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A Narrative of Environmental Values

Joshua Colt Gambrel

Joshua Gambrel received his MA in Philosophy from Colorado State University and is currently a graduate student in the storytelling department at East Tennessee State University.

Everything has a spirit. All natural phenomena – like rivers, wind, and mountains – tell a story. Usually only shamans know these stories, but others can learn to listen. Many people don't understand how to listen to the world. People who don't take the time to listen will suffer, as will their children. In order to live well we must respect the world. Rivers, wind, and mountains tell different stories everyday. Other people besides shamans may be able to hear these stories if they listen with respect. We must help teach others to listen.

Galba, a Tuvan Shaman from Western Mongolia

Mongolia represents many things to many people, but to me, more than anything, it represents the transformative power of the spiritual narrative. As a writer, I searched constantly for the words needed to accurately describe the changes I experienced while I lived among the beautiful sweeping landscapes of this incredible country. Mongolia became a critical junction on my personal path of self-realization. Like many people around the world, I had become dissatisfied with the lifestyle propagated by western society and the established institutions that only seemed to wreak havoc on the natural world and human health. I had hoped that living abroad for a considerable length of time, in an area of the world significantly different from America, would help me understand more clearly the problems we face and, possibly, what alternatives we have to the dominant model that modernity presents. If we are to overcome this paradigm it will be necessary to offer a reasonable alternative; but what is this alternative, and where will it come from? At the time, I had no idea that this would turn out to be not only a philosophical journey, but a spiritual one. But, after a year of work and research throughout Mongolia I was still struggling with these questions and with trying to formulate

more succinctly what it was that this country meant to me. Then came the arduous task of translating all the research I had accumulated during the previous year and an opportunity for a deeper analysis of my own relationship with the natural world.

A significant portion of my time in Mongolia was spent conducting a research project focusing on traditional prose narratives—myths, legends, and folktales. This primarily consisted of traveling around the aimags of Bayan-Olgii and Omnigov, conducting interviews, and asking people if they could tell me stories. I had hoped to gain additional insight into the culture and history of these peoples—Mongolians, Kazaks, and Tuvans—by learning more about the traditional stories that have been passed down for centuries; stories that express a culture’s worldview by articulating a historical relationship to the environment, the moral relevancy of non-human Others, and the history underpinning their ethical systems. Much of a cultural ethos can be traced along such folklines. Prose narratives are often beautiful stories of one’s place in the world. Such stories may also resonate with our own sensibilities in a more profound, lasting way than any amount of ethical discourse. Conducting this project was a wonderful experience. Anyone that has been to Mongolia knows how hospitable the people are and, in a year and a half, I drank enough salty milk-tea and ate enough boiled mutton to last a lifetime. I fell in love with these endearing people, and the memories of the many warm smiles mingled with the complete elation that a foreigner could speak their language will be with me forever.

While collecting these narratives, I was fortunate to be able to spend some time with a traditional Tuvan shaman living in western Mongolia. I was able to conduct two separate interviews in two beautiful locations: Taven Bogd National Park and Tsengel sum, in Bayan-Olgii aimag. During this time I recorded several hours of interviews, stories, songs, and invocations. Galba was amazing. After a couple of days her reticent demeanor towards me melted away to one of warmth and openness. She told me that she had been waiting to hear from one of her spirits concerning my moral disposition and, on learning that I was both trustworthy and sincere, she was willing to let me conduct a thorough interview. I had won her respect. For the days that followed we spent almost every hour together as I shadowed her transcribing her words. One moment she could wear the smile of a loving, jovial mother and in another she was transformed into the resolutely determined shaman who acted as an intermediary between the worlds of light and dark carrying the added weight of one who exists in not one world, but two.

Galba listened silently to my questions, then after quiet contemplation she would offer the advice of one wise beyond her 32 years. To my delight, she loved to rhapsodize about the current state of the world and what was

needed to save it. This sage believes that the great modern deficiency of spirituality the world over is the root cause of environmental degradation. “Now people don’t know what religion is. They think that they need computers, cars, clothes, and money. When they have true religion they have everything they need . . . If I have deep spiritual religion my children and I will live very well.” She believes that spirituality helps to engender a more benign relationship to the non-human Others and world around us. People don’t care for or respect the spirits of the land because they no longer listen to them. For me, this is where the true transformation began.

Galba is an intermediary between the physical world of reality and the non-physical world of the spirits. She is consulted by others due to her ability to enter into a dialogue with the animate world surrounding her. The song sung by the wind, the story told by the river, or the appearance of certain phenomena convey particular meanings and portents to those willing to listen. All phenomena carry significant spiritual importance, but Galba seems to have a special affinity for birds, particularly magpies and swans. Interestingly, these were the two most common birds discussed in the prose narratives I translated during this project. Galba’s world is different from ours; when she steps into it she finds herself embraced by living phenomena calling to her, inviting her to enter into a reciprocal relationship. She accepts these invitations and becomes lost in the primacy of the Other. She allows herself to dance with the sensuous harmonies resonating with her soul off the living landscape. These are the spiritual narratives of the natural world, and stored within their guiding discourse lies the only means of our ecological survival. “If the spirits are revered and their lands kept clean then all people will live calm, happy lives.”

We can only hear these narratives by making ourselves present to these presencing phenomena. Only through such openness can the Other truly become manifest and teach us of the spiritual energy binding together all living beings. When we listen to the spiritual narratives unfolding around us, we strive to intuit the sacred latent in every secular experience. By listening to mountains, rivers, and wind “we will learn how to live happily.”

Galba believed that such an awareness carried along with it a moral imperative to not only respect the stories of the spirits sharing our world, but this imperative also admonished us to share these tales with others. Through my continued research, I began to feel that there was no better way to share such insight than through the traditional prose narratives dear to the people. Many of the tales that I translated included personified talking animals, guiding spirit helpers, sacred places, and noble heroes who triumph over adversity by cherishing, respecting, or building reciprocal relationships with either animals specifically, or nature in general. The continued transmission of such narratives may be the best means the

Mongolians, or any people, have to help cultivate a more compassionate relationship with the living ecosphere. While our modern mechanisms tend to engender a psychological estrangement from the natural world, traditional myths, legends, and folktales help root us in a timeless past connecting our ancestral lines directly to the same ecological systems that sustain our lives today. Fostering a deep fascination with these tales is only one ontological step away from experiencing the transformative power dancing around us in the form of the spiritual narrative of our animate world.

One of the most poignant moments with Galba was early in the initial interview when I asked her if animals feel pain. As if unsure that she had understood the question correctly, she turned to me disbelievingly and replied, “Josh, of course they feel pain.” Laughing, I understood how ridiculous that question can sound. This fact seems self-evident to many of us, but there have been numerous philosophers who have published many papers in an attempt to prove the very opposite. Such individuals would probably no doubt receive the same disbelieving glance from this woman who dances and sings with the very Others that supposedly have no voice or ability to engage us in a meaningful discourse. I believe that time spent with Galba, or other visionaries like her, will help us intuit not only the greater spiritual significance of the world we find unfolding all around us, but also our own rich spiritual connection to the limitless being of existence. Perhaps Galba can even remind us that the god of all religions isn’t necessarily outside or within us, but between us, becoming manifest in the open, loving relationships we develop at every moment we give ourselves unconditionally to the presence of the phenomena before us.