicely with the experiences of indigenous peoples everywhere. (The title of a book by Ojibwe herbalist Mary Geniusz runs: *Plants Have So Much to Give Us, All We Have to Do Is Ask.*)<sup>53</sup> It stands to reason that humans would evolve not to have to rely on abstract thought—which Jung calls “a very recent acquisition of nature … still in its ‘experimental’ state”<sup>54</sup>—to find plants to use, but rather hone their perception of everything that's there to perceive. If even the most woods-stupid city slicker can tell intuitively from the taste of uncooked dogbane (unforgettably bitter, I hear) that it's not edible in that

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<sup>51</sup> I have not yet read the book in question, *Conscious* (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins, 2019).

<sup>52</sup> Buhner, Stephen Harrod. *The Secret Teachings of Plants* (*passim*). Rochester, Ver.: Bear & Co., 2004.

<sup>53</sup> Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minn. Press, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Jung, *op. cit.*, p. 6. Actually, the word he used here was *consciousness* (and he composed this work in English), but he was referring to a different definition of the word than I've been discussing: consciousness as opposed to the unconscious, what in this discussion could be called “self-awareness”.

state, what can the intuition of an experienced Ute herbalist tell her, especially if she's spent her whole life cultivating it?

And what form do those flashes of intuition take? Dogbane will probably feel like a simple "hell no" or "eeughh!" to someone thinking of eating it, but for *Usnea* lichen—with its range of more subtle respiratory effects—that intuition could come as a feeling in the lungs. Or, if your culture's stories are deep in your bones, it could awaken a memory of a story where someone has the problem that this sprig of usnea can fix. Or it might show itself as a spirit you've never seen before. Sure, it's imagination. But it's *trained* imagination. And we have imagination for a reason. *Imag*-ination gives us needed *images* to understand things. It's not just fun. It's essential. And there's no reason to think that when a human understands how to use usnea from observing it closely, the human is the only active one in the interaction. The signals that the usnea is sending out may be subtle and passive—luster, color, size, smell, and perhaps some things not perceived only by the five classical senses—but it's still sending them out. It's communication, as long as we accept that the definition of *communication* broadens at the same time the definition of *consciousness* does.

I thought and wrote all this, that night with my journal, in vaguer and more immature form. But it felt, finally, like a breakthrough. The world of spirits, which I'd only ever been able to dismiss as a figment, now seemed like just a different, deeper way of perceiving the world. Science undeniably has its uses, but here's an anecdote: some years ago, someone called a conference of one hundred spiritual leaders from indigenous cultures on every continent. They got together and spoke about prophecy. When everyone had had their say, it became clear that they all basically agreed on what challenges lay ahead for the next several decades and possibly centuries. If that kind of agreement is reached by people using spiritual modes of perception, with no knowledge of each other, on separate continents, it seems to me that there is something useful in this. And leave aside the fact that no conference of governmental leaders would come to basic agreement on *anything*, let alone a projection spanning decades.<sup>55</sup>

And so when Pebaamibines led an opening ceremony on the first Sunday of camp, and called on us all to take tobacco—or *asemaa*—and offer it by a maple

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<sup>55</sup> White Bison, Inc. (Don Coyhis). *The Red Road to Wellbriety*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: White Bison, Inc., 2002.

tree in thanks to Mitigonaabe, the “tree man” or spirit of the trees, I was able to try a little hesitant communication to that spirit too. I communicated nothing profound or even particularly coherent, and I was still skeptical of getting any response I could interpret. But when I went home that day, I noticed that being inside felt like watching daytime TV. It was stuffy and dusty and who lives in houses anyway? It seemed like I’d been living in the forest for years. The feeling soon faded, but perhaps I got that fractional bit closer to the land that day.

An Ojibwe man leading a pipe ceremony recently told me that if you ask for personal growth in prayer, you’ll be sent a trial that’ll *make* you grow. After ten more days or so at sugarbush, splitting and moving firewood, helping herd little kids, I was sitting around the campfire with Pebaam and our friend Brandon from Ojibwe table, just shooting the breeze. Brandon talked about his new CNC metal cutter and some projects he had lined up for it. Then Pebaam got to talking about his childhood home up on the reserve in Canada,<sup>56</sup> and mentioned that he would be facilitating traditional four-day vision quest fasts there in May, and we were of course invited.

I asked him a couple questions about that, and the conversation went on, but my mind never got much past that moment. It did go back, though: to when I was a little kid reading *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*, and resigning myself, even as I finished the chapter about Lame Deer’s fast, to the truth that even though I wanted so badly to experience that, it was as inaccessible to me as an acceptance letter from Hogwarts. Now here the opportunity had been casually dropped into my lap while I sat in a folding metal chair. I took some of the rest of the day to adjust to this reconfiguration of the boundaries of the possible, and then started working out how I could get to Canada in May.

## Introductions

My partner Misty, who spent several days at sugarbush that season, got invited to fast too, and the two of us caught a ride with Brandon and his partner Liz, in their old black veggie-oil pickup. It would be their fifth year coming up to fast. We crossed into Canada in International falls and turned east into country that’s almost as much water as land, where roads weave tightly like nervous intruders

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<sup>56</sup> Canada calls “reserves” what in the U.S. are called “reservations”.



around hundreds of shimmering lakes, raindrops splattered across the map. We followed along the shore of Rainy Lake, a vast convoluted grandmother among these lakes, little sister of Lake of the Woods, straddling the international border but entirely indifferent to it. After we had seen signs for this and that bay of Rainy Lake on either side of us for about an hour—the lake had us surrounded—Brandon turned off to the left and eased us down five miles of sucking spring mud covering gravel road, down to the mouth of a river that seemed, from its geographical placement, like it must have somehow originated elsewhere in the lake.

When Pebaamibines was growing up, most of his community lived on the good fishing and trapping lands here around the mouth of the Ottertail River and the bay it empties into, Nigigoonsiminikaaning ('Where Otter Cub Berries<sup>57</sup> Abound'). For the most part, when he was very young, they were left alone by people who weren't from the community. His big brother still remembers star-

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<sup>57</sup> As sand cherries (*Prunus pumila*) are called in Ojibwe.

ing baffled when a few white people came to the community for the first time. Were they so pale because they were sick? Pebaam's mother gave birth to him while out running her trapline. Soon that seclusion changed, though, and when he was six Pebaam was taken off to a residential school 160 miles away in Kenora. He at least got to spend summers at home, but for most of the year the Canadian government had free rein to teach him how *not* to be an Indian, to try to make him forget his mother tongue. With him they failed, at least. Since then, though, everyone has moved their homes away from the mouth of the Ottertail; most live now in a town by the highway, the new source of bounty now that the traditions tying them to the river's generosity have been attenuated.

But a few years ago, Pebaam reclaimed an old cabin still standing at the river-mouth, and had a couple new little bunkhouses built near it, with an eye toward creating a camp where people could come and be immersed in the old ways and the old language. These cabins were what greeted us at the end of the muddy road. They perch modestly on the giant dollops of hard granite that make up the shore there. One other cabin stands across the river, occasionally used by Pebaam's family. Other than that, you can stand on one of those rocks and see miles of shoreline, and not one other building. And this is just one sub-bay of Nigigoonsiminikaanning, a vast spread of dark blue water nearly disconnected from the rest of Rainy Lake by a strait eight miles away, rarely visited by outsiders since fishing is only allowed for tribal members. Otters sometimes swim under the dock and make noises suddenly just to scare the tar out of the humans above them. The bay is, of course, home to a great number of spirits.

Here was the place to really practice suspending or dismissing my scientific disbelief. When I got out of Liz and Brandon's truck I offered tobacco into the water to greet the spirit of the lake—which is only common courtesy—and settled in to the fact of being here.

I had once imagined that I knew Northern Ontario lake country. I had, after all, been coming up here since I was a baby, to Crow Duck Lake, which my grandpa discovered before I was born and to which he's been bringing the family annually ever since. As the crow flies Crow Duck is only 140 miles from Nigigoonsiminikaanning, and it's underlain by the same geology, so that Nigigoonsiminikaanning's shores, made of church-sized slabs of three-billion-year-old Canadian Shield granite interwoven with impenetrable dark forest, were as instantly familiar to me as a house with the same floor plan as my childhood home. But during

my last few trips to Crow Duck, it had crept in that I knew the land on only the most superficial levels.

Going to Crow Duck Lake Camp is a paradisiac experience. It is also a sort of situational childhood. It's a full-service fishing camp; they start your boat motor for you when you head out, and when you get back they tie it up and fillet your fish for you and fry it at dinnertime. The only things you have to do are drive the boat, catch the fish, and drink the beers. You are taken care of, like when your mom used to cook for you and do your laundry. And your world is shrunk like a kid's world: the rite of getting there—a boat ride across Big Whiteshell Lake, then a two-mile ride in a truckbed seat through the backest of backcountry—feels like how you enter a storybook. For the following week, the only places on your mental map are Crow Duck Lake, Crow Duck Falls, and possibly Saddle and Ritchie Lakes if you really feel like striking out into the wilderness *voyageur*-style. Even now it's a little jarring to me to see Crow Duck placed on a map. As if it had a real location that could be put down in latitude and longitude! To suggest it feels almost like an insult.

So coming to Nigigoonsiminikaaning represented for me not only a chance to fulfill a childhood dream of going on a fast, but a chance to step out of a childlike dream state and find out what it's like to relate to one of these lakes as a whole, adult person. That first night there, I had to admit that Nigigoonsiminikaanning seemed every bit as paradisiac as Crow Duck ever had. Pebaam helped us find places to put our stuff, and then he took us all out on the lake to set a gillnet for fish to eat the next day. Dusk was coming on and the air was chilling down. There was that water: that dark, mature water that tells stories of thousands of years of life and death, and cold, dark depths where creatures that would scare you live lives you can't imagine. And on top, it glints in the sunset, as if to signal that despite all that, you're welcome with it, can be part of those mysterious millennia. We got the net set and Pebaam drove us back to the cabins, and we went to bed.

When we pulled the net in the next morning, it had thirty-two walleye and a lot of pike and suckerfish in it. Pebaam got on his phone and put the word out that a fish fry was on, and then spent a lot of the day cleaning and frying them, just like when he was a teenager and made shore lunches while working as a fishing guide. Around lunchtime friends and family came down the long bumpy road: Pebaam's mom Ogimaawigwanebiik (or Nancy), in her eighties and still tracking around in the woods like she always has; a couple of her neighbors; Ralph, an

elder from further north who has a cabin on Nigigoonsiminikaaning that he stays at sometimes. I began to see one aspect of what it's like when this place is home, not a vacation: it has a relationship to the rest of your life, and the rest of the world. This cabin was a gathering place, not a retreat.

Ralph, or PaShawOneeBinace,<sup>58</sup> mentioned to Pebaam that he was holding a sweat lodge that same night, and that all of us fasters were invited. Now, I had come up planning to try to get to know the spirits of the land and how people relate to them. I still wasn't entirely clear on what I thought it would *mean* to do that; I had come up with an intellectual understanding of what spirits might be but I certainly hadn't fully internalized it. But I was prepared to grant they existed at least for the week, at least enough to see what happens when people who believe in them spend a while working with them closely. I had imagined, though, that this would be a subtle process: I would see spirits "out of the corner of [my] mind," as Philip Pullman phrased it.<sup>59</sup> I would spend some days on my fast, waiting for my mind to get bored with putting words to things so it could see the world as it is, and maybe I'd catch a sidelong glimpse of something I could call a "spirit". I didn't count on taking part in a sweat, where spirits are invited to come right in and make themselves plainly known to those who are looking. It would be my first. My slow introduction to Anishinaabe culture and ritual was speeding up to where I wasn't entirely sure I could keep up.

Of course I went; I never entertained the idea of not going, once Pebaam decided he was going to go and bring along anyone who wanted to come with. Once we had the fish fry cleaned up and the family and friends had headed back to town, we loaded up on the boat. "Boozin!" Pebaam called out—"Get on!", imperative form of *boozzi*. When it was time to get off, he taught us the opposite—"Booz-out!" (Cue laughter.)

If Pebaam's cabin is at the edge of the known world, Ralph's is off the map entirely, back through an obscure strait into a far section of Nigigoonsiminikaaning, built on a peninsula on a sheltered bay. When we arrived, there were already several people I'd never met there, and Ralph's *oshkaabewis* (ceremonial helper), a young man named Stacy, had gotten a tall fire roaring in a sandy pit. To the west of the pit was a small dome, framed of lashed saplings and covered in tarps. Our

<sup>58</sup> In the most common spelling system (what I've used for other Ojibwe names and words here), this would be written *Pa-shawaniiibines*, but how I've written it is how he spells it himself.

<sup>59</sup> Pullman, Philip. *The Secret Commonwealth*. New York, N.Y.: Knopf, 2019.

boat was the last to arrive, and without much preamble or orientation we all bent down and crawled in through the little door. Dusk was falling.

If I wasn't entirely clear on what the goal or motivation is behind an Anishinaabe sweat lodge, I think it's because there isn't any single fixed goal or motivation. It is not a coded message with one correct answer. Jung says, "a symbol always stands for something more than its obvious and immediate meaning." That is, it is a way of expressing something that cannot be simplified any further, something outside the boundaries of straightforward, diagrammable conception. "The sweat lodge stands for the womb of the Earth," Ralph wrote in a little book I found much later,<sup>60</sup> but what that means is of course not to be understood literally and points to something even less comprehensible. Umberto Eco, asked about the meaning of *The Name of the Rose*, wrote, "A narrator should not supply an interpretation of his work; otherwise he would not have written a novel, which is a machine for generating interpretations."<sup>61</sup> So it was probably good that I entered the sweat lodge with no particular idea of what it was "about". I would just find out as it happened.

No two sweats proceed the same. Though the framework of the ceremony is usually fairly similar, the specifics all depend on who's running it, how the spirits are leading them, who's participating, and what they're all experiencing that day. Once we had all sat down on the dirt with our backs to the lodge wall, Ralph gave the word to Stacy to start the first of the usual four "doors" of the sweat by handing in the first grandfathers. Stacy dug out a number of incandescent-hot stones from the center of the fire, brought them one by one with a pitchfork through the low door. PaShawOneeBinace used a pair of antlers to set them in the small pit at the center of the lodge, and then Stacy shut the door tight, leaving us all in there in muffled silence, with only the dim glow of the rocks to see by, and as they cooled, soon no light at all.

PaShawOneeBinace poured cedar tea and herbs on the stones, wrapping us all in a thick, humid fog. And then we started the first door with songs. When PaShawOneeBinace speaks, he sounds like any other guy in his fifties might, maybe a little more deliberate and soft. My enduring image of him has him casually leaning against a tree, in blue jeans and flannel with a cigarette, calmly talking about

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<sup>60</sup> PaShawOneeBinace (Ralph Johnson). "The Sacred Lodges of the Ojibway". Sioux Lookout, Ont.: WeQuenGwayWin Consultants, n.d.

<sup>61</sup> Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*, "Postscript". Boston, Mass.: Harcourt, 1983.

some of the spirits of the north country. But when he sang there in the sweat lodge, it felt as though I was hearing him from a distance of thousands of years in the past as well as right there next to me, and all points in between. With just songs he brought worlds in to the center of the lodge: the water, the stars, the four directions, the animals, the trees, the Great Mystery. I didn't know if spirits were what I was feeling, but I was feeling *something*. It felt as though all of Rainy Lake was in there with us, the coolness of the night somehow with us in the dense hot air. PaShawOneeBinace sang songs the whole first door, and whether each one was a spirit, or invited a spirit in, it was impossible to tell; perhaps the best answer is "both". He finished the last of the songs that came to him, and called for Stacy to open the door: "*Baakinan ishkwaandem!*" We had a few minutes to take some deep breaths of cool air as Stacy forked in the next few grandfathers.

We took the second and third doors each telling what brought us here, what prayer we were bringing with us. (I was overwhelmed enough that I could barely discern the shape of the question and had nothing very coherent to express besides gratitude.) In the fourth round, anyone who knew a song was welcome to sing it. Time passes differently in the lodge. As we went around, each moment—even, or especially, the silent ones—was full: some with singing and drums and turtle-shell rattles, some with people peeling off the layers that keep their soul shielded from the world and letting buried truths come out. Without seeing their faces, I saw the depths of the people in that lodge, caught a glance at their souls. And the spirits of Rainy Lake and Ralph's little peninsula guided us all through.

When the last drumbeat finished reverberating and we all crawled out under the sky, it was pitch dark except for the remains of the fire, and the air chilling my sweat against me told me the night was well advanced. We walked up to Pa-ShawOneeBinace's cabin along a path lined with used stones—by tradition, each grandfather can only be used once—and ate a feast. All four of us who had come with Pebaam were ready to go out on our fasts the next morning. This would be our last food for four days.

## **Shaken**

My fast began at sunrise, while I was still asleep. In the late morning, once we fasters had packed, we got on Pebaam's boat and he drove us to all corners of Nigigoonsiminikaaning to drop us off at our fasting places. I was the last one.

Pebaam floated up next to a pink granite slab at deck height, and I tossed all my stuff onto this little island, then jumped on and watched Pebaam's boat dwindle into the distance.

And there I was. I had been waiting all my life to get onto an island like this. Not only had I wanted to fast since I read Lame Deer, I had also spent all my childhood Crow Duck trips looking out of boats wistfully while other people drove right past all the lake's islands all thick with mystery. Just once I wanted to go explore one of those islands and step where maybe no human foot had ever stepped. I couldn't have said what I hoped to find there. Certainly not just spruce trees and spider webs, which is what the grown-up driving the boat always seemed to figure was all that would be there. It seemed to me that a place so untouched had to be able to show me, for the first time, what was really real. Now, at age twenty-eight, I got to stay on one and experience whatever the island could show me through three more sunrises.

The thing was, I felt very normal. I mean, sure, I was the only human on a comically remote island, and I had no food or water. But despite all that, I felt basically like myself. My perceptions of the world didn't change appreciably when Pebaam's boat disappeared. Spirits didn't suddenly rush into my mind and begin filling it with swirling images I could spend the next year interpreting. In short, I wasn't having an acid trip. I was just standing on an island. In fact I wasn't even very hungry yet—I'd eaten as recently as dinner last night.

Clearly this was going to be a slower burn than the sweat lodge had been. I set about taking care of everything material I had to do: setting up my sleeping place on a bed of cedar boughs; getting a tarp set up over it. I walked the perimeter of the island. It took me about half an hour (mostly because I had to do a lot of bushwhacking), and it was very pretty. I sat down and worked on a crafting project I'd brought along, a tobacco pouch. Once I finished, I was all out of material things to do. All I had left to occupy myself with was my mind and, perhaps once I knew what I was looking for, my spirit. I had a lot of daylight left, and it was only the first day.

But I did have something to contemplate. Did I have anything to ask at the shaking tent?

The most typical Anishinaabe fast is just you, an island, and four days without food or water. But that template can be adapted if it needs to be. Before I got to camp Pebaamibines had put out one guy for a fast who was bringing along plenty

of food and water to last the whole time, because he'd had a troubled history of nourishing himself well and was going to be taking a fast from distractions and tendencies that usually stopped him from taking care of himself. This year a couple people were going to break their fasts a day early to help around camp. And if a shaking tent ceremony is going to happen right in the middle of your fast, you definitely go if you feel called. That's what happened this year: PaShawOnee-Binace would be leading the shaking tent on my second night of fasting.

When I got to my island I knew almost nothing about the shaking tent. I knew it was described as a way to ask the spirits a question directly, and I knew it was one of the most sacred ceremonies in the Anishinaabe tradition. If my experience at Nigigoonsimikaaning hadn't felt like jumping in the deep end yet, it certainly did once I was invited to a shaking tent. Until a few days ago, I had been, in practical terms, just a language learner. Inwardly I knew I had come to learn the language not just because I liked grammatical puzzles and getting social justice cred, but because something about the spiritual tradition it served as a medium for attracted me on a deep level. But my actual acquaintance with that tradition had barely started. I was in way over my head on this if I wanted to participate. I was still only halfway reconciled to the idea that spirits even existed, and I was still trying to assimilate everything I'd learned at the sweat lodge. I was half a day into my first fast. And now I was contemplating going to one of the most sacred events of the whole tradition, one that would certainly be rich in symbols and history and language that would be completely lost on me.

Which made it even scarier that I did have something I thought I might want to ask at the shaking tent. There was something that had been bothering me for months, maybe years. What was my name?

I of course already had a name, Nathanael, on which I'd been getting along tolerably well for 28 years. (Not only that, I also had a fun pen name that I'd been using on my drifting scrap of cyberspace for about half that long.) But at some point it began to gall at me. It worked fine as a way to get my attention: long and distinct enough not to get easily confused with common words. (I imagine people with names like Ann and Will must constantly be turning their heads when people say "And..." or "I will.") But when I looked at my name any closer, it seemed more and more like a perfect symbol of the culture I grew up with and all the reasons I became disillusioned from it.

For one, it meant nothing in any language I knew how to speak. In this it showed that American culture was two degrees removed from any real home-grown sense of belonging to the world. On the first degree, its opacity of meaning is accepted as perfectly normal by everyone I meet day to day. We don't talk about name meanings around here, really. Practically the only time I've gotten in a conversation about name meanings without being the nerdy etymologist who started it, it was with another guy named Nathanael. Names aren't supposed to have any deeper meaning, the sentiment seems to go; they're just a collection of sounds people use to summon you. The idea that a name should *mean* anything is unfashionable, smelling vaguely of pseudoscience. I at least got a name that, on inspection, *does* have a meaning. My sympathies are with the legions of kids out there whose parents have given up on meaning and history entirely and made something up along the pattern /ə\_ən/: Jaden, Hayden, Kaden, Kaycen, Grayson, Kalen, Jaelyn, Braelyn. The present moment, the surfaces of things, that's all that matters: that's the message I get. Looking deeper into anything is an outmoded pursuit. As if there was a meaning to life!

Below that nihilistic layer, though, we find the second degree of estrangement: even names that do have meaning are mostly imported from some exotic tradition from a far distant land—usually the Middle East via the Bible. Half the people you know, if you're in the U.S., are probably walking around with Hebrew names, and don't speak a word of the language. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; Mary, Margaret, Hannah, Sarah; the many devotions to El: Micha-El, Samu-El, Jo-El, Gabri-El, Dani-El, El-iZabeth, El-iJah, and yes, Nathana-El. Or if not from the Bible, names are from elsewhere in antiquity: Alexander (the Great), Helen (of Troy), (Saint) George (or Zeus Georgos, take your pick), Julia (Cæsar). Or perhaps from our former next-door neighbors, the Irish: Ceallaigh (Kelly), Eirinn (Erin), Breandáin (Brendan), Caoimhín (Kevin—I promise). The one faction that seems to be missing is actual English names. There is a persistent minority of them, but even then, they tend to be holdovers from so long ago that their meaning is only apparent to a philologist: Edward (Ead-weard, 'Wealth-Guard'), William (Wil-helm, 'Helmet of Willpower', filtered into unintelligibility through French Guillaume), Alfred (Ælf-ræd, 'Advised by Elves'), Audrey (what's left of Æbel-þryp, 'Noble Strength'). Naming kids with real words understandable at first hearing was common in the day of Beowulf ('Bee-Wolf', i.e. 'Bear'), but now it's felt to be the domain of hippies and weirdos, and

we feel sorry for kids named “Raven” or “Rainy”. (“Misty” seems to be generally enjoyed, though my favorite Misty reports always getting asked if it’s short for something. Like what? Mysterio?)

Because this is the case with most European languages, which to some extent share a common stock of names, we imagine it’s normal, but there are lots of cultures out there where people’s names come right out and say something. Björk, to her fellow Icelanders, is just ‘Birch’; a Guðmundur is a ‘Good Hand’ (worker) and a Þórsteinn is ‘Thor’s Stone’. Chinese kids are commonly given names than not only say something, but tie them to some period in the grand cycling drama of Chinese history: 建國 Jiànguó ‘Founding’ and 民主 Míngǔ ‘Democracy’ in the early years of the People’s Republic, on up to 奧運 Àoyùn ‘Olympics’ in the years leading up to 2008.<sup>62</sup> And in Ojibwe, I’ve never heard of a name that didn’t have some meaning. Some Anishinaabeg, like Pebaam’s mom, don’t try to translate names to English, because they always lose something, and often that something—that happy poetic happenstance of semantic resonances, or a connection to a story—is felt to be crucial. But nonetheless, I believe I can mention that I’ve met people whose names translate roughly to ‘Mackerel Sky’ (Baabiyaanakwad), ‘Strong-Voice Sky Woman’ (Zoongwegiizhigook), ‘Center of the Earth’ (Nenaakamiginang), and ‘Two-Buffalo Woman’ (Niizho-mashkode-bizhikiikwe). Just from the English you can tell there’s depth there for the digging. Not only are these names bound with a real, functioning tradition, it’s a tradition that I had gotten to know and like, as I’d gotten to know and like the people I’d spent time with who practice it, and it’s also a tradition that links living people to the living land right where I lived and wanted to keep living. That was a kind of name I wished I could introduce myself with.

But asking for a name was, if anything was, clearly a bridge too far. Getting an Ojibwe name isn’t like when two hoboes travel together and one starts calling the other “Bacon Fat”. An Ojibwe name isn’t just meaningful, it’s *sacred*. It’s what the spirits know you by. “It is said that before the Naming Ceremony, the spirits are not able to see the face of the child,” wrote Eddie Benton-Banai. “It is through this naming act that they look into the face of the child and recognize him as a

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<sup>62</sup> China Daily. “China’s History Is Spelled Out in Baby Names.” *China Daily* (web), Jun. 24, 2014. [www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-06/24/content\\_17610669.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-06/24/content_17610669.htm)

living being.”<sup>63</sup> More even than that, it’s a commitment. Pebaamibines explained to me that getting a name is a rough equivalent of confirmation in the Catholic church. You’re saying, “This I believe.” You’re committing to live according to the Anishinaabe traditions: to go syruping in the spring and ricing in the fall, to give back to the Earth in everything you do, to honor the spirits, to be a part of the community, to embody as best you can the Seven Grandfather Teachings—wisdom, love, respect, courage, uprightness, humility, truth. A name is not an interesting souvenir to take home and put into a scrapbook. It was unlikely that I was ready to commit to living by the traditions. I barely even knew what they were.

Not to mention, where did I get off thinking I had the right? I mean to say, here’s some random white guy from Ohio who suddenly turns up on the doorstep, and he thinks learning a little of the language makes it fine for him to be a full-fledged participant in not just a fast but a *shaking tent*, and now to ask for a *name!* There are people born and raised Ojibwe, now well into middle age and further, who don’t have Ojibwe names, because colonialism has torn the culture asunder so thoroughly that they don’t know an elder who can give one—and here’s a guy who grew up part of that very colonialism, and after under a year of once-weekly language tables, plus a little skulking around at a sugarbush and half a fast, he wants to go right on ahead and ask for a name, the mark of a spiritually full member of this ancient culture! Talk about white privilege! White people already have the vast majority of this continent’s land, money, and material resources, but it’s not enough for this guy—he wants the people to share their tradition with him too!

All the same, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I sat there on the granite shore of my little island, and my mind couldn’t seem to go anywhere but back to the idea of a name. Rationally, it seemed obvious that asking for a name was unjustifiable. But anytime I dismissed the thought, soon enough it came right back and circled around my head some more.

This wasn’t a whim I had just come up with. I’d felt ill at ease with my given name for years. It had started niggling at least a little as far back as the traumatic month when I gave up Christianity, then remembered that I had a devotion to its

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<sup>63</sup> Benton-Banai, Edward. *The Mishomis Book*, p. 9. Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minn. Press, 2010 (1988).

god right there in the back two letters of my name. Back at sugarbush I had asked Pebaam to tell me more about Ojibwe names, and at his suggestion I'd asked a few people who carried them what the names meant to them; I'd learned a lot that way. Before that, in other parts of my life, I'd invited people to nickname me many times for years; on one occasion I spent a whole week at a gathering of rewilders without giving anyone my name, hoping that some new name would catch on, but one never did.

And I was pretty sure my participation in the tradition wasn't the overstep it might seem to someone without the full story. I had come quite a ways into the culture, but everywhere I'd been, I'd been invited: invited to sugarbush, invited to the sweat lodge, invited to fast, invited to the shaking tent. I didn't beg and plead my way in; I certainly didn't pay. And I wasn't doing these things out of detached anthropological interest, so I could eventually write a monograph on the exotic Ojibwa's most colorful spectacles. I was participating in all this because I really did want to learn, to let it change me, and I was prepared to work for my teachings, including spending four days with no food or water—albeit on a beautiful island in a clear blue lake. And even asking for a name wouldn't be that far out of the usual here at Nigigoonsiminikaaning: Brandon and Liz, neither one Ojibwe by birth, had both gotten names at PaShawOneeBinace's shaking tent, Brandon on his very first fast.

Even all that hardly seemed to justify as big a step as requesting a name, though. Not for a beginner like me. By the time night fell, I had reached no conclusion.

When I woke up the next morning, my mind lost no time continuing to reel and spin with the same question. But I was able to set it aside for the day and leave it in a state of unsettledness. A fast is, among other things, a time to let go of thoughts and trust feelings. I resolved not to try so hard to think today, and just see what happened. In mid-morning I found, somewhat to my surprise, that I had scrounged up (from my pack and the woods) the materials to make the gift I would need to bring PaShawOneeBinace if I wanted to ask something. I was making it just in case. If I decided not to ask, I would be fine and have an extra gift. But if I did convince myself it was okay, I'd better have something ready. And anyway I didn't have a whole lot else going on. When Pebaamibines came by that evening to pick me up, I had a completed wallhanging, a birchbark cutout of a northern

pike on cloth—PaShawOneeBinace’s clan, the Great Northern Pike clan—and I brought it along. Just in case.

On the way, we picked up all the other fasters. Once we got to Ralph’s peninsula and didn’t have to talk over engine noise, I decided to see if I would get anything out of talking the decision over with other people. I asked Brandon about getting his name on his very first fast. “I was a baby,” he said, just starting to learn Ojibwe traditions, having ended up in a circle of Ojibwe friends after his Lakota mentor passed on. “Ojibwe people get names when they’re babies, so I decided I’d start out at the same place.” Misty, I knew, had been considering asking for a name too, and I talked about how much of a commitment it was—the seasonal harvests, the giving back to the Earth, all of it. “All things you would like to do anyhow,” they<sup>64</sup> pointed out, and I realized it was true. I hadn’t been on this path long, but I’d already seen enough to know that I got a lot out of following it, and I wanted to keep learning. I’d come to the conclusion a while ago that if it seemed like a defensible thing to do, I’d probably ask for a name eventually. I just wanted to feel more deserving first, follow the path longer. That, though, might be going about it all backwards: I was a baby now; maybe I should get a name, and then do the work to deserve it. Once you have a name, it all *matters*. Until then, it’s easy to keep stalling and nap by the side of the path instead of following it where it leads.

But as conclusive as all that might sound, I wasn’t convinced. There was someone more integral whose opinion I wanted to know.

I went up to PaShawOneeBinace where he was sitting, at the edge of the same clearing where we’d had the sweat lodge. I told him I was thinking of asking something at the shaking tent. I explained to him that I wasn’t Anishinaabe, didn’t grow up that way, but I was thinking of asking for a name. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“I think that’s a *great* idea,” he said immediately, smiling. “Every person in this world has a spirit helper. Getting to know that spirit helper is one of the best things you can do to clarify your spiritual path.”

Not just invited, but enthusiastically invited. Part of me had quietly hoped for a flat refusal, so my life would go on just as it had always been, and I could go

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<sup>64</sup> Misty uses gender-neutral *they-them* pronouns.

on being unaccountable. But now it seemed I had nothing left to convince myself *not* to ask for a name.

There was little left to do before asking besides the physical aspects of the ceremony. With little idea what I was making, I helped PaShawOneeBinace and Stacy build the shaking tent. We dug seven holes in the sand, describing a circle not four feet across; we put seven sapling posts in them, and bound the posts all together with bent wooden hoops. We wrapped all that with a blanket around the top half, and surrounded the bottom half in a roll of birchbark. PaShawOneeBinace hung some small things on top—hooves, I think, and some pieces of rolled tin like on a traditional jingle dress—and the *jiisakaan* was finished. It was a tapering cylinder, big enough for one human, open at the top for the spirits to come in.

There were about ten of us there in the clearing, and evening was falling. We went in turns asking our questions a first time to PaShawOneeBinace human to human, outside the tent. Everything was done in Anishinaabemowin; for those of us who didn't speak it, Pebaam's brother Dan was there to interpret for us. I gave him my small, humble gift, feeling impossibly inadequate. I told him I was going to ask to know my name and clan. I had done most of my agonizing over the name, but wherever a name goes a clan usually goes with it, and I knew if I asked for one I would ask for the other. The clan is a little like a last name, except that each clan comes with spiritual responsibilities. People in the Pike clan, like Ralph, are called to be philosophers; the Bear clan to be healers; the Loon and Crane clans to be leaders; the Marten clan to be warriors. I finished talking and stumbled through the night to the sandy clearing to wait.

In the dark we shared around the food we'd brought. (Someone had brought wild rice and blueberries for me to quickly put together beforehand for my contribution to the feast.) Even those of us fasting partook; this meal wasn't for us, it was for the spirits. PaShawOneeBinace told us some things I was glad I didn't know until then. The person who goes in the shaking tent, he said, is risking his life. People have been known not to come out at the end. Even presuming he did come out, he'd been taught that each ceremony takes time off his own life. But he valued us, and all humanity, and this ceremony, plenty enough to go in anyhow. And then he lifted up the roll of birchbark around the bottom, crawled in, and slid the birchbark back down.

The simplest understanding of the shaking tent is that there are a vast multitude of spirits out there who you're asking your questions of, and amid the cacophony the one who serves as an interpreter for them is an immensely old one called Mishiikenh, the Turtle. When the spirits are invited into the tent, all of them can be heard talking, most in no recognizable language. And when they come in, they shake the tent around, violently, until it looks like it might take flight. The *jaasakiid*,<sup>65</sup> the one running the ceremony, asks the supplicants' questions, and from this chaos comes an answer.

There was very little prelude or prologue. PaShawOneeBinace called out that he was ready, and the first person went up to the *jiisakaan*. They knelt down at the front of the tent, where a tiny hole had been cut in the bottom of the birch-bark scrim and aligned with the largest pole, a cedar sapling. They took a handful of tobacco in their left hand and held it against the pole. Then they asked their question, with Dan close behind translating into Anishinaabemowin.

Then a storm seized the tent. It shook back and forth, the hooves and jingles clinking. That noise was joined suddenly by the strange voices of the spirits. Some squeaked, some rumbled. They all seemed to talk at once. They came in a kind of rhythm, in quick waves, and they shook the tent wildly. It seemed like it would come apart at any moment; it could barely contain everything happening inside it. One voice carried the thread. Sometimes it resolved into a word I could understand, but mostly, they say, Mishiikenh speaks very ancient Anishinaabemowin, full of words rarely heard anymore. The *jiisakaan* was tiny, but it expanded to fill my entire awareness. It seemed to take up the entire clearing, or the entire peninsula, and to be lit with a light not from any physical source, a light not even really visible to the eye but to the spirit. It was thunder and lightning, and it was gathered millennia.

And then suddenly it stopped. And it was just a strange cylindrical structure on the sand in a clearing. PaShawOneeBinace talked with the supplicant and Dan, making sure everything was understood. The person thanked him, and stood up, and came back to sit with everyone else.

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<sup>65</sup> Those who haven't studied Ojibwe grammar won't find it obvious that this word is related to *jiisakaan*, the word for the tent itself. That word is a noun form of *jiisakii*, a verb meaning 'hold a shaking tent ceremony'. *Jaasakiid* is a participle—'one who *jiisakiis*'—derived by a suffix and a regular vowel change (a phenomenon we have in English, but irregularly and only on the last syllable rather than the first: *outgrow, outgrew*).

The questions everyone asked that night are a private matter, as are their answers, and I won't recount them. I was nearly last in line, so I watched as the tent shook for people who wanted dreams interpreted, life guidance, advice on how to carry out a ceremony. Misty was right before me. More in touch with their feelings than me, Misty had decided to ask for a name with much less interference from academic questions. When the tent stopped shaking and Dan and PaShawOneeBinace had clarified together, Dan announced: "Your Ojibwe name is MEKADE. And your clan is the white horse with black spots—BEBEZHIGOGANZHII." And since this was a naming: "Now everyone has to greet you, 'Boozhoo, Mekade!'" So Mekade went around the circle, and everyone greeted them with the new name, and it was stuck on, bound in, for good.

My heart hammered as if trying to escape. It was so real yet so unreal to be here. I crouched down and held tobacco against the cedar pole. Dan helped me ask my question again. The tent shook and the spirits' voices rushed down and tumbled into the tent and I felt like I was inside a stormcloud alive with lightning. For that span of time there was just me and the *jiisakaan*, and the *jiisakaan* was the universe. And then it fell silent.

Breath and heartbeats fast and shallow, I waited while PaShawOneeBinace and Dan clarified what had been said, and then Dan told me: "Your Ojibwe name is WAABANANG-ININI."

"Did you hear his clan?" PaShawOneeBinace asked. I had heard a little: the word *ogimaa* over and over—'leader'—though I didn't realize it was connected to that question. "Your clan is the crane," Dan said once it was clear. "AJIJAAK."

I got up, so dazed I nearly forgot to thank them, and went around the circle greeting everyone as they told me, "Boozhoo, Waabanang-inini!" I felt like a stranger on a new planet, experiencing powerful *déjà vu* with the faces of people I'd once known a lifetime ago. Flashbulbs were going off somewhere. In the end I made it back to my spot on the ground. Waabanang-inini. Morning Star Man. I had no idea how to understand it, but that was my name, that was me. I dizzily pondered over it through the last person's question, and then PaShawOneeBinace emerged, still alive this time, and had us take down the tent. A clock somewhere told us it was after two in the morning.

Is it possible to interpret all this as a cheap parlor trick? Of course it is. Man claims ability to talk to spirits, man goes inside little tent, man takes questions,

man shakes little tent and talks in funny voices, crowd says wow. But I'm not interested in that interpretation.

For one thing, shaking tents have a history far weirder and more inexplicable than what I was aware of seeing that night. Around the 1930s a *jaasakiid* held a shaking tent where some skeptical white men were present, who insisted it wasn't the spirits shaking the tent but the *jaasakiid*. So when it was time to start, he put only his coat inside the tent, at which point it started shaking immediately, and continued shaking for the length of the ceremony even though the *jaasakiid* was sitting outside it.<sup>66</sup> In 1879 a Canadian Mountie came to visit a medicine man, walking into his tipi. The medicine man disregarded him completely, and the two sat in darkness for a while, until suddenly the tipi began shaking violently. The medicine man was sitting completely still, and the tipi was made of "a dozen long poles crossed at the top, wide apart at the bottom and covered with heavy buffalo robes making it impossible to lift one side, as I now witnessed, for these teepees are built so that no ordinary wind could blow them over." When it stopped the Mountie ran outside to see who was shaking it, and found nothing but an empty plain in bright moonlight. He came back in and it started rocking again, "this time so violently that it sometimes lifted several feet on one side so that both myself and the interpreter could plainly see outside."<sup>67</sup> In 1848, a Canadian painter couldn't sleep for the sound of a shaking tent ceremony, and went out through the pitch dark camp to see it. As soon as he lay down to watch, unseen by the attendees, at the outside of the circle, the *jaasakiid* stopped the ceremony, and from inside the quite opaque tent called out that a white man was there who shouldn't be.<sup>68</sup> Sometime before 1850, a *jaasakiid* named Catherine Wabose told about her experience inside the shaking tent, and it was not her doing the shaking:

...I went in, taking only a small drum. I immediately knelt down, and holding my head near the ground in a position, as near as may be, prostrate, began beating my drum, and reciting my songs or incantations. The lodge commenced shaking violently by supernatural means. I knew this by the compressed current of air above, and the noise of motion. This being regarded by me and by all without

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<sup>66</sup> Deloria, Vine. *The World We Used to Live In*, p. 95. Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Publishing, 2006.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 93–94.

as proof of the presen[ce] of the spirits I consulted, I ceased beating and singing, and lay still, waiting for questions, in the position I had at first assumed.<sup>69</sup>

But even leaving aside the issue of just who's talking and shaking the tent, there's a more basic reason that I'm not interested in explaining the ceremony away as trickery. It's just this: I've gotten to know PaShawOneeBinace a little. And he's not trying to put one over on anybody. Everything that happened there, he believes sincerely. In this he joins centuries of *jaasakiwaad*<sup>70</sup> before him, including the one who, later, renounced "his former pagan practices" and converted to Christianity—but even on his deathbed, when a man who'd seen him thirty years prior asked him to finally reveal the trick, told him,

"I know it, my uncle. [...] I have become a Christian, I am old, I am sick, I cannot live much longer, and I can do no other than speak the truth. Believe me, I did not deceive you at the time. I did not move the lodge. It was shaken by the power of the spirits. I only repeated to you what the spirits said to me. I heard their voices. The top of the lodge was full of them, and before me the sky and wide lands lay expanded. I could see a great distance about me, and believed I could recognize the most distant objects."<sup>71</sup>

And if there's no trickster, there's no trick.

In this regard it seems the simplicity of PaShawOneeBinace's lodge stands almost as a challenge. In former centuries, it seems to say, people could be convinced that something supernatural was happening if they saw a phenomenon they couldn't explain rationally. In these latter days, now that we have magic everywhere—rectangles in our pockets that can summon (what purports to be) all the world's knowledge in an instant—and it's all rationally explained, those who will gain the reward of understanding that the world is permeated with strange spirits are those who will toss out the idea of looking for the trapdoor, the dove up the sleeve, and realize that the true magic lies in getting swallowed

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>70</sup> Plural form. (Being a participial verb form, this pluralizes very differently from the usual -(a)g endings for animate nouns.)

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

up by the storm. Why explain thunder when you can experience what it's like to be thunder?

You can say that PaShawOneeBinace must've put himself in some kind of hypnotic trance state, and you might even be right. And you'd certainly also be entirely missing the point. "You could as well say that a poem is explained by saying that it consists of black marks on paper," wrote Greer of a similar situation: "a true statement, but one that misses most of what's meaningful about the phenomenon."<sup>72</sup> Coming to people when they're in states like that, open to the spirits like the top of the *jiisakaan*; grabbing hold of their imagination and taking it to new places—this is *how* the spirits communicate. If we take it as established—as I think we can—that "spirit" and "consciousness" are basically synonyms, it follows that spirits aren't, for the most part, going to communicate with you through physical acts like knocking over plates and rattling chains (although they may shake the occasional tent). Rather, they'll be there in your imagination, where your consciousness runs freest, waiting for you to leave a path open to the more sober, calculating parts of your mind, where you can see them clearer and talk about them. PaShawOneeBinace opened a path that night wide enough for all of us to communicate with the spirits, if we allowed ourselves to.

## Lost and Found

Once the *jiisakaan* was taken down, all we fasters picked up the warm blankets we'd huddled up in to watch, and got on Pebaam's boat. With the help of Stacy and a snazzy million-candlepower light he'd just gotten, he took us back through the enclosing darkness and a drizzle that muted conversation, to all our various islands. He dropped me off last. "Got a light?" he asked.

"Nope!"

"Need one?"

"I don't think so." It would be a short walk.

"Do you know exactly where you are?"

"I... think so. I should be able to follow the shoreline back."

"Okay. Sleep well!" He rode off, with Stacy shining the light to illuminate my path for as long as it reached me.

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<sup>72</sup> Greer, *op. cit.*

Once the light was gone, I realized two things. One: it was *really* dark. Two: this did not seem familiar at all in the dark.

I picked my way along the damp rocks of the shoreline. With each footstep into the invisible I was liable to find that my foot's next landing spot was up at shin height, or an unknown distance below me, and attempting to account for this made me move with a slow-motion stagger. I didn't have the help of my hands to deal with the rocks and slopes, since they were full of the sleeping bag I'd wrapped up in at the ceremony. I pushed through some trees I didn't remember and found myself uncomfortably close to a ten-foot sheer drop to the lake that I would have to edge along. When my path kept bringing me into unfamiliar trees and up to cliff edges, I stopped. "Okay," I said aloud. "I did a dumb thing when I told Pebaam I knew where I was. And now I'll pay the price for doing that dumb thing." I found a vaguely flat spot on top of a rock, spread out my sleeping bag, covered it marginally from the drizzle with my jacket and raincoat, and slept a little.

When I woke up there was daylight, though so dim and drizzly it barely qualified as such. My sleeping bag was damp. The island still looked unfamiliar. I circumnavigated it. It didn't become familiar. It was the wrong island.

Pebaam would be coming back later that day to take us all to the teaching lodge—a sort of second half to the shaking tent, where we could sit in the light of day and ask for clarity on some of the mysteries we'd witnessed in the night. I just had to be ready to make myself visible when he got close. While circumnavigating I'd seen another island that seemed to be the same shape as my island, so I banked on the hope that he'd head there. I sat on the steep rock closest to the other island and waited.

The drizzle kept on drizzling. I bundled up in my bag, which got damper and damper. Later there was a little weak sun, enough to dry off fractionally. I waited. The vastness of this lake began to impress itself upon me. Of the thousands of people living along its shores, I could see nothing whatsoever. I had heard only natural sounds all morning: no boat motor anywhere, even off in the far distance. I sat there and kept waiting.

In what I guessed must be the early afternoon, I saw Pebaam's boat heading to the other island, and waved my bright orange sleeping bag in his direction. After finding the usual landing site empty, he noticed my signal and came over. "You know," he said, a little abashed, "I was kind of wondering last night if I

dropped you off on the wrong island.” I told him I’d managed okay. “There’s a good story in there,” his indefatigable jokester answered. “We’re going to get a lot of mileage out of this.” It didn’t turn into quite the smash hit we hoped, but we at least got a goggle-eyed chuckle out of each person we picked up along the way back to Ralph’s camp.

The peninsula that by night seemed vast and full of impenetrable mysteries looked, by day, more like a little Canadian lakeside paradise. Ralph’s teaching lodge was a series of arched saplings lashed together with horizontal cross-saplings into a long half-cylinder frame, with no walls, open to the sky. The floor was soft pine needles and the air was gentle and quiet. The ten people who’d been there last night all gathered quietly along the walls, and we went around asking questions about the answers we’d gotten from the spirits last night: unpacking some of the mysteries. Ralph stood at the front, in his blue jeans and plaid with a cigarette, and in his calm voice made the inexplicable sound a bit more explicable.

I took my place by the wall bubbling with enough questions to keep him talking for days. I knew nothing about the mythological role of the morning star, in Ojibwe or European tradition. The sum of my knowledge was that it was a traditional alternate name for Venus among old-time European stargazers. I had nowhere to connect. I had imagined, when I dared to imagine I might ever be given an Ojibwe name, that at the moment I received it, it would make instant sense and feel like I’d borne it all my life. In fact, it would make my life itself make sense, draw it into focus. But the name I’d gotten was a mystery to me. And it made me nervous that I was way up there in the sky. People around me carried names that translated to ‘Streamlet’, ‘Stone Woman’, ‘Leaf Storm’. And here I was, not even on the same planet. Not to mention that I was in the Crane clan, and thus supposed to be a leader (of whom?). I don’t remember what I asked exactly, but it can be boiled down to: What on Earth does this mean?

Essentially, that is, I hoped he would explain most of the metaphysics of the Ojibwe world and exactly how my life fit into it. As with any question where the answer is the size of a world, the only useful way to respond was obliquely. He told me that he never used to understand any reason behind his own name either, but one day on a fast, as his strength was failing, it occurred to him to just say it out loud. “PaShawOneeBinace,” he said—and felt an unexpected rush of energy. “PaShawOneeBinace.” More energy. “PaShawOneeBinace!” More. And he

kept going until he was shouting it across the lake. He reminded me that in the Ojibwe creation story (as in the scientific one), we all come from the stars, and we're all still connected to them. He told me that the morning star is a powerful spirit keeper to have as a namesake. And I started to realize that I would have to grow into this name, that the message here wasn't so much an explanation of my specific name as a reminder to trust the process.<sup>73</sup>

When Pebaam dropped me off after the teaching lodge, on the correct island, I suddenly found that I had no more arts and crafts projects left to keep me busy, nothing left to do but watch the island and mull over things. Here, on the last day, I would finally experience something like a typical fast, one not consumed by anticipating and then attending an important ceremony. I spent some of the rest of my fast thinking myself into circles about various questions, and some of it having a series of ambiguous and amorphous moments that could possibly, with some squinting, be construed as spiritual contact.

I stared for a long time at a little plant with a soft white flower growing out of a patch of soil, seeing what my imagination told me about it. It seemed to be telling me, almost playfully, that in a while, it would be tasty: it seemed to encourage me to smile and pretend I was biting it. I don't think it was just the hunger. I found out eventually that it was a blueberry plant: I'd never seen one in flower and didn't recognize it.

I watched the pine trees on the closest shore, standing so joyfully in the calm evening sun. They seemed to explain that life is hard work sometimes, like in the winter they'd just emerged from, but it's also just so much fun. I thought about a lot of things, rarely in any organized way. I sat on the island. The sun went down. I slept.

I heard a motorboat early in the morning of the last day and hurriedly packed up, but it turned out to be a glinting speck of a boat on the other side of the bay, not Pebaam on his dawn pickup rounds. I sat and waited anyhow; he'd be by shortly.

But he wasn't. And then he wasn't some more. I abandoned the idea of a dawn pickup. Then of a morning pickup. Then of a pickup in time for even a late lunch. I started to wonder if I'd misunderstood the days, or miscounted them. Or if there'd been an emergency back at camp. I examined some beaver poop. I

<sup>73</sup> In a useful phrase that seems, oddly, to have been popularized by the Philadelphia 76ers.

played with a plastic pinwheel I'd found washed up on the first day. I got really, really hungry.

At some point, feeling myself fading, I lay down on a big granite rock, head hanging down over the side of it, staring at the lichen on the rock and the island below it, and I let my mind wander in free association. My head was filled with static. After a while, though, it started resolving into vague impressions. A ghost of wind, blowing in white lines across darkness. A face, ancient, Native, out of focus both visually and mentally. The idea, again, that everything is connected, itself strangely unconnected to any context for thinking about that. A shapeless experience, not through any particular one of the five senses, of something that might be a barest bit of essence of the spirits. The wind blowing through time: the rocks as they are and as they've been; as they were under glaciers. So much, so fast, so hazy and bewildering and even, possibly, enlightening.

After a while I let it fade. I stood up: no boat. I cleaned my multitool very thoroughly. When I finished, Pebaam was arriving. It transpired that he was going to come get everyone at 6:30 A.M., but various things had happened, and now it was 5 P.M. I tossed my stuff into the boat with him and Liz, and he took us to Misty's little island, where he helped us both break our fasts.

He brought out a copper cup and poured in water. Except at the shaking tent, I hadn't drunk anything but a few raindrops in three and a half days—rain being considered sacred enough to drink while fasting—and I was dry inside and out. He held out the cup, and as he explained to do, I refused it. "No," I said, "this is for the healing of the Earth." He offered it three more times, and I offered it instead to the health of the culture, to the spirits I would learn to listen for, to belief. And on the fifth time he offered it, I drank it. Misty thought of four more ideals to offer the water to, and drank, and then we devoured a whole pot of wild rice. When we got back to camp, someone had made a big pot of delicious soup, and friends were there, and we told stories, and we slept soundly.

I did little the next day but sew and listen to shouts from a boisterous sweat Pebaam ran and I cooked for. The day after that, several more people came off their fasts, and Pebaam figured it would be an opportune time to call a sharing circle. So we all got on couches in the living room and went around the circle talking about our fasts.

I had a hard time imagining that all the many and apparently inconclusive experiences and impressions I'd had could add up to any lesson of any coherency.

But I listened to everyone speak. Anthony, who had unexpectedly gotten his name in the sweat yesterday, talked about having had the single most transformative day of his life, and learning the limits of rationality. Liz and two friends, who all work with kids, all agreed about the joy you get from doing good for the community. Misty talked about feeling like a tumbleweed that's finally found root in good soil. These fasts ran deep for people, and I heard some hard, soul-deep truths getting dug up and brought into light. And when it came around to me, I found that after all I did know some lessons I'd learned. I'd realized, in an insight that came after my fast with only a tenuous apparent connection to it, that I keep walls up against the unexpected, and only stand to gain from tearing those walls down. As I said it, I found myself filling up with an excitement for life that I had rarely been able to muster in my last few months of dry routine and empty adventure-seeking, because it looked like I might be able to quit desaturating all my experiences into crumbly gray cinders as I'd been doing lately, and start experiencing them in full color.

Something happened in that sharing circle. Eight or so people, only half of whom I knew at all, became, over the course of a couple hours, a community. It's hard to logically find an equivalence between a community such as a longstanding tribe or Amish town and this circle of half-strangers, but it's there—perhaps in spirit. If a Carrington Event had struck the world into sudden technopocalypse and stranded us together there, so that instead of a couple days together we now had the rest of our lives stretching before us, we would have done okay together with that sharing circle as a basis (and joined soon, no doubt, by several more of Pebaa'm's Nigigoonsiminikaaning friends arriving on foot).

This was a particularly bracing realization to me because I'd just spent nearly three years living in a community house in Minneapolis that had never quite seemed to achieve the depth I'd just felt with these people. Was it because at Sprout House we approached our various quests for the metaphysical individually and kept our hands out of anyone else's, leaving us nothing more profound than the succession of mundane daily highs and lows for conversation fodder—whereas here we could talk freely about trying to attain something mysterious, and have a common reference point? I couldn't say. But something felt different. I felt like a real part of this circle. All of me did.

The next day Misty and I climbed into Liz and Brandon's truck to catch a ride back into the rest of the world. We had been gone eight days. But I had lived two

or three strange new lifetimes in that span. Already it was hard to believe that when we reached the highway and made it beyond the embrace of Rainy Lake we would find the prosaic old town of Fort Frances there, with its paper mill and border traffic. But alas.

## What the River Said

If I hadn't been looking for the sign, I probably would've gone right past it—a little brown one by the side of the trail that said walk in campsite. I slowed to a stop and took my bike by the handlebars down off the pavement and into woods that fairly sighed with spring.

It was May of 2018 now. As it turned out, in the year since I'd been given my name, I hadn't experienced a sudden upwelling of purposefulness and clarity about life. In fact I'd rather spent it directionlessly: hitchhiking and trainhopping with Misty from one off-grid community to another, mostly out West where the skies are big and the air is thick with dreams attempting to manifest. I was trying to convince myself that I was learning how to live in the country after a lifetime of living in cities, but a few months into the trip it became very clear that although I imagined I was moving to the country to be close to the land and thus solve all my problems of feeling estranged from the Earth, the real estrangement wasn't geographical but mental, even—dare we say it—spiritual. I was very capable, it turned out, of going to a permaculture farm whose mission I believed in deeply, and nonetheless whiling away a whole month reading books, waiting for an enlightened feeling to arrive. It was due any minute. I had read of people and met people who were very at one with nature, felt at home in the woods. That was what I wanted. And I knew that in order to feel that way I had to learn, learn, learn about those woods, spend time there, learn to perceive what's not obvious, until I could go out and see the stories all around without relying on a woods-wise friend to tell it all for me. But the problem was, I wasn't good at that *now*. And when I went outside and wasn't good at understanding everything, that was a bummer. I had been a kid who tested well and didn't need to study for exams. I should have grown up to be someone who walks into a forest in an unfamiliar biome and points to a tree and says, "Ah, yes, the little nutlike fruits on this tree can be boiled and mashed to a pulp to be used as a wonderful addition to the squirrel I plan to snare for tonight's dinner." But the natural world was reluc-



tant to give me its secrets as readily as an SAT “critical reading” multiple-choice question. I wasn’t good at the natural world. Know what I *was* good at? Reading books, learning from *them*. And so I kept finding myself, on summer days, in the shade of a beautiful forest, reading ink-stained bits of dead trees while living ones rose up sheltering and mythical around me.

I could see the problem; I had barely begun to glimpse any solution. And so I rode my bike: after I went back for a second spring at Porky’s—hoping perhaps that my spirit guide would explain my life’s purpose to me during one of Pebaam’s ceremonies—and after the May sun finally melted all the snow, I pedaled out alone to spend some time outside. If I didn’t know quite how to approach learning about life in tune with the natural world, it at least couldn’t hurt to just get out there awhile and breathe fresh air. Whatever I did under the trees, at least I’d be under them. When your way forward isn’t clear to you, there’s something to be said for the old strategy of “fake it till you make it.” A person who gave me a hitchhiking ride years ago told me, “Take the first step, and the second one will be revealed.”

When I came to the end of the quarter-mile trail to the walk-in campsite, I started to believe that I had been shown the second step. I found a single picnic table in a little clearing lain with soft white-pine needles, which gathered the sun and transmuted it into a lazy-warm gold glow, an alchemical process that quite evidently imbued the light with a life all its own. The clearing sat on a little river. The river flowed by at just the right speed, not too fast, not too slow, and redwing blackbirds tossed out their reedy calls cavalierly from the other bank as they bombed through the air from one dried cattail stalk to another, picking spots at random to perform their strange sideways landings. As I came in, two herons flew upstream. The pines that embraced the campsite also leaned out over the river. They were celebrating the arrival of spring by dropping a magnanimity of

rich golden-yellow pollen, which streaked the top of the water and made it seem to glow from within.

My name came with a few stipulations I didn't mention yet. One of them, common to all Ojibwe names as far as I know, was that once a year I would need to feast it, as it's called: a quiet, contemplative little ceremony I could do anywhere I could find some woods. Another, explained to me by PaShawOneeBinace in his teaching lodge—where the pine-needle floor, come to think of it, looked a lot like what was under my bare feet here—was that I should display a star somewhere on me. The how and where were up to me, but that Morning Star should be there to see. I was coming right up to the first anniversary of being named, and I had yet to do either, but I'd biked 170 miles now hoping a place would present itself where I could sit quietly and listen to the world, or the spirits, and figure out how to give my name that respect. Under one of the pines I found a little feather from Migizi, a bald eagle, the one who flies highest and intercedes with the Great Spirit on humanity's behalf. As I poked around, more feathers kept turning up until I had five on the picnic table. If everything else around me had yet failed to make my mind up, that good omen certainly would have been enough. I set up my tent and prepared to stay awhile.

I found the water was not just the right speed, but the right temperature as well, even though there had probably been snow on the ground here until a few weeks ago, and I could walk from one side of the river to the other without ever stepping into unnerving muck or going more than chest-deep. I also found that it begged for me to drink it, not filtered but straight, with all the pollen granules and subtle scent of algae that marked it as living water. My awareness that giardia and cryptosporidium could lurk upstream was overruled by some faculty in my body that could clearly sense the health of the water and assured me I had nothing to worry about. I filled my bottle and took the land into myself.

I took a couple days to settle in before doing anything too big. I got acquainted with the town of Pine River a couple miles up the road, sharing a name with the river: a homey little place where Jim at the Chamber of Commerce (a big log cabin by the trail) showed me some of the historical items scattered around the building, like the town's first telephone, and explained that tourist money does help, but a lot of the people of Pine River are farmers and ranchers. At the campsite, I watched a muskrat swim by the landing, and noticed the amazing whizzing sound geese's winds make, and I wrote a haiku:

the moon got caught in  
the powdery pine branches  
over the river

When I decided, after two days there, that it was time to feast my name, I couldn't say I was doing it as someone who knows the spirits, communes with them every day, has a close relationship with the spirit helper invoked by his name. I was little closer than I had been a year before to working out in what capacity I even think spirits exist. But on the other hand, I hadn't been completely idle in the previous year. I had searched with slight but nonnegligible success for Ojibwe stories that mention the Morning Star; I'd talked about it with Pebaamibines at sugarbush; I'd looked into the tradition of star quilts, which are sometimes said to represent Waabanang specifically of all the stars. From all this and from plain old-fashioned contemplation and common sense, I'd gathered at least the simple insight that the Morning Star represents hope: the light that shows up into the darkness a little while before the sun, to reassure those who are watching that even the longest night does have an end. And hope is, after all, something I've always felt called to carry. These days people everywhere are prone to hear the news and slump into an impenetrable pessimism-fest. Planet on fire this, endless wars that, and on top of it all every movie's a remake. I've always felt more drawn to the longer, more positive view: through all that, there are people in Iraq and Indonesia and Idaho living lives they love with people they love, and coming up with creative ways to keep living good lives amid everything that's changing. Our species may cause a lot of problems for a while, but it won't end Earth, and a rebirth is inevitable once the problems eat themselves. Maybe it's a weird, backhanded kind of optimism, but it keeps me going and makes me happy.

I cooked some rice and beans, and dolloped some onto a birchbark plate I'd made that morning, and carried it with those thoughts away from the campsite and into the woods. Then, feeling a little silly about it, I sat there—glad the mosquitoes hadn't hatched yet—and quieted down and talked into the forest about what I'd learned. I spoke in English and halting Ojbewemowin and addressed whatever spirits might be existent and listening. Fake it till you make it, I had read, isn't just good advice for when you're directionless in life, but also for when you want to establish a relation with the spiritual realm, whether for an Ojibwe Mide priest waiting to see what happens when she smokes a pipe or

for a Christian kneeling by the bedside hoping someone really is listening. Act as though there is someone to hear you, and they'll be more inclined to answer.

I don't know that I got any answer in particular when I was out there feasting my name. But I still felt like I'd done the right thing: not just by honoring what I'd agreed to do when I asked for a name, but by remembering that even if I never fully understand even the one thing it seems like I should have complete understanding of—myself—the reward is in trying and always understanding more.

The way you can go  
isn't the real way.

The name you can say  
isn't the real name.<sup>74</sup>

But it's a name I can use while I'm here among the ten thousand things.

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Then there was the matter of showing a star somewhere on me. From before I was even given the name, I was getting hints about how it should look. My first day on the island, I found a little plastic pinwheel that had washed up on the stones, with eight petals, alternating blue and orange. After the *jiisakaan*, in the teaching lodge, I noticed Ralph's leather bag had a star beaded onto it: eight points, radiating in colorful patterns. Back at Pebaam's cabin I noticed a quilt I hadn't paid attention to before, showing a big eight-pointed star. A star quilt, Pebaamibines said. The Morning Star.

I had toyed briefly with the idea of a rotating series of shirts, or a patch on a jacket, or (most plausibly) a beaded tobacco pouch. But really I knew from the moment Ralph told me to show off a star that it was time to take what I had learned in a year or two of giving my friends stick-and-poke tattoos, and put the star right there on my skin. There were only two questions left: what colors I'd use—which I'd settled that January during a series of predawn walks out onto a frozen lake to look at the Morning Star and let inspiration come—and whether I'd actually have the nerve to do it.

It wasn't that I was afraid of the pain; the consideration of pain ranked somewhere near "negligible" for me. It was that a tattoo is so, well, permanent. ("No

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<sup>74</sup> Le Guin, *op. cit.*, ch. 1.

*kidding?”) I had always thought it’d be cool to have one, but I had already changed so much in the decade since I’d hit the legal age to get one, and if I played my cards right I still had a good five or six more decades to live. Wouldn’t regrets just be a matter of time? Even in this case, when I had been all but mandated to get one by actual spirits, I found it hard to convince myself I’d always agree with the decision. Perhaps later I would decide that beaded pouch was the right choice after all. I’d asked elders and been told it was no sacrilege to get a spiritually oriented tattoo, but would everyone I met agree?*

The day after I feasted my name, I woke up having decided that if I was going to do it, I was going to do it today, but I still didn’t really know if I was going to. So I figured I’d just proceed as if I’d come to a yes, and at some point if that was the wrong answer, I would come to a step where I’d realize I had to stop. I got some paper and sketched out the shape I’d devised, and did a little basic trigonometry to figure out the measurements I’d need. I cut some straightedges out of birchbark and drew the star onto my arm to check out the placement. Good, good. I opened up my kit and mixed the first color of ink. Alright, getting a little heart-pounding here, but still seems good, just... big. I got a needle out of its package and fixed it onto a pencil for grip. Hmm, that looks quite a bit like a needle one could use to permanently put ink under one’s epidermis. Hmm. I sat down on the picnic table. It was a bright, warm day, and redwing blackbirds were crashing through the reeds, and I dipped the needle in the orange and poked the first dot into my skin. When it came right down to it, I didn’t even hesitate much before I did it.

And of course just a little patch of orange would look ridiculous, so once I started I did the whole star, eight points in a six-color pattern, poking straight through the whole day. After one of the colors I stopped and considered eating, but found I only had an appetite for finishing the tattoo. I poked the last few dots as the long dusk of the Northwoods’ late May was beginning to gather. I stared at it for a while.

As a kid I had spent days at Warder feeling completely, unabashedly at home. Then I had grown up and left Cincinnati and spent, it seemed, all the years since then chasing a grown-up version of that same feeling. Now I had come to a place where the muskrats came by to see me, the redwing blackbirds played just across the way, the eagles left behind feathers for me to find, and the air was fat with pine pollen and the lightness of life. I wasn’t tempted to pull out a book; none could be as fascinating as where I was and who was there with me. I felt at home



in the outdoors as I hadn't since I was a kid, a feeling I'd been starved for for all these years, now filling me up over the brim. It wasn't hard to believe spirits of *some* sort were responsible. I put some tobacco in my left hand; I closed my fingers around it and the muscles moved around under the freshly placed ink. I walked over to the river and offered the tobacco into the water. All that, at least, was worth giving thanks for.

## **Back for More**

Anything that might be called "spiritual development" in my life proceeds slowly and haltingly. In the year after I spent those couple days under the pines with my name in May of 2018, I had moments that approached transcendence, like some of the days I spent bicycling around Lake Superior. I also had long periods of just muddling through, like the month I spent in a limbo between places to live,

humping my big hiking backpack around Minneapolis to crash on friends' couches and under bridges, frankly baffled as to the point of being alive. I kept up at least the outward manifestations of the responsibility I'd accepted when I asked for a name. I offered tobacco by a tree or in the water every day. Later in the year I made a hand drum for myself, fulfilling another obligation that I'd been given with my name there in the teaching lodge, the making of my *izhiwan* or namesake-item. And I brought the drum to the forest with me when I feasted my name again that spring, so I could break it in and "spiritualize it" (*adizookaazh*). But not much of it felt like it meant anything. When May rolled around, I knew it was time to go back out on an island and attempt to reacquaint myself with the mysteries of the world.

It so happened that Misty also felt called to fast again, so together, fighting various schedule crunches, we set out from Minneapolis one evening and drove all the way to Nigigoonsiminikaaning in one night. The border guards in International Falls, I discovered, are less chummy in the small hard hours of the night when the Rainy River recedes into the darkness and the world is reduced to the sterile geometry of the floodlit customs post. On behalf of the Queen, they confiscated a Roman candle Misty had forgotten in the trunk. Piloting the little Honda Civic down the five rutted miles of gravel to the cabin like a small craft on Superior in a November gale, I had a troubling sense that all the things I'd been hoping to leave behind were riding right there in the back seat. When we made it to the end of the road, silvery hints of dawn were beginning to burnish the edge of the night, and all we could do was stumble into the bunkhouse and fall asleep.

The sun rose over the lake while we slept, marking the beginning of both of our fasts, and when we finally managed to wake up, the sunlight pierced into my half-baked mind and threw into sharp relief all the spider webs hanging off my soul. Besides us, the only other person in camp was Pebaam's wife Laura, who greeted us with a smile I wished I could reciprocate. We'd called ahead, so she knew we wanted to go out that morning, and together we slung a canoe over the back of Pebaam's motorboat so we'd be able to come back on our own steam, howbeit reduced by four days of fasting. She brought Misty to one of a cluster of islands around the corner from the cabin, and left me with the canoe at another island nearby.

I climbed onto my island feeling at best half alive. It was a cool, sunny day, and I fell asleep almost immediately on the rocks, still in tatters from the night of

driving. I didn't make it far from sleep all day. The sunset brought a rainbowy ring around the place where the sun had sunk below the horizon, and then an orange-red that flooded half the sky. It was the last sunlight I would see for days.

I emerged from my tent the second day into a world shushed, stilled, and chilled by drizzle. My spirits dimmed to match the weather. This time around I had no big colorful ceremony halfway through the fast to look forward to, just three more days of this island—on which I couldn't go exploring off the little patch of rocky shore without getting soggy from the spongy dirt underfoot and the water collected on the million little twigs I would have to bushwhack through. I spotted a little gaggle of mergansers next to a nearby island, and attempted to derive meaning from watching them swim around, one of them occasionally diving or flying away. I also stared at the rocks. I found an interesting downed tree, all its roots spread through a thin mat of dirt that had been clinging to the granite until the tree blew over and took the soil with it, leaving bare rock and a standing disc of tangled roots taller than me. To keep warm I walked in circles, or I huddled in my sleeping bag, staring out sideways at the next island over, occasionally able to catch glimpses of the mergansers.

By the third day, I was having trouble seeing the point. I was wet. I was cold. I was hungry. The flat gray of the sky was disarranging my mind. I woke up that day and walked in circles on the granite shore for hours, willing the morning to pass away. When I couldn't do one more orbit, I figured it must be around noon or one—lunchtime, I couldn't help thinking—and pulled out my watch for the first time that day to check. It was 8:40 in the morning.

An ineluctable stream of secondhand words flowed through my head all day. A song lyric would grab hold of me for half an hour, refusing to leave even after I sang it aloud. Then just as mysteriously as it arrived it would fade and be replaced by a clever passage from a book I'd read five years ago. I would find, to my surprise, that I could reconstruct whole paragraphs from memory. I had enough experience with meditation to know that ceding my attention to these used-up words was no way to reach a greater awareness of any aspect of the world, be it physical, mental, spiritual, excretory. I dismissed them. Within minutes they were back, crowding in through the alley door in greater numbers than before.

The *manidoog* were out there, ostensibly. They were all over my island. But I sure couldn't see them. In a pool in a depression on one of the granite stones I'd been orbiting, tiny water beetles swam back and forth in the algae that had grown

to fit the shape of the bowl. They were very neat, perfectly inscrutable in their tiny lives made of tiny decisions. The Ojibwe word for insect is *manidoons*, ‘little spirit’. But they seemed more like little automata to me, more reminiscent of Conway’s Game of Life<sup>75</sup> than of any cosmic truths or mysteries whose contemplation would open the world out into something strange and wonderful. Over on the other island, the mergansers paddled and dove and issued quacks too quiet to reach me. And I walked around in circles, waiting for the slow darkening of the sky that would be, absent the sun, my first signal that night was coming. Not that I would be able to sleep. I had never slept so much in my life as those first couple nights, and I’d napped through the days, waking up from each nap both pleased and dismayed to find the day a little closer to ending. I had dreams of shocking triviality: going to the mall, reading Wikipedia. Now I was slept out; my eyes wouldn’t stay closed, and I’d find myself right back where I’d always been, looking out at the mergansers’ island.

In what I presumed was the afternoon, as I was walking in circles again, I heard my name. It wasn’t a spirit, at least not an incorporeal one. It was Misty shouting from their island. “I want to go back,” they said.

I tried, unsuccessfully, not to admit to myself that I was filled with glee at having a change of pace and something actually happening. I untied the canoe and paddled over to Misty’s island, where they explained they’d fouled up their back somehow on the first night and could now only assume a small range of positions, all of them seated, without excruciating pain. They had gotten no sleep the previous night. Unworried that I hadn’t eaten for about thirty hours, I helped them pile their stuff in and paddled us back. I’ve never been more thankful for small talk.

A few other people had shown up at camp—Pebaam had passed us with some of them in his boat on our way in—and there was a fire going inside the cabin. Misty broke their fast and figured out a bizarre, contorted sleeping position on the recliner. I stayed inside awhile, enjoying light, dryness, warmth, friendship. But I set up my tent on the lawn and stuck out my fast until the fourth morning.

Pebaam and Misty helped me break my water fast. Food came a short time later when Tammy, who was there to support her daughter during her fast (which

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<sup>75</sup> For an explanation and demonstration, see [playgameoflife.com](http://playgameoflife.com).

would start the next day), cooked up some strikingly orange seagull eggs that Pebaam had harvested from a little island the night before.

As soon as I'd eaten I was given a job, and found myself helping prepare things for a sweat lodge: kindling, firewood, grandfathers, repairs on the lodge frame, tarps and blankets to cover it, cedar boughs to carpet the floor. I surrendered into the bustle of activity, and felt happier than I had in days, maybe months. I was a part of something again; I was here for a reason, getting the lodge set up and learning from Pebaam's goofy nuggets of wisdom. Pebaam busied himself frying fish, the final big meal for a whole clutch of people who were going to sweat tonight and then start fasting tomorrow morning.

Stuffed with fried walleye, we stuffed ourselves into the sweat lodge. I had never been to one of Pebaam's sweats before. He gave the first door over to songs for the spirits. The other three doors he split equally among the nine of us: each of us could say anything we felt called to say. In situations like this I'm apt to feel anxious, the out-of-place Ohio boy in a sweat lodge far from home among people who, it seems, must have heard enough speeches from white people to last their whole lives. But when the drum and stick came around to me at the end of the second door, a gush of words poured out of my mouth, with little more self-consciousness or filtration than there was on the sweat pouring off my forehead: my journey in capsule form, my hope for the future, my joy at being in that lodge with everyone, my gratitude. When Pebaam runs ceremonies at sugarbush, sometimes when he smokes the pipe and starts his invocation of the spirits, he speaks for a solid five minutes or more straight through in Ojibwemowin, naming and thanking entities east, south, west, and north, and when he finishes and switches back to English for the benefit of the crowd, the first thing he says is, "I did not know I was going to say all that!" It's the pipe talking, he explains—its spirit and the spirits it channels. I think, talking in the lodge, I felt for the first time something like that state. I even quoted his little epilogue when I was done. And I sang a song I'd learned at sugarbush that spring. By the end of it I was flowing everywhere with sweat and shuddering.

I was like that through the remaining two doors. When the *oshkaabewis* threw open the door at the end, I crawled out feeling open, everywhere open, in every pore open to the bright Nigigoonsiminikaaning evening. During my fast I'd entertained the idea that I was having the most mindnumbing time of my life in preparation for some climactic reversal in which everything would become clear.

It seemed, strangely, to have come true: I had known the depths of boredom and the purest feeling of pointlessness, and now all I had was pure joy. In the evening the camp bustled with fasters getting ready to go out, and then going—some for the first time, full of excitement. (And hustled again, more modestly, when one of them called camp on her cell phone to say she'd found bear poop and didn't want to be on a peninsula after all but a real island.) Misty's back had clicked back into shape overnight, and we spent the night in the tent talking about our lives, how far we'd both come since we met each other, the sweat, how tremendous it was to be here, the lessons to be learned from a lifetime as a human. Life was so full, so ripe with potential and experiences. A few claps of thunder sounded in the far distance.

I stayed at camp for the next week to help out and get to know the place better. Misty had to leave after a couple days, but before they did, we shoveled sand into low spots together and cut cedar boughs for a sweat. After Misty left, Brandon and Liz showed up, and I worked with Brandon to fix the tilty dock and dig a new hole for the outhouse. (To move it we screwed long two-by-fours to the walls and assembled a crew of four to carry it to the new hole like a big gross bier.) I even served *oshkaabewis* duty for a couple sweats, one by Pebaam and one by his brother Don.

Fasters came and went. A number of them were students from the University of Minnesota's American Indian Student Cultural Center, most of them on their first fast, looking as innocent and eager as puppies. There was also Joseph from Bad River, who was only 24 but already learning to hold ceremonies, and planning to start an immersion school back home. Later on two teenage girls from Lac Courte Oreilles showed up, students at the Waadookodaading immersion school. Not only were they fluent in Ojibwe, they were also quick-witted and already more skilled at questioning approved stories out of textbooks than I was at age twenty. Everyone pitched in to make the camp run. And Pebaam took us all to see local sights. On one powerhouse day I rode with him and three of the U of M students to see the Nigigoonsiminikaanning powwow grounds, then cross the water border into Minnesota and see Ober's Island, where beloved local conservationist Ernest Oberholtzer (1884–1977) had built a fantasy world of cedar houses crazy-quilted onto a tiny, remote island and stuffed with eleven thousand books; then we puzzled at the red-ochre paintings left by unknown ancestors on granite lake cliffs hundreds of years ago; and we came back by way of



an island where we raided seagull nests for late-season eggs: big, gray speckled with black, with thick shells built for the wild.

And of course we circled up on the porch to share our experiences of our fasts. Gabby, one of the U of M students, went out merely open to the idea of getting a name from the experience, as she'd heard happens sometimes, and was surprised when one actually presented itself. Then Joseph mentioned that names kept coming to him while he was fasting, and he'd eventually realized he was being given the right to name people. When Pebaam confirmed this interpretation, he gave Gabby another name that had been coming to him for her. But it wasn't all names and revelations. One guy went out looking for clarification about the mountain lion, which he'd been told was his spirit helper, but came back with a different clarity instead, one he couldn't or didn't put into words. Another girl said her takeaway was mostly a kick-start to learning about her ancestral culture, which had been absent in her childhood. When I talked about my less-than-revelatory time in the rain, a few people combined ideas to say that not every fast gives you a big vision ("or as the cool kids call it, 'vizh,'" Pebaam says)—Liz said it can be like a tree you look back at years later to find it's a lot bigger than you remembered, even if you couldn't see it growing day by day.

Working with the people at camp, jumping into the lake with the rest of the outhouse team once we got it repositioned, eating dinners and talking the evenings away out on the porch next to the mouth of the Ottertail, I felt that community spirit, that feeling I've gotten at sugarbush and fasting camp and maybe nowhere else. Whatever spirits may or may not have visited me on my fast, the spirit of community was certainly thriving and feeding all of us there. It's a spirit that's no less important or real just because it's makes itself clearly known. It's the spirit that allows knowledge of all the other spirits to be passed on. While I was there in that pop-up community pitched on ancient foundations, I felt at my most alive, and though I don't know what the people I met there are like outside camp, I believe I could tell most of them did to.

It was hard to leave. In fact I was the last to leave; after everyone else went home, I sat Pebaam and Laura's dog Ziinzibaakwad ('Sugar') for a couple days before catching a ride to Fort Frances with Pebaam and hitching along on my way. When he dropped me off, I told him I planned to be back.



## Doing the Work

Today is February ninth. On this morning bright with sunlight off the snow, I put on my boots and coat and carried my wooden turtle out to the woods behind the house I live in now. I walked over the narrow, handmade bridge over the creek, my feet elevated a foot and a half above the deck on hard-packed old snow, and sat down on one of the stumps that serve for steps on the far side. Sitting there and looking north, there's nothing to see but woods. I set the turtle down in the snow on the bridge, and took off its shell. Inside in a couple little compartments were matches and a mussel shell with the four medicines—sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco.

I lit the medicines and wafted them to each of the four directions, and then sat down and meditated. Since November I've been practicing something called "discursive meditation". The familiar, Buddhist-American style of meditation seeks to dissolve the mind's attachment to its random stream of thoughts by train-

ing the practitioner to stop focusing on all those thoughts—the “monkey mind” that constantly jumps from one idea to another barely connected one—and instead empty the mind of contents. Discursive meditation has a similar goal, but once you’ve wrested your attention away from all these monkey-mind thoughts, instead of focusing on nothing at all, you focus on following one and only one train of thought, constantly returning to it if you go astray. It’s a style of meditation that was much in favor with monks and nuns in the Middle Ages, used for contemplation of the depths of truth to be found in the Bible: choose one phrase—say, John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word...”—and follow your thoughts about it wherever they can take you. It’s been out of fashion for some centuries, but I discovered it by way of old-ideas enthusiast John Michael Greer.<sup>76</sup> He points out that it can be used to great advantage with any spiritual system; he uses it himself as a pillar of his modern Druidic practice (which is, in fact, a real thing, as are modern Heathenry, Wicca, and Hellenism).

Before I started, hints had been accumulating in my life for a while that I would probably get a lot out of a meditation routine, but I’d been only half-inspired by Buddhist-style meditation. That, and I kept remembering something Brandon told me he’d once been told by a Dakota eacher of his: “Don’t cross the pipes.” That is, if you’re going to learn a spiritual tradition, learn *a* spiritual tradition, not two or three at once. Spiritual practice is all depth. Depth is of course abhorrent to Americans, especially in the age of Google and Wikipedia, but it’s the only way to learn any spiritual tradition. Because what such a tradition amounts to, after all, is a way to understand things you will never fully understand. Shallow dilettantism is not rewarded in that pursuit. That gets you things like a hippie-dippie celebration I attended once, in a very white middle-class part of Minneapolis, that featured a disgusting mixed salad of spiritualeseque empty gestures. There was a singing bowl meditation led by a Mexican guy who said, “I am... *from the Mayans*,” and then proceeded to use exclusively Sanskrit jargon (*pranayama, kundalini*) to narrate his charade. They had “sound healing” with tuning forks tuned to the orbits of the planets. Also a big circle where everyone was expected to go to the center and say what makes them “enter their divine place”, while chanting women sang something irrelevant about Mother Earth.

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<sup>76</sup> Greer, John Michael. “Discursive Meditation” (5-part series). *Toward Ecosophy* (blog). [ecosophia.dreamwidth.org/65232.html](http://ecosophia.dreamwidth.org/65232.html) (pt. 1), .../66287.html (pt. 2), .../67579.html (pt. 3), .../68294.html (pt. 4), .../69547.html (pt. 5).

Nothing real was learned by anyone that night, except that I learned very vividly what you get when you cross the pipes and think grabbing the grooviest bits of eight different traditions constitutes a useful system of practice.

In this regard it was interesting to me that, although no one had described a specifically Ojibwe style of meditation to me, discursive meditation sounded somewhat like how Pebaamibines had described his morning routine, and even more like how Richard Wagamese described his in *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*:

When the tea is ready, I cradle the cup in my palms and inhale the scent of lavender. I place the cup on the living room table. Then I rise to retrieve the bundle that holds the sacred articles of my ceremonial life. I open it and remove my smudging bowl, my eagle wing fan, my rattle and the four sacred medicines of my people—sage, sweet grass, tobacco and cedar. I put small pinches of each together in the smudging bowl, which I set upon the table. I close my eyes and breathe for a few moments. Then I light the medicines, using a wooden match, and waft the smoke around and over my head and heart and body with the eagle wing fan. When I am finished, I set the fan on the table, too.

There are certain spiritually oriented books I read from each morning. I lift the books from the couch beside me and read from them in turn. Then I place the books on the table as well. I close my eyes and consider what the readings have to tell me that day. When I'm ready, I settle deeper into the burgeoning pool of quietude, and when I feel calm and centred and at peace, I say a prayer of gratitude for all the blessings that are present in my life....<sup>77</sup>

Since I started meditating, I've been working my way through some of the lessons of the Medicine Wheel. It's a simple shape: a circle divided into four quarters of four different colors, usually yellow, black, red, and white. But Pebaamibines once condensed an entire dissertation on Ojibwe thought into a somewhat elaborated version of it. Much of Ojibwe spiritual tradition can be

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<sup>77</sup> Wagamese, Richard. *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*, p. 11. Madeira Park, B.C.: Douglas and McIntyre, 2016.

keyed to the Medicine Wheel in one way or another. I've gone around it twice now, dedicating a few days' meditations to each direction in turn, but today was the first day I meditated outside. I had reached the North, which is naturally also the quarter of Winter, and I had been planning since I started in the East this time to supplement my four days of indoor discursion on the North with some days actually sitting outside *in* the Winter.

I relaxed my body; I took a few minutes to steady my breathing. And then I considered where I was. Perhaps unwisely, I didn't bring a specific phrase or image to this meditation; I've been finding that I can derive interesting lessons from meditation on even fairly vague themes, though I'm interested to use more specific ones in the future. Instead I looked out at the forest. The sun off the snow was blinding; I couldn't even keep my eyes open. I thought about the Northern Lights, *Manidoog Niimi'idiwag*—the Dance of the Spirits—up in the sky. I thought about the little animals living burrowed under the snow all around me. I thought about the fires we keep burning through the winter in our houses, and the fires we keep going in our souls—coals glowing singly or together, spirits abiding in themselves and in contemplation through the season. My mind started out very much the monkey mind, from one vaguely wintry thought to another. But as I kept thinking, it relaxed into a calm focus, a state I've been able to reach only occasionally, but more and more often as I practice. And a little after it got there, my thoughts stopped forming themselves exclusively in words, and began taking shape into images. Like Jung's symbols, those images suggested more than my mind could pin down in rational explications. Foremost of the images was one of a forest of great, snow-white conduits stretching from the ground to the sky—linking, it seemed, our spirits with the Earth's spirits with the universe's spirits. Not just an image, rather, but a sort of resonance, as if I had started vibrating at the same frequency as the forest, and that was making strange things happen. The air of the forest took on greater substance and color, and permeated through my mind and body. The borderline between me and the rest of the world became hazy. I was the world experiencing itself. Around me were other points of the world's awareness, aware of me—as I, at last, was of them. The North ceased to feel like it was way off at the pole, a direction to be looked toward, and instead was right on top of me and around me, and part of me, alive with energy and meaning. I held on to the feeling for several minutes, and finally it faded and I opened my eyes and

looked out into the day. It was the same day as when I sat down, but more so. It seemed from every angle fuller, more vivid.

When I fasted this May I hadn't yet learned to meditate this way. I barely meditated at all, even in the Buddhist way, for the whole three rainy days; somehow I couldn't get myself started. Instead I contemplated everything on the island rationally: the water beetles in the puddle, the windthrown tree roots. All evidence of evolution at its interesting work: pretty perhaps, but without any resonance in the question of the meaning of the world and the spiritual communion of all things, if those were even concepts that had meaning. Now, though, I'm finding that this year's fast had another lesson to teach me: you get out what you put in. Waiting for spirits to strike your eyes open and give you a phantasmagorical vision with no effort on your part is unlikely to be rewarded. Communication with the spirits of the world is a two-way street, and requires exertion, contemplation, openness. Without all that, three days in the rain is three days in the rain.

The person I was ten years ago would be stunned to find out that I now believe it's quite possible that I've communicated with spirits. Voices haven't spoken to me inside my mind, telling me, "I am Jesus," or, "I am Wenaboozhoo." I haven't had an all-enveloping psychedelic trip. Anything that has passed between me and them has been subtle, along the lines of what I experienced in today's meditation.

I certainly don't believe I understand what the spirits *are*. In fact I no longer believe anyone can answer that question; by all accounts it's unanswerable. I think Basil Johnston gets it right when he says that the correct translation of *manidoo* isn't 'spirit' but 'mystery'.<sup>78</sup> But I do think I can explain some of what the spirits *do*. When I look at the world with the assumption that it's full of spirit, the forest in an intangible way fills out; the sky gains color without changing its color. A song somewhere turns from a precisely but meaninglessly arrayed series of notes into a jam that lifts me up off my feet to dance. I lose the feeling that I'm hunkered in a concrete room somewhere, watching a screen that displays the camera signal of a robot in the shape of my body, twiddling joysticks to move it through the world, and I emerge into an outdoors where I'm connected to everything on all sides of me. The birds aren't just chirping, they're speaking, and I can learn from them if I pay attention; the trees aren't just green, they're green in

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<sup>78</sup> Johnston, Basil. *Ojibway Ceremonies*, p. 301. Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Neb. Press, 1982.

a way that means something to me. I'm not alone. What a lonely cosmos where the only intelligences are human. Though the road to understanding the *manidoog*, the mysteries, may be endless, the further down it I go, the more I feel like I've returned home, like I belong here on Earth with the rest of the life around me, from prokaryotes to Pando, and all the spirits they entail.

Does this mean that the religion I practice is now the obscure, animistic spirituality of a people I have no familial relation to, who I've known for only a few years? Yes and no, I suppose. It's more true than saying I practice any other religion, at least. I'm trying to follow this path 'in a good way': *weweni*, a word I hear like a refrain during Ojibwe prayers.

But on the other hand, I will never be completely Ojibwe: even if I married an Ojibwe woman tomorrow and lived on the rez for the rest of my life, I would still have grown up in a foreign culture and been molded in inescapable ways by my summers in West Virginia and my Thanksgivings in Ohio and the time I spent catching frogs in Warder Park. Ojibwe history is something I can learn about and from which I can take lessons small and great. But it isn't a heritage for me in the same way it is for someone whose mother grew up in tribal housing, whose grandmother grew up in a tarpaper shack in the woods, whose great-grandmother grew up making the family's living by spearfishing and harvesting wild rice, whose generations further back sold beaver pelts to *voyageurs* and paddled birchbark canoes across entire Great Lakes and sat at the feet of elders every night of the winter to listen to stories of Wenaboozhoo and Nookomis and *wiindigoog* and *memegwesiwag*. Ceremonies that will wake something up in people with that family history might well stir something in me too, but it will usually be a different something. I can close some of that gap by listening to stories, learning the language, and spending time with the land and its spirits. But no matter how much effort I put into that pursuit, there will always be a gap.

Some of this is true even of some people who are Ojibwe by birth, like the U of M student whose fast last year was her first exposure to her birth parents' culture. A person's relation to the spirit world is unique and built on their entire lifetime of experiences. No two Ojibwe traditionalists practice exactly alike, and that diversity is reckoned a strength by people I've heard talk about it. In that way, I don't think my relation to the spirit world is condemned to always be partial if I relate to it through an Ojibwe perspective. Rather it will be some sort of hybrid, formed of bits of my Ohio past, bits of my own self-created rebellion

against that, and helpings of the stories I've picked up since moving to the part of the world where I feel at home.

Stranger things have happened. Before monotheism became so dominant as to be nearly the only game in the Western world, the question "What's your religion?" would have been unimportant and possibly halfway incomprehensible. Not that religion wasn't considered important, but distinctions between them weren't drawn nearly so starkly. Greer notes, "A Greek traveler who went to Phoenicia on business, say, would likely participate in the worship of Melkarth and Astarte while there, and then sail back home and sacrifice a bullock to Poseidon in gratitude for calm seas and favorable winds, without anybody, human or divine, taking offense."<sup>79</sup> Not only that, but the distinction between one's religion and one's culture has likewise mostly been fuzzy or absent, even in monotheist cultures, until recently; it wasn't so long ago that what we call a "first name" was habitually called a "Christian name". And it's always been a part of the immigrant experience to pick up some of the new culture while retaining some of the old. My ancestors were immigrants to Turtle Island (as North America was known before Amerigo Vespucci's name got attached to it), and I continue to be an immigrant even hundreds of years later, since the culture built by the intervening generations of my ancestry has never grown up and rooted into the land. I'm doubly an immigrant, having left Ohio in my own lifetime and come to an unfamiliar land to try to grow into it. I can use all the help I can get. Given a name, I'm now visible to the spirits here.

The Anishinaabeg have a prophecy of the Eighth Fire. The first seven fires were lit as the people followed a *miigis* shell that appeared in the sky, from one point to another along a centuries-long migration from the shores of the North Atlantic. We live now in the time of the Seventh Fire, a time marked by chaos and forgetting. As a people new to this land finds its confused way into a relationship with it, it leaves a trail of wreckage in its bootprints. Now we're being asked to choose which path we'll walk into the future. Down the wrong path lies destruction, death, and suffering. But if we walk the right one, the Eighth and final Fire will be lit, and the people from all the quarters of the Medicine Wheel—all the corners of the world—will come together and become a New

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<sup>79</sup> Greer, "Changing" *op. cit.* See also Deloria *op. cit.*, p. xxiii.

People, the *Oshkibimaadiziig*, who will live in peace.<sup>8o</sup> There is no putting Pandora's demons back in her box; the new people are here on Turtle Island and even if they could be sent back it wouldn't undo the harm they've done. But being one of them, I can choose to walk the right path. If I'm to have any part in the beginning of the *Oshkibimaadiziig*, it seems to me I can't stay holed up in the white quarter of the circle. I have to learn something about where I am, the people I'm here with. I have to learn how to be here in a good way.

I've started walking creeks again. Last week I traced the one behind the house upstream until it ran under a hundred-year-old logging railroad grade. Along the way I felt the world expand around me, starting from my small mind until it encompassed everything I could see and hear, and much that I couldn't: the crows calling overhead, the wolves who left tracks there weeks ago, the young aspens at the edge of a field, the big warts of mushroom on a birch, the long-forgotten train engineer who helped loggers cut down this forest a century ago. I've always known there was magic out there along the creeks and around the forests. I had to take a long, twisting route to convince myself it was alright to believe it. But look where it's brought me. Home, always home.

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<sup>8o</sup> Benton-Banai *op. cit.*, pp. 89–93.

