

Heart Knowledge

A short time after being diagnosed with cancer in December of 2005 I was having lunch with Cliff SiJohn, a Schitsu'umsh elder and close friend, sharing the situation with him. His words helped initiate the critical path in my healing journey. Cliff emphasized the importance of appreciating the distinct, though complimentary, processes of both the "exterior healing" and the "inner healing." "Listen with your heart," he said.



Cliff SiJohn 2002

He insisted I put my full faith in my oncologist, my surgeon, my family physician, my nurses – the "external healing and head knowledge." But he also stressed that I needed to attend to my "inner healing and heart knowledge."

What did Cliff mean by "heart knowledge"? It certainly was in contrast to the head knowledge empiricism and rationalism that brought forth the chemotherapy, irradiation treatments and stem cell transplant I'd undergo. On the other hand and given me particular background, the internal healing would entail the prayer acts within Sweat Lodges and Sundances, the spoken words of an Indian name and before an opened Medicine Bundle as well as the words spoken bringing to life the story of [Burnt Face](#); and internal healing would entail the love from so many family members and friends. Let me offer here some broad perimeters and characteristics, a brief outline for what cannot ultimately be defined. I'll reference this discussion with some other collaboratively developed materials, with what I've experienced along my journey with Cliff, and Tom Yellowtail and so many other elders. I needed to attend to both head and heart ways equally.

Heart Knowledge is the story of an omnipresent Creator – *Akbaatatdía*, "the maker of all things first," the *Amotqn*, "sits on the mountain," and of a multitude of "Peoples," kinsmen – human, animal, plant, rock and spirit, both of the present and the past – the "ancestors" and the "First Peoples" of the creation time. This is the story of Coyote and Crane, Rabbit and Jack

Rabbit, Chief Child of the Yellow Root and Burnt Face, not “Godfathers,” as the “Guardian’s of the Oral Traditions,” who prepare the world for the coming of the human peoples, overcoming “man-eaters” and other monsters, and inundating the landscape with “gifts” – foods, teachings, what human peoples will need. This is the story of deer, camas and salmon as “brothers” to the hunter or root digger or fisherman, offering themselves up voluntarily when given “gifts” of respect and song, and then to be shared with all those in need; never to be taken without consent.

In the acts of re-telling, re-singing, re-dancing the perennial stories of the creation, the world is re-created and perpetuated, the world renewed; the present is rendered one with the First Peoples of creation time and place. As Cliff SiJohn has said, in telling the stories of the First Peoples, “they come *alive* . . . they *swirl around* you as the Turtle is saying his thing or as the Chipmunk is saying something . . . they *swirl around* you and you see the *Indian medicine* . . . this is Chipmunk talking to you . . . this is Coyote talking to you . . . all these things *suddenly come alive* . . . they are just as alive as they were a thousand years ago.” Hence the Apsáalooke expression, *dashússuua* (“breaking with the mouth”) and the phrase, “stories make the world.” That which comes through the mouth, be it spoken or sung, be it an Indian name or a creation story, has the efficacy to bring forth the world. In re-telling Coyote’s story of the Rock Monster, the blue in Lake Coeur d’Alene is perpetuated. In re-telling Burnt Face’s story, a scar is removed and a face made new, as a “child’s.”

Heart knowledge is a transitory world co-created at the convergence of those participating, be they human, animal, plant or spirit Peoples, an event of converging relations, always in the making; no glass pane here. A world unified through kinship, imbued with spirit. Contrasting ways of viewing, indeed, of knowing the world – very distinct epistemologies!

“Heart knowledge” is associated with participatory modes of action, all premised on very different ontological principles from those of head knowledge. Key among those principles are the unity of interrelational existence, as expressed in the Apsáalooke concept [*ashammaléaxia*](#) (“as driftwood lodges”) (Frey 1987:40, 155-176) or Sch̓itsu’umsh concept the *chnis-teem-ilqwes* (“I am part of all”) (Frey, Aripa and Yellowtail 1995:40; Frey and the Coeur d’Alene 2001:10, 183); equality among all entities, as expressed in the Sch̓itsu’umsh term

unshat-qn (“eye-to-eye”), seeing all beings as equals, be they human, animal, plant, or rock (Frey, Aripa and Yellowtail 1995:41); and the transcendent and animating spiritual nature of reality, as expressed in the Apsáalooke concept of *baaxpée* or the Schitsu’umsh concept of *summesh*, both referring to “spiritual force” and “Indian medicine” (Frey 1987:61-63; Frey and the Coeur d’Alene 2001:176-80). When asked “what is real and knowable through the Heart” Cliff would insist that it’s revealed while traveling within the oral traditions of narrative, song, dance and ritual. Reality is ultimately “experienced” as the transitory intersection of all those participating, an event of converging relations, always in the making. The “vital act” is the “act of [participation](#).” “Those participating” are inclusive of human, animal, plant, rock and spiritual “Peoples,” both of the present and the past – the “ancestors” and the “First Peoples” – all in kinship with one another. It’s a world within which the deer or camas or salmon is as a “brother” to the hunter or root digger or fisherman, offering itself up voluntarily when given “gifts” of respect and song, and then only doing so when it’s flesh is to be shared with all those in need; it is never to be taken by one asserting himself over it, never to be taken for one’s sole use and appetite, and never to be taken without consent (Frey and the Coeur d’Alene 2001:10; 204-11). It’s a world precipitated and animated by the spiritual, with its animation and volition shared equally within all Peoples (Frey 1994:169-76; Frey and the Coeur d’Alene 2001:10). The rock formations along that bend in the Bighorn River were created through the actions of Coyote.

To reiterate, given the spiritual animation of and kinship-based unity within this expanded world of the many Peoples, in the act of re-telling, re-singing, re-dancing the perennial oral traditions of the creation time and place, the world presently engaged is a world re-created and perpetuated, the present is rendered one with the First Peoples of creation time and place (Frey, Aripa and Yellowtail 1995:171-73, 176; Frey and the Coeur d’Alene 2001:197-204, 234, 260-68; Frey 2004:166). As Cliff SiJohn has said, in telling the stories of the First Peoples, “they come *alive* . . . they *swirl around*” (Frey and the Coeur d’Alene 2001:197). In the acts of telling, singing and dancing, the human Peoples thus have a co-creative role and responsibility. Hence the Apsáalooke expression, *dasshússuua* (“breaking with the mouth”) and the phrase, “stories make the world.” That which comes through the mouth, be it spoken or

sung, be it an Indian name or a creation story, has the efficacy to bring forth the world. In re-telling Coyote's story, the blue in a lake is perpetuated. In re-telling Tom Yellowtail's Burnt Face's story, a scar is removed and a face made new, . . . and a cancer abated. In giving voice through prayer, song or the movement of feathers, water can usher forth from a Tree, bullets removed from a young man's body, and humans transformed into Blue Jays. For additional background, see the essay, [The Power of the Spoken Word: Orality in contrast with Literacy](#).

Any pretense that words simply describe a world out there is vanquished. Any pretense of a "glass pane" separating you from all other Peoples is shattered; there is no [Cartesian Dualism](#) in this cosmos (Frey 1994:126-41). Any pretense that you can have an "understanding" of or a "belief" about a world separate from yourself is dissolved. Belief does not mediate nor veil your engagement with the world. Within this world you don't so much have beliefs about God, as direct experiences with the Creator. As a graduate student at the University of Colorado in 1979 I had the opportunity of listening to Vine Deloria Jr. as he was being interviewed for a faculty position, which he was offered and accepted. During the interview David Carrasco asked Deloria something to the effect, "what are some of the key beliefs of the American Indian?" Deloria responded by saying, "we don't have beliefs about our religion, we experience it," and went on to explain.

While traveling within this world, perennial meanings are revealed and spiritual animation channeled, permeating and renewing all the relations and lives of the world. No experiences are left untouched; all interactions are imbued with Heart ways. In singing the Medicine songs, in prayer prior to digging the camas, in charging the Center Pole of the Sundance Lodge, in wearing and dancing the regalia of a traditional dancer, in speaking an Indian name, in sharing the huckleberries with those in need, in prayer at a brother's wake, in telling of Coyote's story, it's never a matter of "suspending disbelief" but invariably of intensifying what is most real and true. "The world is made and rendered meaningful in the act of revealing Coyote's story of it" (Frey, Aripa and Yellowtail 1995:214).

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